

Rabbit ER : When your rabbit needs to see the vet NOW

Even the most experienced rabbit owners dread their rabbit becoming ill. This is bad enough during the daytime, but it's even worse if you make this discovery at three o'clock in the morning. Should you call the vet now, even though it's the middle of the night? Or can it wait till morning?

We hope this article will help you should you find yourself in this situation.

Obviously, we can't cover every eventuality. If you are ever concerned about your rabbit, even if you can't quite decipher exactly what is wrong, then it is always wise to telephone your vet for advice. All vets offer 24 hour emergency cover (although some may employ dedicated out of hours practices for this and you therefore may not see your usual vet and may have to travel further). The worst that can happen is that you make an un-necessary trip to the vet, which may hurt your wallet, but is a lot better than gambling with your rabbit's life.

What's different about rabbits?

Rabbits are programmed by evolution to conceal their illnesses. This is a behavioural adaptation of a prey species at the bottom of the food chain: a wild rabbit showing obvious signs of illness becomes an easy target for a predator.

Unfortunately, for pet rabbits, this tendency to conceal signs of illness causes problems for owners and vets. Whereas dogs and cats that are in pain will usually vocalise especially on examination of a painful area, rabbits don't shout from the rooftops when they feel unwell. In fact, they can look remarkably normal ("just a bit quiet") even

when at death's door. To make matters even worse, rabbits are small animals. This means that if they do become unwell, they can become dehydrated (and hypothermic and hypoglycaemic) very rapidly.

Prompt veterinary advice is vital if your rabbit is to have fighting chance of surviving a serious illness. Delaying even a few hours to see what happens can prove fatal. These are examples of danger signs that indicate you need to contact a vet immediately (day or night):

Rabbit is mouth breathing or is having difficulty breathing, +/- lips and tongue blueish in colour

Rabbit has severe diarrhoea (watery faeces)

Rabbit is bleeding uncontrollably from wound; or has been attacked

Rabbit may have a broken back or limb(s), or paralysed limbs

Rabbit is limp, floppy or cold

Rabbit is in pain

Rabbit isn't eating or passing droppings

Rabbit has flystrike

Rabbit is fitting

Call the vet immediately if.....

Rabbit is mouth breathing or is having difficulty breathing, +/- lips and tongue are blueish coloured:

Rabbits are obligatory nasal breathers and any mouth breathing is a poor sign and indicates respiratory difficulty.

The normal respiration rate in an adult rabbit is 30 - 60/minute, but some breathe much faster than this if they are hot or stressed. Get to know what is normal for your rabbit. The time to get worried is if their

breathing is *laboured* (long hard breaths rather than rapid panting in rabbits) or grunting/wheezing. If the lips and tongue are blue tinted, your bunny is not getting enough oxygen. Call the vet immediately.

Rabbit has severe diarrhoea:

True liquid diarrhoea is not overly common in adult rabbits, but does occasionally occur. Rabbits who are sitting hunched in a pool of diarrhoea (either liquid/watery faeces or jelly-like material) need veterinary help *immediately*. Baby rabbits are especially vulnerable to developing acute diarrhoea (the weeks after weaning, just as young rabbits arrive in their new home, are especially high risk) and because they are so small, can become fatally dehydrated very quickly.

A rabbit that has had an episode of runny or soft stools but is otherwise alert, lively, eating and generally his/her usual self should be safe overnight, and you can call the vet for advice in the morning if the problem persists.

Don't forget that excess caecotrophs (smelly, shiny, dark coloured droppings like miniature bunches of grapes) are not diarrhoea and do not need an emergency trip to the vet. They will require investigations into why they are not eating their caecotrophs and if their backside is caked with caecotrophs they are at risk of Flystrike. Book an appointment to see your vet within a day or so, for advice and a clinical examination.

Rabbit is bleeding uncontrollably from wound; or has been attacked:

As with all animals, bleeding that isn't controlled by firm, direct pressure needs prompt veterinary attention. Also, if the rabbit has been attacked by a dog (or cat, fox, ferret etc) telephone the vet for advice even if there are no apparent injuries or those you can see seem minor. There may be internal damage and/or at risk of shock

developing.

Rabbit may have a broken back or limb(s) or paralysis:

Skeletal injuries usually occur when rabbits are dropped or fall from a height – which is one of the reasons why allowing young children to pick up rabbits is a bad idea. Spinal injuries causing partial or total hind limb paralysis are very serious, but not necessarily hopeless. Aggressive treatment with steroids as soon as possible after the injury helps some rabbits by limiting swelling in the spinal cord, and some lucky rabbits recover sufficiently to lead a pretty normal life. Broken legs can sometimes be fixed by lightweight casts, external fixators, pins and plates. A rabbit that has fallen from a height may also have internal injuries and shock. You need to take your rabbit to see a vet immediately.

Rabbit is limp, floppy or cold:

These rabbits are very, very sick and may be close to death. The common end point of dehydration, shock or sepsis (infection) is a weak floppy rabbit, often with cold ears and totally unresponsive to sounds. They tend to sit hunched in a corner and 'feel funny' when you pick them up. Wrap them up warmly and get to the vet straight away.

Rabbit is in pain:

Rabbits who are in pain may sit hunched up with their eyes half closed, reluctant to move, grinding their teeth (bruxism) firmly. As well as being a welfare issue for the poor rabbit suffering it, pain is very dangerous to rabbits. As well as putting strain on their kidneys, pain is a very common trigger for the development of gastrointestinal stasis (ileus), a potentially lethal condition when the gut slows down or stops moving altogether.

If you think your rabbit is in pain, it is imperative that you seek veterinary treatment immediately.

Rabbit isn't eating or passing droppings:

Missing the odd meal is not normally a big deal for dogs or cats, but often indicates serious trouble in rabbits. Rabbits who have stop eating are often suffering from GI stasis. Or, if they have stopped eating for another reason (e.g. pain due to dental problems) then it probably won't belong before they do go on to develop GI stasis.

GI stasis normally builds up over a few days with the rabbit slowly eating less and the droppings getting smaller, fewer and harder.

These signs should ring alarm bells and veterinary treatment sought at this stage. If left untreated then it is highly likely that the rabbit will go into full blown stasis, making treatment and recovery more difficult.

If your rabbit has stopped eating suddenly or entirely, ring the vet, day or night. Before picking up the phone, check the litter tray, and specifically look for small droppings, pools of diarrhoea, or droppings strung together by strands of hair. The vet will need to know if the rabbit has been eating, drinking, peeing and pooping normally!

Rabbit has Flystrike:

"Flystrike" is the common name for a condition called myiasis, which occurs when blow-flies lay eggs on rabbits (usually on soiled/moist fur or wounds) that hatch into maggots within a few hours. The maggots can literally eat the rabbit alive, and trigger severe shock and infection.

The condition is much more common in the warmer months of the year (April – Sept), but can and has occurred in the depths of winter, so you should always be vigilant. If you do find maggots or maggot eggs on your rabbit, get your rabbit to the vet fast. You can pick off

visible maggots with a pair of tweezers, but don't think that pulling off all visible maggots will solve the problem - some may have already got under the skin. It is advised not to try washing the maggots off since the rabbit will need shaving once at the vets so they can be examined properly. Wet rabbit hair is almost impossible to clip and will therefore delay treatment.

The main priority is getting the rabbit to the vet fast. Those whose wounds are superficial and the maggots haven't entered the body cavity stand a good chance of recovery. Sadly those rabbits who have large wounds with maggots having entered the body cavity have a poor prognosis and euthanasia may be the kindest option for them. Even with antibiotics and fluid therapy, the prognosis is fairly grim. Prevention is much better than cure. Any rabbit can suffer from, but some rabbits are at particularly high risk.

If your rabbit is elderly; overweight; struggles to groom him/herself; has "sticky bottom" problems; urine scald; or any wounds or discharges (e.g. chronic runny eyes) you need to be especially careful. Rabbits must have their bottoms checked at least twice daily in warm weather; and if your bunny falls into a high-risk category talk to your vet about using "Rearguard" to protect him/her.

Rabbit is fitting:

Fitting can be a clinical symptoms of many different problems; *E. cuniculi*, certain poisons, brain tumours, hypocalcaemia to name a few. Any prolonged period of fitting will lead to a rise in body temperature, which can prove fatal, not to mention the actual cause of the fitting in the first place.

If you observe your rabbit having a fit, day or night then telephone your vet straight away. Ensure the rabbit is away from sharps objects,

electric cables and any water bowls are removed. Your vet may advise you to observe your rabbit or may want to see them straight away, especially in cases of hypocalcaemia, suspected poisonings or *E. cuniculi*.

Do....

- Contact the vet immediately if your rabbit is obviously unwell. If you're not sure, telephone for advice sooner rather than later.
- Always call ahead before rushing to the veterinary surgery with a sick rabbit, especially at weekends or out of hours. Staff may need to come in from home, and you may be directed to a different branch; a neighbouring practice, or a dedicated emergency clinic
- Try to find a good vet near your home. If you're not lucky enough to have an expert rabbit vet on tap, find a local practice that you trust to act as your rabbit's "GP" – you can always be referred to another practice with more rabbit expertise if required. Most urban practices these days have someone with an interest in rabbits, although out of hours you may not see a vet you are familiar with.
- Do take the rabbit to the surgery (by taxi if necessary) rather than requesting a house-call. The sicker the rabbit, the more the vet is likely to need equipment and drugs that can only be provided at the surgery.
- If you need to take your rabbit to the vets, then take their companion with them. Separating them will only cause them both

more stress.

- Do insure your rabbit for vets bills - it is bad enough being worried sick about your pet without having to worry about how you are going to pay a large veterinary bill for life saving treatment. Pre-existing conditions aren't covered, so make sure you insure your bunny before he or she develops any health problems!
- Do keep vaccinations up to date. Boosters with the new Myxo-RHD vaccination against VHD and Myxomatosis are needed every year.
- Do be prepared to stress to the vet or vet nurse who answers the emergency phone that you are talking about a rabbit, not a dog or cat. Just occasionally (and it doesn't happen very much these days) you might need to insist your rabbit needs to be seen urgently.... particularly if you think your rabbit is in pain or has stopped eating (most of the other problems we have listed would be an obvious emergency in any species).

Revision History

This article was first written as a BHRA information sheet in 1998, with the assistance of Owen Davies BVSc MRCVS. It was completely re-written and expanded in April 2005 and reviewed by Claire Speight RVN in December 2012. Reviewed by Richard Saunders BSc BVSc CBiol MSB CertZooMed DZooMed (Mammalian) MRCVS in Feb 2013.

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