



THE CENTER FOR

BIRD & EXOTIC ANIMAL MEDICINE

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IS MY RABBIT SICK?

Rabbits, like all animals, are susceptible to a variety of bacterial, viral, fungal, metabolic and neoplastic diseases. Unlike traditional domestic animals (dogs, cats, cows, horses and so on) that usually act sick when they are, rabbits are very skilled at hiding their illness. Although they live in our homes and are tame, they still have much of the “programming” found in wild animals to withhold symptoms and show signs of disease. This programming cannot be overridden and they often maintain this “I’m okay” attitude until they are critically ill, weak to the point that they do not have the strength to hide disease any longer. As a result, rabbit owners need to be aware of small, subtle changes that may signal illness.

So how will you know if your rabbit is ill? Start by observing and making a mental note of your healthy rabbit’s normal behavior and habits. Once you know normal, it will be easier to spot abnormal.

Behavior: This will probably give you your first hint that something is not right. A normal rabbit is active and curious in its surroundings. If it sits with its body hunched, appears sleepy for extended periods of time or huddles/trembles despite a normal, warm environment, it is likely feeling pain, discomfort or general malaise. A rabbit grinding its teeth is a reliable indicator of pain. A sick rabbit is usually quieter than normal, not interested in food or treats, and often retracts from petting or attention. It is these changes in behavior and patterns that suggest something is wrong.

Droppings: A normal rabbit dropping is round, firm and almost odorless. The color should be consistently dark brown, with no liquid component. Black, green or tan stools are all signs of disease, as are stools that have poor or no form to them. A lack of solid consistency to the feces is true diarrhea, and diarrhea is a serious condition in a rabbit and should not be taken lightly. One or two abnormal droppings are usually nothing to worry about, but consistently abnormal droppings over an entire day or two would warrant a call to the vet. Blood in the droppings is always abnormal.

Urine: Urine can vary in color and density, and can range from clear to dark yellow, and may be cloudy. Red urine can be porphyrin pigment (normal) or blood, and can be related to diet or a sign of disease (blood). The amount of clear urine may increase with high fluid intake or as a result of disease. Kidney disease can produce either increased or decreased urine production and can increase or decrease water intake.

Appetite: Most rabbits will lose their appetite when they become seriously ill, but even a small decrease in appetite should be taken as a potential sign of disease. Some ill rabbits will stop eating their regular diet and eat only one food item or treats. Eating non-digestible items is a cause for concern. Others will stop eating and drinking altogether. Occasionally a rabbit will drink a lot but not eat, this is a sign of serious disease.

Body condition: Pick up rabbit and run your finger down the center of the backbone. You should be able to feel the spine running from neck to tail. A healthy rabbit should have muscle on either side of the bone. A rabbit that has lost weight will have a very “pointy” spine, prominent shoulder blades and hips, or even small lateral points immediately to each side of the point of the spine. Feel your healthy rabbit so you will know how normal feels and will be able to recognize abnormal when it occurs. Weight loss can be significant in rabbits in a very short amount of time, as little as a day or two, or as long as a week or more depending on the disease. Weight loss is a sure sign that something is wrong.

In short, it can be elusive to identify the early signs of disease in your rabbit. However, it is essential to note changes in their behavior, attitude and physical condition as early as possible to prevent serious disease from becoming life-threatening.