

Care of the Senior Rabbit

With proper care, pet rabbits can live long, happy lives

Depending on the breed, the average domestic rabbit lives from 6 to 12 years. Today many pet rabbits live to 9 or 10 years of age. Rabbits are generally considered middle-aged at 3 or 4 years and geriatric at 5 years or more.

What can we expect with the aging process?

As in other animals, aging is an individual process. Not all elderly rabbits will exhibit obvious evidence of aging, however, may observe:

- Thinning fur
- Change in coat color
- Loss of muscle and weight loss
- Slower movements
- Reduced agility
- Decreased activity, increased resting

Health problems in the geriatric rabbit

As improved husbandry and nutrition have extended the lifespan of pet rabbits, aging can be associated with specific health problems.

Conditions involving the head:

- Rabbit teeth continually grow throughout life. Although dental disease classically manifests in young rabbits, it is not uncommon for rabbits to develop **dental disease** in later years due to changes in tooth growth or dental wear.
- Cataracts** are common in aging rabbits. Rabbit with cataracts may be reluctant to move, especially in new surroundings, and they can be sensitive to bright light. Cataracts are usually not painful and require no treatment unless secondary problems like glaucoma develop.
- Extreme narrowing of the ear canal is frequently observed in elderly lop rabbits. This narrowing predisposes affected rabbits to infection of the ear or **otitis**.

Disease involving the chest:

- Long-lasting **respiratory disease** is sometimes seen in older rabbits. Infection is often attributed to *Pasteurella multocida* and other bacteria.
- Heart disease** has also been reported in elderly rabbits. Signs of disease include reluctance to move, decreased appetite with weight loss, coughing, or other signs of respiratory difficulty.

Musculoskeletal problems:

- **Osteoarthritis** or degenerative joint disease often involving the lower back and **spondylosis**, a progressive degeneration and fusing of the spine, are commonly encountered in the aging rabbit. Signs of pain can be quite subtle in the rabbit as this species tends to respond to pain and/or distress by “freezing” or remaining motionless.

Early signs of musculoskeletal disease can include:

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|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Reluctance to move | <input type="checkbox"/> Soiled or matted coat |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Abnormal movement | <input type="checkbox"/> Excessive tooth grinding |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Inability to hop | <input type="checkbox"/> Resistance to being handled |

An unkempt coat and urine/fecal staining can develop when the rabbit is reluctant or unable to groom its back end. As disease progresses, the rabbit can also exhibit lameness, muscle loss, and even vocalizations from pain.

Rabbits with pain and inflammation caused by musculoskeletal disease can benefit from nutritional supplements like chondroitin and glucosamine, as well as anti-inflammatory drugs and even pain medication like opioids.

Tumors: As in other animals, the incidence of neoplasia increases with age. Uterine tumors are fairly common in females that have not been spayed. Mammary tumors, lymphoma, and thymoma are also commonly reported in older rabbits.

Renal failure: Renal disease and chronic renal failure occurs in many geriatric rabbits. Signs of disease can be subtle but may include increased water intake, increased urinations, reduced appetite and weight loss, failure to groom, and depression.

Weight gain: Obesity can develop if the same diet is fed as activity and metabolism decline. Obesity may not kill an animal, but it can complicate and worsen other diseases. Obesity contributes to many problems, including arthritis, cardiovascular disease, and pododermatitis.

Pododermatitis: Pododermatitis or “sore hocks” can occur in rabbits of all ages, however this problem is commonly seen in geriatric rabbits. It is not uncommon for an older rabbit to become ill with a primary problem, which causes it to be less mobile. This lack of movement coupled with obesity puts enough pressure on the bottoms of the feet to predispose the rabbit to pododermatitis. Foot infections can be exacerbated by poor husbandry like wire cage flooring and poor sanitation.

Health screening in the senior rabbit

Use regular evaluations by an experienced rabbit veterinarian to screen your pet's current health status, develop a plan to prevent future health problems, and to follow-up on any preexisting health concerns. Take the opportunity to discuss any questions or concerns about your pet's quality of life.

- Schedule annual examinations with an experienced rabbit veterinarian until your pet reaches 5 to 7 years of age. Biannual or even quarterly exams are recommended in geriatric rabbits.
- By 3 or 4 years of age, your veterinarian may also want to perform blood work, urinalysis, and x-rays to obtain normal baselines. Annual or biannual blood work screening can then be performed to screen your pet for underlying illness in older rabbits.

Home monitoring

Home monitoring is a cornerstone of senior pet health care. Maintain a log of your pet's body weight as well as any changes in behavior or activity. Any deviation from your rabbit's normal behavior can potentially signal an underlying health problem. Also monitor your senior rabbit for all of the following:

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|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Changes in urination or fecal output* | <input type="checkbox"/> Changes in attitude |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Changes in food or water intake | <input type="checkbox"/> The fur is dirty, matted and/or falling out |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty eating or dropping food | <input type="checkbox"/> Night feces (cecotropes) sticking to rear |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Refusing food* | <input type="checkbox"/> Tires easily |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Drooling | <input type="checkbox"/> Coughing and sneezing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Weight loss | <input type="checkbox"/> Discharge from the eyes or nose |

*It is a medical emergency if your rabbit is not eating or defecating.

Home care

Careful attention to your senior rabbit's habitat, diet, and activity can make a major difference in your pet's longevity and quality of life.

Diet:

Feed a diet low in calories and high in fiber. Offer small amounts of high fiber pellets, lots of greens, and unlimited amounts of grass hay.

Water:

Encourage water intake by making sure your pet rabbit always has easy access to fresh water. NEVER withhold water from a senior rabbit.

Housing

- Keep your pet's living area clean and stress-free.
- Maintain the rabbit on non-slip surfaces and provide well-padded resting areas. As the force produced by hopping is much higher on joints than that produced by walking, soft surfaces are particularly beneficial for rabbits with osteoarthritis.
- Provide litter pan(s) with a shallow lip for easy access.

Activity

- Encourage play and moderate exercise daily.
- Stimulate not only your bunny's muscles, but also his mind with toys, areas for exploration, and other forms of environmental enrichment.
- Regularly pet and hold your rabbit, looking your rabbit over for any physical changes. Gentle massage may prevent muscles from becoming stiff or painful and can be helpful for rabbits with musculoskeletal problems. Regularly brush your pet to keep the coat dry, clean, and free of mats. (*If your pet will not tolerate handling, consult your rabbit veterinarian and the House Rabbit Society website for advice on slowly and carefully building trust*).

References

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