



Pittwater Animal Hospital

We are your pet's other best friend.

FACT SHEET

Rabbit Emergencies

Rabbits are stoics; they don't like to show when they are hurting. It's probably a survival-of-the-fittest thing. In the wild a sick bunny doesn't stand much of a chance against predators so they instinctively keep very low profiles. However, because they're small, they can become dehydrated (and hypothermic) quite quickly.

Therefore, when your rabbit seems unusually still and is reluctant to eat, you should get in touch with us right away. Delaying even a day to see what may develop could prove fatal. Here are some danger signs to look out for:

Limp, floppy or cold – If your rabbit sits hunched in a corner and feels funny when you pick him or her up, you have a very, very sick animal. This weak, floppy condition, often accompanied by cold ears, indicates severe dehydration, shock or sepsis. Wrap your rabbit warmly and contact PAH immediately.

Breathing difficulty sometimes accompanied by bluish lips and tongue – First, you have to know what your rabbit's normal respiration rate is; usually 30 - 60/minute with an adult rabbit. However, some will breathe faster than this when hot or stressed. If your rabbit's breathing becomes laboured (long, hard breaths rather than rapid panting) or turns to grunting, it's in trouble. If the lips and tongue are blue tinted, your bunny is not getting enough oxygen. Call us immediately.

Uncontrollable bleeding - As with all pets, a rabbit whose bleeding can't be controlled by firm direct pressure needs prompt veterinary attention. If the rabbit has been attacked by a dog (or cat, fox, ferret), phone us for advice immediately. Even if you can't see any injuries or those you can see seem minor, your rabbit could still have internal damage and/or be on the verge of shock.

Severe diarrhoea – We're not talking about the occasional episode of runny or soft stools where your rabbit is otherwise alert and lively; these animals can wait until the morning to see us. The same goes for excess caecotrophs (the smelly, shiny, dark coloured droppings like little bunches of grapes).

However, if you find your bunny sitting hunched in a pool of diarrhoea, either liquid/watery faeces or jelly-like material, call us straightaway. Baby rabbits are especially vulnerable to developing acute diarrhoea leading quickly to death due to dehydration. Many a baby rabbit has died of diarrhoea a few days after arriving in a new home.

Suspected fractures - If your rabbit has fallen or been dropped from a height, both internal and skeletal injuries are quite possible. Although damage to the spine causing partial or total hind limb paralysis is very serious, the situation is not necessarily hopeless. By treating with steroids as soon as possible after the injury, we can help limit swelling in the spinal cord. Some rabbits then recover sufficiently to lead pretty normal lives as house pets. We can also sometimes fix broken legs using lightweight casts or pins and plates.

Obvious pain - Rabbits who are in pain sit hunched up with their eyes half closed and are reluctant to move. If you listen closely, you can also hear them grinding their teeth. The most common cause will be belly ache. Check the litter tray for small droppings, pools of diarrhoea, or droppings strung together by strands of hair. When you phone us, we'll want to know if your rabbit has been eating, drinking, peeing and pooping normally.

Flystrike – If your rabbit is getting on in years and maybe carrying a bit of extra weight, you should be checking its bottom daily in warm weather. Fly eggs laid on soiled fur can hatch into maggots within hours. The maggots then trigger severe shock and can literally eat the rabbit alive.

If you find any maggots on your rabbit, call us ASAP. Even with antibiotics and fluid therapy, the prognosis is fairly grim, especially where the maggots have eaten away a lot of tissue. In this case your rabbit would need extensive surgery to remove maggots and diseased tissue.

By the way, picking off visible maggots with a pair of tweezers won't necessarily solve the problem; some may have already got under the skin. Also, don't dunk your rabbit's bottom in water to remove maggots, because wet or damp fur is next to impossible for us to clip.

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