

RABBIT HEALTHCARE

Rabbits have been domesticated since 1100 BC and they are now the 3rd most common pet in the UK after cats and dogs. Rabbits can be kept in hutches outside but is increasingly popular to keep rabbits in the house. They can be litter and harness trained although we do recommend a digestible litter such as hay, straw or non-dusty wood shavings rather than cat litter. Rabbits become stressed if the weather is cold or changeable so hatched rabbits should be kept in a shed or garage during these times.

Rabbits like other mammals need exposure to sunlight in order to synthesise vitamin D. Rabbits can be kept in pairs, they may fight with each other unless they are neutered or brought up together. We do not normally recommend keeping rabbits with guinea pigs as their requirements differ and they may be aggressive to one another.

Rabbits can live as long as 13 years, more is now known about rabbit medicine and treatments are improving all the time. Many health problems in rabbits are due to improper housing, diets or neglect. Insurance is now available for rabbits from many different companies, and is a great way to get peace of mind for your pet.

DIET

It is very important to feed rabbits a nutritionally balanced diet in order to avoid health problems. Many pet shop mixes do not contain enough calcium. Rabbits have a different way of controlling their internal calcium levels to other mammals so it is important to feed correct amounts. It is better to feed a balanced diet than supplement as too much calcium will cause bladder stones. Incorrect dietary calcium and phosphorous levels can result in the condition nutritional osteodystrophy, which is a major cause of dental disease.

Rabbits eat grass in the wild and will spend 6 hours every day grazing. In their lifetime one rabbit will eat the equivalent of 5 football pitches. Grass and fibre is indigestible to most single stomached mammals but rabbits have several adaptations to allow them to do this. The caecum is a large well developed sac connected to the large intestine, which acts as a fermenting vat and contains bacteria, which digest plant materials. In order for the all the nutrients to be absorbed from the food it must pass through the digestive tract twice. The first time food passes through it forms soft faecal pellets known as caecotrophs which the rabbits eat directly from the anus. The second time through the faeces form firm pellets from which all the useful nutrients have been absorbed. The caecum requires adequate levels of fibre in order to function properly. If the rabbit is overweight or has dental disease then it may not be able to eat the faeces from the anus. The caecotrophs can be mistaken for diarrhoea.

We recommend a complete pelleted rabbit food. Pellets are better than mixes as rabbits can't pick out the bits they don't like. Some mixes are nutritionally balanced such as Russell rabbit but others aren't so always check. Hay or freshly pulled grass (not lawn mower cuttings) should also be offered or the rabbits can be put out in a run in the summer. Grass and hay helps to grind the teeth down properly and prevent overgrowth and malocclusion problems. Timothy grass or hay is the best kind to use. Treats such as carrots and broccoli can be given but apples and lettuce should be avoided, as they are low in calcium.

DENTAL PROBLEMS

Rabbit's teeth grow continually throughout life. The top and bottom teeth grind against each other in order to wear down. There are 2 rows of front teeth (incisors) at the top and one at the bottom. These act like scissors to grasp and cut grass. The food is then ground by the back teeth (molars) at 120 jaw movements per minute. The incisors should be smooth, shiny and slightly yellow with vertical grooves. If the incisors become white, dull and have horizontal grooves then dental disease is present. If the incisors are out of alignment then they will

overgrow and require regular trimming. This can be done consciously with clippers but there is less chance of cracking the teeth if it is done with a dental burr. However the rabbit may need to be sedated when a dental burr is used. If the incisors are badly misshapen then they can be removed under general anaesthesia.

The molars can develop sharp cusps if they are not occluding properly. The rabbit will slobber and go off its food. If this occurs the molars will need clipping and rasping under general anaesthesia. The main causes of dental disease are lack of grass for teeth wearing and nutritional osteodystrophy from an inadequate diet. The roots of the teeth are also affected and may become impacted. The tear ducts, which run from the eye to the nose, may become blocked if the upper molar roots are impacted or if the incisors are overgrown. This can predispose the rabbit to eye infections.

VACCINATIONS

There are 2 major infectious diseases of rabbits for which annual vaccinations are recommended.

MYXOMATOSIS

This disease is caused by a poxvirus. It is present in the wild rabbit population and is spread by rabbit fleas. Your rabbit does not need to come into contact with another rabbit to contract the disease. The disease causes severe, painful swellings to the eyelids, ears, skin and genitalia. One strain can just cause breathing problems. There is no effective treatment and affected rabbits usually die. The vaccination can only be given to healthy rabbits and the first injection can be given from 8 weeks old. Annual booster vaccination is needed but if the rabbit lives outside and is in contact with wild rabbits then 6 monthly vaccination is needed.

VIRAL HAEMORRHAGIC DISEASE

This disease was first seen in the UK in 1992, with a more virulent strain (RHDV2) seen in the UK from 2014. The virus is spread in the air and by birds and fleas. The disease causes sudden death; blood may be seen coming from the nose, vagina or anus. There is no treatment so annual vaccination is needed to prevent infection. Vaccination can be done from 10 weeks old and 2 weeks after the myxomatosis vaccination.

COMMON DISEASES IN RABBITS

Snuffles

This is a common problem in rabbits and is most often caused by bacteria called pasteurella. Severe disease can be fatal so veterinary assistance should be sought immediately. The rabbit may sneeze and cough and thick white nasal discharge will be present at the nostrils and on the front paws. This disease can often occur after stressful experiences and extreme temperature changes.

Abscesses

These can occur externally or internally. The external abscesses will be felt as soft lumps anywhere on the body. Veterinary attention should be sought immediately. Abscesses can be difficult to treat successfully and often require surgical removal, long courses of antibiotics or euthanasia if there is severe underlying bone infection.

Eye infections

This condition can be recognised by discharge from the eyes. Dusty environments can cause eye infections. Infections of the tear ducts can occur if there are dental problems.

Fly strike

This condition occurs in summer and if diarrhoea is present or if the rabbit cannot consume the caecotrophs because of obesity or dental disease. Blowflies lay eggs in the faeces around the back end and these hatch into maggots, which can burrow under the skin. Apart from being extremely painful this can make the rabbit very ill.

Rabbit's rear ends should be checked daily during the summer months. There is also a sponge-on product available called Rear guard which inhibits the development of the maggots, please ask for details.

NEUTERING

It is generally accepted that pet rabbits should live in compatible groups, such as non – breeding pairs, and rabbit neutering has become much more common place.

Reasons for neutering rabbits:

1. Prevents unwanted offspring.
2. Decreases certain unfavourable behaviours such as aggression, urine spraying, mounting and nest making.
3. Easier to litter train, better house rabbits.
4. Prevents uterine adenocarcinoma, a common tumour of the womb.
5. Prevents womb infections and bleeding in females.

Male rabbits can be castrated when their testicles have descended from about 12 weeks of age. Female rabbits can be spayed safely from 16 weeks of age, so long as they are in good health and weigh at least 1kg.

A general anaesthetic is needed for both castration and spaying, rabbits do not need to be starved prior to an anaesthetic as they cannot vomit. Your rabbit may need to stay in overnight after its operation to ensure that it is eating. Males can still breed for 3 weeks after castration so should be kept separate from un-neutered females. Stitches may be present in the skin and will be removed 10 days after the surgery.