

RABBITS – AVOIDING THE COMMON PROBLEMS

You can never completely protect your rabbit against disease, but there are things you can do to improve your pet's chances of staying healthy. This leaflet is a brief guide to some of those problems, and what you can do to try and avoid them.

Tooth Problems

Many rabbits suffer from malocclusion - which means teeth that don't meet properly. Although it is more likely that your rabbit will have dental problems if it belongs to one of the short-faced breeds (in the same way that short-faced dogs often have dental problems), the main cause of malocclusion in rabbits is an incorrect diet. The largest part of a rabbit's diet should be grass and hay and other coarse, fibrous greens.

Rabbit mix or pellets should form only a very small part of the diet - and in fact many adult rabbits do very well without it altogether.

It is the constant action of the teeth grinding away at this tough material that keeps the teeth worn down to the correct length. Rabbits' teeth grow constantly throughout their lives, and only if they are constantly worn down by a natural, high fibre diet will they remain the correct length and not get over-long and out of position.

It is also easier to avoid malocclusion if your rabbit has daily access to an outdoor run for exercise and grazing. Firstly because it gives him access to grass, and secondly because access to sunlight helps him form vitamin D, which helps the body develop strong bones and teeth. Bone development is also improved by exercise, much better than being cooped up in a hutch all the time!

Respiratory and eye infections

Many rabbits develop a condition called 'snuffles' (which describes it very well), which can lead to eye infections, lung disease or abscesses. Once a rabbit develops this problem, it will usually have it for life, and treatment consists of containing and controlling the problem. Infection often complicates malocclusion by invading tooth roots and causing abscesses. Any rabbit can develop this problem, but is most likely to do so if it is either generally unhealthy (for example, it is on an incorrect diet) or is kept in a warm or poorly ventilated environment.

Wild rabbits are active in the cool air of the night, and retreat underground when the weather gets too warm. Pet rabbits may get too warm if they are exposed to too much sunlight, or kept in poorly ventilated sheds during the winter.

Bowel problems

By now you've probably worked out that one of the most important ways to keep a rabbit healthy is by feeding it correctly! For further information on correct feeding, read the leaflet on 'feeding your pet rabbit'.

Common digestive tract problems in pet rabbits include poor bowel movement, caused by a lack of fibre in the diet, and the condition where the rabbit ends up with sticky faeces stuck around its rear end.

To understand the latter, you have to remember that rabbits produce two types of faeces. Firstly they eat their food, and it passes through the tract and then is eaten again from the anus. The faeces that are passed the first time are sticky and smelly. Once the food has gone through a second time the faeces are normal dry pellets. If a rabbit fails to eat its 'caecotrophs' as it should, they end up as a revolting sticky mess stuck to the rabbit's bottom.

If a rabbit's bottom is not kept clean, flies may lay their eggs in the faeces, which hatch out into maggots, which then attack the rabbit - this is called 'fly strike', and is often a fatal condition.

The reasons why a rabbit might fail to eat its caecotrophs include obesity, and eating more cereal than fibre.

Behavioural problems

A lot of young pet rabbits start off as lovely, affectionate pets, and then, the spring after they were bought, they seem to change. They may get aggressive. They may grunt and stamp, and even bite. All these problems arise as the rabbit reaches sexual maturity.

Many vets now recommend the neutering of all pet rabbits not required for breeding - it makes them much more loving pets! Also, more than 3/4 of all entire female rabbits develop womb tumours before they're about five years old, and this problem is, of course, removed in the spayed rabbit.

Infectious diseases

Myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic disease are both viral diseases that can kill your rabbit. Conditions and therefore vaccine regimes vary from one part of the country to another - so ask your vet what he or she recommends.