

How to Find a Good Rabbit Vet

Introduction

Rabbits are very different from dogs and cats, and not every vet is “rabbit-saavy”!! The following may seem like a lot of work to go through to find a veterinarian, but your rabbits' well being depends upon finding the most experienced veterinary care available. We hope that within another few years, veterinarian schools will begin to understand rabbits well enough so that veterinarians can be properly trained before they run across a rabbit in their practice.

The other problem is that veterinarians not trained in rabbit medicine should be responsible enough to refer you to another veterinarian. Instead many just see the green of your money and say to themselves, "Sure I'm a vet, I can see your pet, after all it's only a rabbit". When you find a veterinarian who is honest enough to admit their limitations and refer you to someone else, be sure to refer people to him/her for cats or dogs and give him that business. It's really great to work with an honest vet!

How do I Start the Search?

- **Start the search before you have an emergency!**
- Check the House Rabbit Society's recommended veterinarian list (through www.rabbit.org) first to see if there are any recommended rabbit veterinarians listed in your area. Next check the yellow pages for veterinarians who advertise as "exotic" (includes, rabbits & rodents). Then also randomly select 5 veterinarians who do NOT advertise as avian or exotic.
- Phone these veterinarians and ask who they refer their clients to if they have a serious rabbit case. If all 5 veterinarians give you the name of the same veterinarian, ok. If not, then randomly select another 5 veterinarians and continue the process until you have a clear "winner".
- Phone several (start with 3) veterinarians in cities within 50 miles of you and ask the same question: who do they refer their clients to if they have a serious rabbit case. (One House Rabbit Society volunteer passes by at least 15 clinics to get to her veterinarian who is 35 miles away.)
- At this point you should have either a clear "winner" or several veterinarians to choose from. The next step is to phone the vet. Let the front office person know that you are concerned with finding the very best veterinarian to care for your rabbit and that you would like to speak directly to the doctor at his/her convenience. Leave both your work and home phone number and specific times that the veterinarian can get hold of you (and be there) or ask what would be a good time for you to call back (when the veterinarian is between appointments).

What screening questions should I ask?

- Ask about how many rabbit clients the veterinarian sees each year.

- Ask how many rabbits they have spayed or neutered in the past year, and what their success rate is for these surgeries (in other words, have they lost any rabbits during surgery). A 90% success rate is way too low. Every doctor, whether for animals or humans, will occasionally lose a patient, usually because of an undiagnosed problem. However, veterinarians across the country who spay/neuter rabbits for the House Rabbit Society lost an average of less than ½ of one percent.
- Ask if they remove both the uterus and ovaries during spay (they should) and does the veterinarian do “open” or “closed” neuters (closed is preferable – let your veterinarian explain the difference.) Is entry to the testicles made through the scrotum or the abdomen? Entry via the abdomen unnecessarily increases the trauma for male rabbits.)
- Ask if they know which antibiotics are dangerous for rabbits. Even one dose of the following can be deadly: most of the “...cillin” drugs like penicillin and Amoxicillin, lincomycin, clindamycin.
- Casually ask about preventing hairballs. Q: "What's the best way to prevent hairballs?" A: "Provide your rabbit with hay every day, preferably 24 hours a day. Provide daily exercise and brush frequently"
- Ask if food has to be removed the night before surgery. The answer should be "no". Rabbits should never be fasted.
- You might also want to ask which conferences they've attended lately that had talks about rabbit medicine and what journals they read. We want our veterinarians to be up on the latest in rabbit treatment.

If you don't get the "right" answers to the above questions, continue your search.

What shouldn't I do?

- Do not make your choice based on how close the veterinarian is to your home (unless that veterinarian is the clear "winner"). Paying money to a veterinarian who does not know anything (or very little) about rabbits is just throwing your money away and can cost the life of your companion.
- Don't assume that just because a veterinarian works with breeders or local 4-H clubs, that they are experienced with house rabbits or the medical needs of older rabbits. Unfortunately, such veterinarians often tend to approach rabbits as stock animals rather than as beloved companions. They may never have done a spay or neuter and "treatment" of any difficulty may amount to euthanasia (when dealing with stock or show animals, the financial bottom line may be the primary consideration).

Adapted from an article by: Kathleen Wilsbach and Sandi Ackerman for the House Rabbit Society.