

## Care of the Elderly Rabbit

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Contrary to common wisdom, many well-kept rabbits live long and happy lives. With better owner education, improved diets and husbandry, and better medical care, more rabbits are living into their senior years. In this article we will review some of the special care and problems we see in the senior house rabbit.

Rabbits often live into their second decade. Early House Rabbit Society literature reported rabbits living only 4 to 5 years. This misconception was likely because of rabbits dying at an early age due to poor management, rich diets and lack of ovariohysterectomy (spaying). In our experience, 10- to 12-year-old rabbits are not uncommon, and rabbits as old as 14 years have been presented to our practice. We have not as yet determined the record-breaking age for a rabbit, but there are anecdotal reports of rabbits living 16 to 18 years.

Breed may have a significant effect on the aging process. Breeds with specific conformational traits (long or floppy ears, small size, long backs, etc.) appear to live shorter lives. These are many of the breeds kept as house rabbits, including dwarf and lop breeds.

Signs of aging may be noticed in rabbits as young as 5 or 6 years of age. Decreased activity, weight gain or loss, problems with mobility (especially problems with back legs), dental problems, problems with eyesight and hearing, growths on skin or mucous membranes, and changes in behavior may all herald old age in your pet.

Aging is inevitable but there are things you can do to slow the process and make your friend more comfortable in his senior years.

### Problems of older rabbits

The first change you may notice in the older rabbit is a decrease in activity. This may start with moving at a slower pace and progress to a reluctance to venture far from favorite places. Changes in activity may be due to weight gain, weakness, and aches and pains from back problems and/or arthritis. Keeping your rabbit active will help keep him fit and slow this aging process.

Several new medications help rabbits with painful joints and backs. Don't put off caring for mobility problems. Properly diagnosed, your veterinarian can make a significant difference for these rabbits. Precursor of joint material and joint fluid can be given to help slow arthritis and decrease arthritis pain, thereby greatly improving the quality of life for rabbits with arthritis.

Keeping your rabbit on a diet high in fiber (grass hay) and low in simple carbohydrates (grains, refined carbohydrates and sugars) will help him stay slim. Rabbits must spend time out of their cage to get regular exercise. A confined rabbit will live a shorter life and have a poorer quality of life.

Back and neck problems are common in rabbits, especially breeds with long backs, including large lop breeds. Ruptured intervertebral disks and arthritic spinal problems both result in partial to total paralysis. The onset of paralysis may be acute or chronically progressive. Early intervention in these cases similarly improves their long-term prognosis. Radiographs (X-rays) are needed to diagnose these problems. Again, keeping your pet slim with a good high fiber, low calorie diet and regular exercise will aid in preventing back and neck problems. Also, try to prevent large, long-backed rabbits from leaping off high perches such as couches, beds and chairs. Treatment for spinal diseases includes those medications mentioned for arthritis above as well as judicious use of steroidal anti-inflammatory therapy.

A complication of arthritis and spinal disease is urine scald caused by urine dripping or spraying on the skin between the rabbit's back legs causing a diaper rash-like irritation. The best treatment for this problem is to correct the underlying cause, however this may not be possible in all cases. Shaving the hair from the affected area, bathing with mild soap and the use of topical products (A&D Ointment) offer temporary relief. Many rabbits benefit from surgery that moves the skin or urinary opening so that urine does not collect on the skin of the perineum and inner thighs.

Dental problems may plague the older rabbit. This is most often due to the gradual tipping of the cheek teeth leading to sharp edges forming that can irritate the tongue or cheek. Signs of this problem include the gradual rejection of hard foods (hay, pellets, and hard vegetables such as carrots), salivation and a foul or sweet odor to the rabbit. As the problem progresses the rabbit may lose weight or stop eating altogether. An oral examination under isoflurane anesthesia may be required to diagnose the problem. Sharp edges are trimmed from the teeth to correct the problem.

Many rabbits ultimately die of renal (kidney) failure. Early signs of kidney problems include breaking litter box training, increased frequency of urination or urine volume, or increased thirst. Urinary tract infections, bladder stones or sludge and kidney stones may make a rabbit more prone to kidney failure. Early treatment and good follow up of these problems are highly recommended to keep your rabbit healthy. Feeding a diet low in calcium, good litter box hygiene and lots of fresh water will help prevent urinary tract disease as well.

### **Preventative medicine**

Rabbits should be examined by a veterinarian familiar with rabbits annually. Starting at 5 years of age, blood tests and urinalysis should be performed at least every other year to 9 years. Rabbits with decreased mobility should have survey radiographs taken to rule out early arthritis or spinal disease.

Care must be taken to provide a healthy diet to the older rabbit and not allow him to become obese. As with all rabbits, we recommend a diet of grass hay, dark leafy greens and limited, if any, high fiber pellets. This diet will promote a healthy gastrointestinal tract and prevent obesity.

## **Euthanasia**

Eventually the time comes when the aging process causes our friends to have aches and pains. Many new analgesics (pain killers) are on the market that hold promise of helping in these times. Never forget that the quality of our pets lives is more important than the quantity. All too soon the times comes to say good-bye and offer euthanasia to an old friend no longer happy with his daily existence. Signs that this may be the case include refusal of food, and ceasing of grooming behavior. Your veterinarian will be able to help you with this decision when the time comes. Euthanasia is typically accomplished with an overdose of an injectable anesthetic. A gas anesthetic may be administered initially to minimize any restraint or perception of the injection.

The best way to have your rabbit live a long and healthy life is to offer him a happy healthy environment, a healthy diet and regular medical care. Not surprisingly, avoiding fattening foods, getting exercise and a happy social environment all contribute. Early attention to health problems and a good preventative health program will keep little problems from turning into life threatening ones.