

YOUR RABBITS HEALTH

When raising rabbits your best medicine is Preventative Medicine. That means, you take away the things that could cause your rabbits problems, before they do.

YOU and **YOU ALONE** are responsible for your rabbits health. Poor feed and feeding practices and dirty cages will result in sick animals. You don't live in dirt conditions and neither should your animals. If you are not prepared to take on this responsibility for your rabbit (or any other animal), then you should look at joining one of the non- livestock projects.

To protect the herd's health keep all equipment sanitary. Remove manure, soiled bedding and contaminated feed from the hutches daily. Wash watering and feeding equipment frequently in hot soapy water. Rinse in clean water, drain well, and dry.

If you manage your rabbits well and keep a clean rabbitry, you should not have too many problems with disease. Nonetheless, it is useful to know the signs of health problems common among rabbits and be on guard at all times.

STRESS

While stress is not a disease, it is a contributing factor to many health problems among rabbits. Stress is generally defined as a pressure or strain caused by an adverse force. It may come from sources inside the rabbitry or externally. Early signs of stress are difficult to detect in the individual rabbit and may have any number of causes.

Environmental

Transporting your rabbits, changing their pens, overcrowding them or making other changes to their habitat can cause stress. Climatic changes, temperature, humidity and drafts are also factors.

Physiological

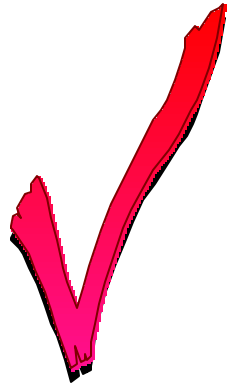
Anything which upsets the function of the body such as pregnancy, kindling, lactation, changes in diet, as well as clinical causes like illness, injury or infection can cause stress.

Inherited

Nervousness, in reaction to noise, new handlers and strangers, may be an inherited trait.

The effects of stress leave rabbits susceptible to disease. Young animals seem to tolerate and recover from stress better than older ones.

As we said before, diseases in rabbits can almost always be attributed to faulty husbandry.



Practice the following precautions for a trouble-free operation:

- C Clean cages and feeding utensils regularly.
- C Give rabbits food and drinking water that are fresh and clean.
- C Disinfect cages before restocking with healthy rabbits.
- C Keep rabbitry adequately ventilated, and the rabbit cages quiet and comfortable.
- C Make sure the rabbit houses are free of vermin (mice, rats), and cannot be entered by other animals. (Cats, dogs, raccoons, etc)
- C Isolate all newly purchased rabbits and those returning from shows, etc. for about a month.

If you suspect disease, take the following precautions immediately:

- C Whenever possible, isolate affected rabbits.
- C Clean and disinfect all infected cages.
- C Consult a knowledgeable person and give them all the details of the disease.
- C Prevent other rabbit keepers from visiting your rabbits until you get your health problems cleared up.
- C Do not take your rabbit to any club events while it is sick.
- C If you have more than one rabbit, feed and handle the sick one last and then go in the house and wash your hands.

It is important to learn to recognize the appearance and behavior of healthy rabbits . You should always be on alert for any departure from normal as this could be a sign of disease or stress. Feeding time is a good time to observe your rabbit. Also, if YOU need a little time to yourself, find a spot, sit down, take it easy and watch your rabbits. This way you will get to know how your rabbits act normally, when it's in its home and you will get a break from the world around you. It's good for your rabbit's health and it's good for yours.

WHAT IS NORMAL?

It is very important that we know how to tell when a rabbit is not well. Some of the illnesses which affect rabbits can rapidly cause death if not detected soon enough. **Early recognition** of health problems will help you treat the rabbit as soon as possible. You will be able to quickly isolate the sick animal before disease has a chance to spread to the others. Again, learning what your rabbits normal actions are and recognizing a change, is your first defense in fighting illness.

Examining the rabbit

The rabbit should be examined thoroughly from one end to the other when looking for any health problem. Do not stop at the first abnormal sign that you notice. Many diseases and disorders have **some** of the same signs. It is only after you know **all** of the signs that you can try to decide which problem you are dealing with. You will also find it helpful to record your observations on a note pad in case you need to call a veterinarian or other knowledgeable person.



First, observe the rabbit from several feet away. Watch how it is lying or sitting. Is it in its normal position? Is it moving about in its normal way? Does it appear to be in any discomfort? Is it doing any kind of repetitious movement (i.e. scratching at some area on its body, tilting its head to one side, etc.).

Move up closer and observe again. Is its respiration rate normal or does it seem fast? Listen carefully to the breathing. Do you hear normal sounds or are there water sounds like fluid in the lungs, or congested breathing like a sinus problem?

Look around the cage and on the floor beneath it. Are the droppings normal looking? Are there any signs of diarrhea? Is there leftover feed in the feeder?

Next, remove the rabbit from the cage and place it somewhere which is convenient to examine the rabbit. Beginning at the head, check the animal carefully all over.

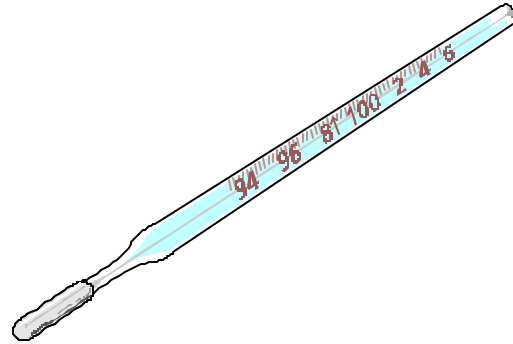
Look at the head. Are the eyes bright and shiny or are they dull and lifeless looking? Is there a discharge from the eye? Is the nose clean looking or is there abnormal nasal discharge (particularly, thick and whitish mucous like)? Is the mouth normal looking? Do the rabbit's teeth meet correctly? Are the ears in their normal position, or is one or both dropped down? Feel the base of the ear. Does the rabbit flinch when you handle the ear? Look carefully for signs of ear mites inside at the base of the ear (crusty brown discharge coating the inner surface of the ear, down where the ear joins the head).

Next, look at the **fur coat**. Are there any areas of missing hair? Are there any rashes or areas of flaked or dry skin? Are there any sores or abscesses? Does the coat feel soft and supple, like it does normally or is the skin dry, hard or tight feeling and the hair dry and lifeless?

Next look at the **feet and legs**. Check the rabbit's feet and legs. Check for missing claws which might be infected, sores on the feet and legs (particularly the hind legs), or bent or abnormal shaped legs.

Next look at the ***underside***. Turn the rabbit over and examine its body. If it is a doe (one which has been nursing), check the mammary system for any signs of mastitis or congestion (hardness, redness, swelling). Check the external sex organs to be sure that there are no rashes, sores, scabs or infections.

Next, take the ***temperature***. Take the rabbit's rectal temperature. A normal temperature is in the 39°C to 39.5°C range.



If you don't find any signs of disease and your rabbit still acts sick then call an experienced breeder to come and have a look at your rabbit, to see if they can see something. If they can't then you will have to consult a veterinarian for a more in-depth examination.

If you do find some signs of sickness, then check the disease and health problem charts to see if you can match them to a disease in the chart and find out what you have to do to help your rabbit. **BUT BEFORE YOU DO ANYTHING. CALL AN EXPERIENCED BREEDER** and ask them to have a look at your rabbit and give you their opinion. You might have mis-diagnosed the disease and the wrong medicine is the same as no medicine. They will know if a veterinarian will need to be consulted or if it can be looked after at home.

The following chart will help you recognize what is normal and what is not normal for a rabbit. However, you are your rabbits' best defense against disease. You will know first, when it is happy how it acts normally and when it is not feeling good. The chart will help you to start looking for the signs of sickness earlier, which will be a big help to you and your rabbit in fighting sickness.

<u>THE HEALTHY RABBIT</u>	<u>THE SICK RABBIT</u>
<p>Eyes - clear and bright Nose - clean (no discharge) Ears - clean with smooth skin inside Head - held in normal position Coat - smooth, shiny Skin - soft and supple Feet - claws unbroken, pads healthy Temperature - between 39°C to 39.5°C (rectal) Respiration - normal Droppings - normal Appetite - normal Thirst - normal Behavior - alert Movement - normal functions</p> <div data-bbox="365 1155 511 1302" style="text-align: center;"> </div>	<p>Eyes - dull, cloudy, runny Nose - nasal discharge or mucous Ears - crusty brown discharge or any other discharge. Ears - drooping (except on Lops!) Head - tilted to one side Coat - dry, dull, patchy hair Skin - dry, tight, hard Feet - claws broken, and infected, sores on feet. Temperature - above 39.5°C (rectal) Respiration - much faster or slower Droppings - diarrhea Appetite - does not touch food Thirst - does not drink or drinking all the time, laying with front feet in water dish Behavior - listless Movement - scratching at different part of the body. - signs of paralysis - twitching</p> <div data-bbox="998 1155 1161 1323" style="text-align: center;"> </div>

You have now learned how to recognize when a rabbit is not healthy or feeling well. As mentioned before, the next step is to try to find out exactly what the problem is. When you know what kind of problem the rabbit has, you can begin to treat it or choose the right steps to eliminate the cause. When you identify a disease by its signs, it is called a diagnosis.

It is not always possible to identify the problem by examining the live animal. Sometimes we do not find out that an animal has a problem until it has died. In the case of an animal being found dead without a cause, you can have a post mortem (autopsy) performed on that animal to find out what it died from. This means that the rabbit is taken to a veterinarian's office or to one of the Provincial Department of Agriculture's Veterinary Services Laboratories. The cost of this service is expensive, but the lab can often report a diagnosis within 2 or 3 days. You can then use this information to decide what action must be taken to protect the rest of your rabbits.

The following pages have a list of the most common rabbit diseases and health problems, both external and internal: their causes and treatments.

As mentioned earlier, if you do match a problem your rabbit is having to one of the ones listed on these charts, you should still check with someone more experienced to verify that you have diagnosed the problem correctly. Incorrect diagnosis and treatment could lead to the death of your rabbit!

SOME ADVICE

As mentioned at the start of this section, your rabbits good or bad health rests directly on your shoulders.

Besides keeping a clean and quiet environment for your rabbit; learning what's normal with your rabbit and learning the signs of sickness and the treatment of it, are two of the most important things you can do to raise healthy rabbits. The following has already appeared in the Selection section but it is so important that it bears repeating. **YOUR** first decisions must be the right ones.

NEVER, NEVER buy or accept a rabbit out of sympathy because it is sick or injured. **NEVER, NEVER** buy a sick or injured rabbit because its been reduced in price. **NEVER, NEVER** accept a sick or injured rabbit from a "friend of the family" because they just want to get rid of it.

If you do any of the above you will be putting yourself in a hole that you will never get out of, as long as you keep those rabbits. You have an obligation to your club mates and to yourself to raise quality healthy stock and you should **NEVER, NEVER** allow yourself to be swayed from that obligation.

Remember:

**Sick gets you sick;
Junk gets you junk;
Quality gets you quality;
Healthy gets you healthy.**

You should be aware of the most common diseases and health problems which affect rabbits so that you can watch for these. These have been broken down into categories.

EXTERNAL: SKIN, EYE AND EAR PROBLEMS

Problem or Disease	Description	Cause	Treatment
Ear mites	A brownish crusty discharge in the ear canal. Rabbit will scratch at its ears. Further bacterial infection may set in.	A tiny parasite known as an ear mite will invade the rabbit's ear canal and cause infection and irritation.	Ear mite solutions are available to treat this problem. Treatment must be repeated several times to rid a rabbit of the mites. Isolate infected rabbits.
Weepy Eyes	Eyelids become swollen and reddened. There may be clear or yellowish discharge. Eyes will weep tears which make the rabbit's fur wet around and below the eyes. Common in young rabbits which are still in the next box.	Irritants in the air such as dust, ammonia vapors (from urine), or from a bacterial or viral infection.	Eliminate cause of irritation. Eyes may be treated with an ophthalmic ointment (an ointment made especially for eyes). Do not use any type of ointment or drops not made specifically for the eyes!
Sore Hocks	Loss of hair on bottom of foot pads. Very irritated skin with thick sores which can become infected. The rabbit may be very reluctant to walk on affected feet.	Rabbits which have a thin hair covering on their feet are much more susceptible to this problem. Poor cage sanitation is also responsible. Rusted floor wire also grinds hair off foot pad.	Antibiotic ointment may help, as well as keeping cages clean and well bedded with fresh straw. It is best to cull affected rabbits as poor hair covering on the feet is a hereditary problem. New floor wire if needed.
Ringworm	Crusty, circular shaped patches which appear in areas on the rabbit's face or feet. Hair loss will occur.	Despite the name, ringworm is not caused by a worm. It is caused by a contagious fungus infection (which can be transmitted to other types of animals and to humans). Care must be taken when handling infected animals.	Treat rabbit with a fungicidal cream or lotion. Be sure to disinfect cage and feeder. NOTE: To be sure of diagnosis for this disease, you may wish to have a skin scraping taken and analyzed (a small patch of infected skin is scraped and cultured for a few days to ascertain the cause).

<p>Skin Mange</p>	<p>Reddened scaly skin, intense itching and scratching with some loss of fur.</p>	<p>Fur mites</p>	<p>A good mite powder used throughout the rabbitry might work, or treatment by veterinarian may be required. Best to destroy animals and blow-torch cages.</p>
<p>Fungus Infection</p>	<p>Scaly skin over shoulders or along back. Hair thin, dandruff.</p>	<p>Fungus</p>	<p>Apply commercial fungicide or 2% solution of Lysol to affected areas every other day for 1 week.</p>
<p>Hutch Burn</p>	<p>Severe skin inflammation around the external sex organs and the anus. This may be further complicated by a bacterial infection.</p>	<p>Usually caused by poor sanitation of the cage. The rabbit may not have a clean, dry place to sit or lie down.</p>	<p>Clean out cages properly! Apply a soothing antibiotic ointment or petroleum jelly to coat the affected areas to prevent further irritation.</p>

INTERNAL PROBLEMS

<p>Mastitis also known as “blue bag”</p>	<p>Mammary system is swollen, reddened, hard, painful. Doe will go off her feed. Temperature will be very high (over 39.°C). If untreated, doe will stop milk production and litter will die.</p>	<p>Commonly caused by injury to udder from scratches, especially caused by slivers or rough edges of nest box, or from rough wire cage floors. Poor sanitation can also be responsible.</p>	<p>Doe must be treated immediately with antibiotics to prevent loss of milk production. Do not foster her young to another doe as they will spread the mastitis to the healthy doe. You may wish to cull the infected doe after her litter is raised as the problem may return after the next kindling.</p>
<p>Caked Breast</p>	<p>Breasts become firm and congested with hard knots at sides of nipples.</p>	<p>Milk not drawn from glands as fast as formed.</p>	<p>Do not wean young abruptly.</p>
<p>Snuffles Pasteurella Multicida</p>	<p>Snuffles will cause cold-like pneumonia symptoms. Running nose, sneezing, difficult respiration. Hair on front feet will be wet and matted from rubbing nose. Can cause other problems such as abscesses, weepy eyes, and internal infections.</p>	<p>Pasteurella multocida organism is extremely contagious and easily introduced to the rabbitry when purchasing new stock.</p>	<p>No effective method of treatment. Cull infected rabbits. Poor sanitation, poor ventilation, high ammonia levels and careless disease transmission practices help cause the disease!</p>

Pneumonia	Dullness; quick labored breathing with nose held high. Bluish color to eyes and ears. Lungs congested.	Bacterial infection of the lungs.	Penicillin effective if administered early.
Wry Neck	The neck is bent to one side or twisted at an odd angle. Rabbit has a difficult time eating and cannot straighten its head and neck.	Can be an injury or many times it is caused by an inner ear infection. The balance is affected.	There is no effective treatment for wry neck.
Abscesses and Boils	Lumps occurring under skin over ribs and back, neck, dewlap, mammary glands.	Various bacteria.	May break and drain naturally. Ask vet for treatment.
Metritis	White sticky discharge from female organs. Palpation indicates enlarged uterus.	Infection of uterus by variety of bacteria.	Destroy infected does and disinfect cages. Replace bucks, as they are carriers.
Orchitis	Infection or inflammation of the testicles.	Pus-forming bacteria.	Destroy afflicted bucks. Breeding bucks with orchitis may produce metritis in does and vice versa.
Enteritis	Severe diarrhea, dehydration, death.	Can be caused by many types of bacteria and viruses. It is also very often caused by poor feeding practices.	Try to find possible reason or cause for an outbreak. Have post mortem done on dead rabbits. Isolate affected rabbits. Try feeding hay to reduce problems from enteritis. Consult with your veterinarian about possible preventative treatments.
Coccidiosis	Diarrhea, weight loss in the young rabbits even though the rabbit is eating well, a pot-bellied look even though the rest of the body is thin, sudden death in rabbits which showed no signs of illness.	Coccidia are microscopic protozoan (single celled) parasites. There are several different species. Some attack the liver and some attack the intestinal lining. They destroy digestive tract tissue and make it very difficult for the rabbit to absorb nutrients.	Prevention is the key word! Proper sanitation will help to reduce and control coccidia contamination in the environment. Almost all rabbits have coccidia and are carriers. Older rabbits are not usually affected, but young rabbits cannot survive a severe infection. Fecal samples may be taken to your local Vet Lab for analysis to check for coccidia levels. Various medications for feed or water can be used to control coccidia.



ACTIVITY IDEAS

1. Play “What’s Wrong With Me?” game at the bottom of this page.
2. Visit a local Veterinarian or have one attend your meeting to talk about rabbit health issues.
3. Have members divide into 2 groups. 1 group will discuss and draw a healthy rabbit. The other group a sick one. Come back together and compare their opinions.

What’s Wrong With Me?

<p>1. I have been scratching at my ears for a few days. I have brown, crumbly discharge in my ears. I don’t feel very happy. What’s wrong with me?</p>	<p>2. I am a nursing doe. I have a fever and don’t feel like eating. What could be wrong?</p>
<p>3. My back feet are sore. I don’t feel like walking around my cage. What could be wrong with me?</p>	<p>4. I have been sneezing all day. My front feet are all wet. I just moved to this place a couple of days ago. What could be wrong with me?</p>
<p>5. My head is bent to one side. I can’t seem to walk right and keep falling over to one side. What could be wrong?</p>	<p>6. I have a good appetite but I keep losing weight and have a pot belly. What might be wrong?</p>
<p>7. I am a young rabbit living in a nest box. I have red, swollen irritated eyes. What is my problem?</p>	<p>8. I have had digestive problems all day! My owner just changed us over to a new feed two days ago. I’m not the only one feeling sick! What could be wrong?</p>