

How To Tell If Your Rabbit Is Sick

Adapted from an article from the House Rabbit Society

When trying to figure out if your rabbit is sick, always remember rabbits are at the bottom of the food chain and in the wild the weakest are the first to be preyed upon. Thus, rabbits innately tend to hide their illnesses and injuries. This may be a good survival tactic in the wild, but for domestic rabbits, hiding their symptoms only misleads their caretakers and prevents prompt medical attention.

What is "normal" behavior? Some rabbits jump up to greet you; some don't. Some rabbits are very active, running all over the house; some aren't. In general, rabbits mellow a bit as they age. A three-month-old bunny might seem hyperactive compared to a more sedate five-year-old rabbit. Both activity levels are normal, just different.

People who live with rabbits need to be particularly attentive to subtle changes. If your rabbit usually greets you with leaps and bounds and he is now lying in the back of the pen when you approach, perhaps hunched over, this could be a cause for concern. Couple this with no droppings in his litter box and loads of hay still present from the previous night, and you could have a very sick rabbit.

Be sure to find a good veterinarian before your rabbit gets sick. When Bunny is ill, you need help quickly and you won't have time to "shop" for a vet. If you are ever in question about your rabbit's health, call your vet – immediately!

Tooth grinding: Loud tooth grinding is a sign of pain. Note: This tooth grinding is different from the less-loud "tooth purring" you may hear when you snuggle and kiss Bun's face! It is much louder and sometimes combined with a "hunchy" body posture.

Body heat: Rabbits regulate body temperature by their ears. Very cold or hot ears could indicate a fever or a drop in body temperature. This, coupled with other warning signs, could warrant a trip to the vet.

Runny eyes or nose, labored breathing or chronic sneezing: These could indicate allergies, upper respiratory infection, a blocked tear duct or other problems. See your vet.

Wet chin or drooling: Usually a sign of tooth problems, or malocclusion. You may also notice a decrease in appetite, picking up food and then dropping it after a couple of chews, and an inability to eat hard foods such as whole carrot. See your vet. Left untreated, tooth problems can lead to infection of the jaw bone, which is very difficult to treat. Depending on the severity of the misalignment, your rabbit's teeth may need to be trimmed regularly. In severe cases, teeth can be pulled.

Loss of balance or a head tilt: This is often called wry neck, typically an inner ear infection. This can come on suddenly. Although treatment can be lengthy, a head tilt can usually be cured if treatment is begun quickly.

In one end, out the other: Your rabbit's litter box contains a wealth of information. A healthy digestive tract will produce large, round fecal pellets. Increasingly smaller, irregularly shaped droppings or droppings strung together with fur (or carpet) may indicate a problem. Proper grooming by you, especially during a molt, and plenty of fresh hay will help produce optimum digestive tract health, along with appealing to the rabbit's urge to chew.

Loss of appetite or lethargy: Even a rabbit can have a "bad hare day." But if your rabbit refuses his usual fresh food or any of his special treats for more than a day, and seems particularly lethargic, you should call the vet.

Picking up food, chewing a little, then dropping it: This is a classic sign of tooth problems. Other signs are not eating foods that the rabbit previously enjoyed, or only eating them if they are chopped up so as to make them easier to eat.

Lumps and bumps: These could be signs of an abscess, especially when they appear on the face. Abscesses need to be treated with antibiotics and possibly could require surgery. Please take your bunny to a rabbit-saavy vet for evaluation.

Holding one ear down for a prolonged length of time: This could signal that the bunny is in pain, or has developed a type of palsy. Again, please take your bunny to a rabbit-saavy vet for examination.

We encourage you to observe your rabbit's behavior, activity level and droppings daily. Each rabbit is different and knowing what is normal behavior for your rabbit could save his life.

And one more suggestion – if you are concerned about the vet expenses your bunny may incur, think about starting a savings account just for bunny vet expenses now, while your bunny is still healthy. Even putting in small amounts on a regular basis will add up fast, and if your bunny does become ill, money will be one less thing that you have to worry about!!