

Sick Bunny

Rabbits are at the bottom of the food chain and are among the first to be preyed upon in the wild. Thus, rabbits instinctively hide illnesses and injuries to avoid detection by animals of prey. People who live with rabbits need to be particularly attentive to subtle changes in behavior or litterbox habits.

See your rabbit doctor immediately if your rabbit exhibits any of the following signs:

Loss of appetite or lethargy: Even a rabbit can have a "bad hare day." But if your rabbit refuses his usual fresh food or any of his special treats, and seems particularly lethargic, you should call your rabbit's veterinarian right away. Observe your rabbit's behavior, activity level, and droppings daily. Each rabbit is different and knowing what is "normal behavior" for your rabbit could save his life.

Lack of fecal pellets and/or urine in litterbox: Your rabbit's litterbox contains a wealth of information. A healthy digestive tract will produce large, round fecal pellets. Increasingly smaller, irregularly shaped droppings or droppings strung together with fur (or carpet) may indicate a problem. Proper grooming by you, especially during a molt, and plenty of fresh hay will help maintain optimum digestive tract health, along with appealing to the rabbit's urge to chew.

Body heat: Rabbits regulate body temperature by their ears. Very cold or hot ears could indicate a fever or a drop in body temperature. Use a heating pad set on low to warm your bunny (make sure cords are inaccessible). Cool him by stroking his ears with a damp cloth.

Runny eyes or nose, labored breathing, or chronic sneezing: These could indicate an upper respiratory infection, a blocked tear duct or other problems.

Loss of balance or a head tilt: This is most often a sign of wry neck, which is an inner ear infection, but could also be an indication of E. cuniculi. This can occur very suddenly. Although treatment can be lengthy, and improvement not noticeable for about 10 days, wry neck may be cured if treatment is begun quickly.

Wet chin or drooling: Usually a sign of tooth problems, or malocclusion. You may also notice a decrease in appetite and ability to eat hard foods such as whole carrot. Left untreated, tooth problems can lead to infection of the jaw bone, which is very difficult to treat. Depending on the severity of the misalignment, your rabbit's teeth may need to be trimmed regularly. In severe cases, teeth can be pulled.

Rabbits' teeth grow continuously and must be checked to ensure that they are wearing down properly. Bunnies with straight teeth will keep them worn down with everyday hay chewing. Buns with malocclusions, or crooked teeth, will need to have their teeth trimmed. A rabbit doctor should be consulted for appropriate tooth care.

Lumps and bumps: Abscesses and tumors can be serious and should be checked by your veterinarian as soon as possible.

Tooth grinding: Loud tooth grinding is a sure sign of pain. **Note:** This tooth grinding is different from the softer "tooth chattering" you may hear when you snuggle with your bunny.

Watery eyes or eye discharge: In addition to any medications or eye drops, cheeks need to be kept dry and clean so the area doesn't chafe or fur doesn't peel off. Use ophthalmic saline solution (contact lens cleaner) and a clean tissue to clean cheeks.

Blood in the urine, straining to urinate: The two may or may not go hand in hand. While certain foods can turn urine red, actual blood in the urine can be a sign of cancer, bladder infection or urinary stones. If your rabbit is straining to urinate or is "leaking" puddles outside the litterbox, you should be concerned. You may also notice "urine burn," caused when urine-soaked fur keeps the underneath skin damp and irritated.

Sore hocks: This is when the fur on the rabbit's hock, or heel, is worn down to the bare skin or, in severe cases, to the bone. Sometimes the rabbit forms calluses and gets along just fine. Problems arise when the skin turns into an open wound. You may notice the rabbit favoring a foot as he tries to avoid putting weight on his hocks. Overweight and large-breed rabbits are particularly prone to sore hocks, as are the Rex breeds, since they do not have a lot of padding on their feet.

To prevent sore hocks, give your rabbit a soft, clean resting area. Also, keep your rabbit's weight within normal range and examine your rabbit regularly.

Excessive itching or scratching, head shaking: Fleas, ear mites and/or fur mites are the usual culprits. In some ear mite cases, scabs can be seen in the ear canal. Fleas are common in the summer months. Although they may seem harmless, flea infestations can kill rabbits by causing a deadly case of anemia. Have your carpet steam-cleaned or treated with a commercial borate-compound product to kill the flea eggs and larvae. Be sure the products used are safe for rabbits—ask your rabbit veterinarian about which flea treatment to use.

Ear Wax: Ear wax can be lifted out with a cotton swab, being careful not to push

on wax in the canal, or you can try a mild ear cleaner containing Chlorhexadine, such as Nolvasan Otic. Ask your rabbit doctor to show you how to clean your rabbit's ears safely.

Good and Bad Medicines: ORAL penicillin such as Amoxicillin and Clavamox can kill your rabbit. INJECTABLE penicillin Procaine G with Benzathine is a fairly safe antibiotic for rabbits. Oral penicillin destroys the good gut flora and can kill your rabbit shortly after administration of the drug, or up to three weeks after the drug has been taken.

Do not administer any medications to your rabbit without consulting a veterinarian well-versed in rabbit care.