



Looking after your older rabbit

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Because more people are keeping rabbits as pets and because they feed them well and seek veterinary care when they are ill, many more rabbits are living well into old age. Rabbits over 7 years of age are considered 'older' or geriatric rabbits. Your geriatric rabbit may have some special requirements as he/she gets older.

What should I look for?

There are some common signs that your older rabbit may be less well than he/she used to be. These include:

- Increased drinking and increased urination
- Loss of litter training
- Changing food preference (e.g. only eating pellets when he/she used to eat hay and vegetables also), or just eating less
- Weight loss
- Dandruff, especially over the back and near the tail
- Not eating all or any of their caecotrophs (soft faecal pellets)
- Getting wet or dirty under his/her bottom
- Being reluctant to get out of the hutch
- Increased aggression to you or his/her companion.

What might be wrong?

Older rabbits get similar ageing problems to other pets, and it is important to recognize and diagnose these. 'Old age' problems can often be treated. Common problems include:

- Chronic renal failure (kidney disease)
- End-stage dental disease
- Osteoarthritis
- Heart disease
- Sore hocks
- Senile changes including blindness, deafness and cognitive dysfunction (reduced ability to understand)
- Tumours.

What should I do?

If you notice any of the changes described above, the first step is to get your rabbit examined by your veterinary surgeon. Your vet may want to run some tests or take some X-rays. This will allow them to diagnose what is causing the changes you have noticed. Your vet will then be able to prescribe medication to treat these changes, or advise you on changes you can make to the diet or environment to make your rabbit more comfortable. It is important to remember that many age-related diseases cannot be cured; the treatment is aimed at managing the disease so your rabbit can cope more easily.

Your veterinary practice may run 'Geriatric clinics' supervised by one of the qualified veterinary nurses. Attending these every 6 months or so will allow you to monitor any changes in your rabbit and let your veterinary team act promptly on any problems you or they have found.