

Directors: Stephen F. Glanvill, M.A., Vet.M.B., D.B.R., O.V.S., M.R.C.V.S.
Simon D. Richards, B.V.Sc., O.V.S., M.R.C.V.S.
Gary Jennings, B.Sc., B.Vet.Med., M.R.C.V.S.



CARE OF THE ELDERLY RABBIT



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.

Rabbits often live into their second decade. Early literature reported rabbits living only 4 -5 years. This was likely because of poor management, rich diets and lack of spaying (in female rabbits).

10-12 year old rabbits are not uncommon. Breed may have a significant effect on the ageing process.

Signs of ageing may be noticed as young as 5-6 years. The signs include the following:-

- Decreased activity
- Weight gain or loss
- Problems with mobility (especially back legs)
- Dental problems
- Problems with eyesight and hearing
- Growths on skin or mucous membranes
- Changes in behaviour.

Problems of older rabbits

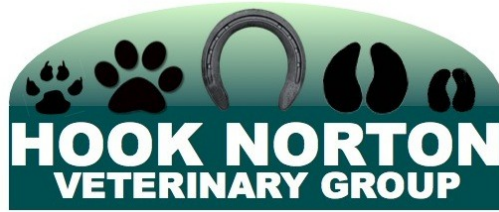
The first change you may notice is a decrease in activity. These changes may be due to weight gain, weakness, aches and pains from back problems and/or arthritis. Keeping your rabbit active will keep him fit and slow this ageing process.

Keeping your rabbit on a diet high in fibre, (grass hay), and low in simple carbohydrates, (grains), 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.

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Hook Norton Veterinary Group LLP, registered in England and Wales under number OC356808
(Registered Office) White Hills Surgery, Sibford Road, Hook Norton, Banbury, Oxon. OX15 5DG
Tel: 01608 730085 (Farm, Equine & Accounts) 01608 730501 (Small Animal)
The Spendlove Centre, Enstone Road, Charlbury, Oxford. OX7 3PQ. Tel: 01608 811250
Heritage House, St Thomas Street, Deddington, Oxon. OX15 0SY. Tel: 01869 337732
FAX NO: 01608 730439 VAT Reg. No. 349 3951 20
www.hooknortonvets.co.uk



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Back and neck problems are common in rabbits, especially breeds with long backs, including large lop breeds. Try to prevent these larger breeds from leaping off high perches such as couches, beds and chairs etc.

A complication of arthritis and spinal disease is urine scalding. This is caused by urine dripping or spraying onto the rabbits back legs, causing irritation. The best treatment for this problem is to correct the underlying cause; this may not be possible in all cases. Shaving the hair from the affected area, bathing in mild soap and the use of topical products offer temporary relief.

Dental problems may affect the older rabbit. This is often due to the gradual tipping of the cheek teeth leading to sharp edges forming that can irritate the tongue or cheek. Signs include rejection of hard food, salivation and a foul or sweet odour to the rabbit. As the problem progresses the rabbit may lose weight or stop eating altogether. An examination under anaesthetic may be required to diagnose the problem. The sharp edges are trimmed to correct the problem, again under anaesthesia.

Many rabbits suffer from kidney failure as they get older. Early signs of kidney problems include breaking litter box training, increased frequency of urination or urine volume, or increased thirst. 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 prevent urinary tract disease as well.

Euthanasia

Eventually the time comes when the ageing process causes pets to have aches and pains. Never forget that the quality of our pet's life is more important than the quantity. All too soon the time comes to say goodbye. Signs this may be the case include refusal of food and ceasing of grooming and behaviour. Your vet will be able to help you with this decision when the time comes.

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