



Potter League  
*Enriching Lives*

## HOUSE RABBIT HEALTH

Rabbits may act as if they're hardy creatures, but they are, in fact, extremely delicate—from their skin to their spines to their external systems. Care must be taken to maintain their good health, but a well-cared-for rabbit can live 12 to 15 years. The following basics are necessary to know in order to groom rabbits safely and to help keep them healthy.

### Grooming

Rabbits should be groomed on a regular basis to prevent skin irritations and hairballs. Rabbits shed every three months. Every alternate time, they'll have a light shedding that may not be very noticeable. Next they'll have a heavy shedding that you will not be able to escape.

Rabbits are fastidious groomers. They insist on being clean and tidy. Rabbits lick and groom themselves in a manner similar to cats; however, unlike cats, rabbits cannot vomit or regurgitate the hair, which can cause hairballs to form a mass in the stomach, resulting in serious medical problems and possible death. A rabbit may even appear fat when he is actually starving to death from stomach blockage. Providing a rabbit with exercise, unlimited access to hay, and a piece of dried papaya or papaya tablet once a week will go a long way toward preventing hairball blockage.

Short-haired rabbits should be brushed with a cat brush or flea comb at least once a week. Long-haired rabbits, like Angoras, should be combed out twice a week. In addition, Angora rabbits must be sheared every six months to prevent matting. Rabbits will shed in different ways. Some rabbits will take a couple of weeks or more to lose their old coat of fur. Other rabbits will be ready to get rid of their old coats all in one day, and these are the ones that cannot be neglected once they start shedding. You can often remove a very large percentage of hair by just pulling it out with your hand. But, however you remove it, remove it as soon as possible or your rabbit will do it during grooming.

Bald spots on rabbits are quite common when they are shedding. In fact, some rabbits, short-haired or long-haired, may get totally naked except for their face and feet. If these bald spots occur from shedding, they will begin to grow back within a week or two.

### Long-haired Rabbits

These types of rabbits are truly wonderful to look at, but require a lot more attention than their short-haired cousins. The House Rabbit Society recommends that you use scissors to keep the rabbit's hair trimmed to 1 inch or less; otherwise, you may be fighting hairballs most of the time.

### Baths

Never give your rabbit a bath unless instructed by a veterinarian. Baths are very stressful for rabbits, and it can take a long time for them to dry. Spot cleaning with a damp cloth and mild cat shampoo is the best way to clean a dirty area. In general, rabbits are very fastidious animals and they will groom themselves as needed. If you have a pair of rabbits, they will groom each other.



## Potter League *Enriching Lives*

### **Mats**

Rabbit skin is delicate and highly susceptible to cuts, so mats should not be cut off with scissors. Instead, use a mat rake to take the mat apart. Remember that bunny fur requires a finer blade than most cats and dogs.

### **Skin**

Scratchy, flaky skin with bald patches is usually a symptom of skin mites or an allergic reaction to fleas. A veterinarian should be consulted for other skin irritations.

### **Feet**

House rabbits that spend all of their time in homes with carpeting and linoleum periodically need to have their toenails trimmed, in the same way as dogs and cats. If excessive digging or scratching is a problem, then a large box of hay, shredded newspaper or straw, where bunny can pursue these activities, may help. If the padding (fur) on the feet is worn down, exposing inflamed or callused skin, then soft, dry resting pads and rugs should be provided. Exposed skin that becomes urine burned or broken is very likely to infect. Take extra care that rugs and litter boxes are kept clean and dry.

Due of risk of infection, declawing is definitely NOT recommended for rabbits!

### **Incontinence**

A rabbit with a urinary infection or a disabled, older rabbit may not be able to project urine away from the body. The result may be saturated fur around the hindquarters and urine scalding. Please consult a veterinarian before shaving or treating an area with urine scald.

### **Ears**

It's important to check your bunny's ears regularly. If you notice a rabbit is scratching his ears excessively or shaking his head, it is best to take the rabbit to your veterinarian. Rabbit ears are very delicate and are best treated by a veterinarian.

### **Teeth**

Rabbits' teeth grow continuously and must be checked to ensure that they are wearing down properly. While you're brushing your rabbit or clipping his nails, also look at his teeth to make sure there isn't a problem. Bunnies with straight teeth will keep them worn down with everyday gnawing and chewing on things like applewood or willow. Buns with malocclusions, or crooked teeth, will need to have their teeth kept trimmed. This is best done by your veterinarian.

### **Nails**

Rabbits' nails can grow to be very long and sharp, which is uncomfortable for the rabbit, so they must be clipped regularly. Pedicures may be given with cat nail clippers. If the rabbit has light-colored nails, they are very easy to trim. You can see the blood inside the



## Potter League *Enriching Lives*

nail, and you clip just before that point. It is more difficult to see where dark-colored nails should be clipped, but it is still visible.

Check your rabbit's nails every six to eight weeks.

People are often afraid to clip nails for fear that they will cause the rabbit to bleed. As with dogs and cats, you can purchase a product called Kwik Stop to keep on hand for this problem. Some rabbit owners find that simply holding pressure with a cotton ball works just as well. Your veterinarian will also clip nails for you.

### **Eyes**

Watery eyes or eye discharge needs to be diagnosed by a veterinarian. Clean tissues will absorb mild wetness. Do not put any human eye drops in a rabbit's eye without consulting a veterinarian.

### **Fleas**

Flea collars should never be put on a rabbit. They are poisonous to all rabbits. If fleas are seen, follow up with your veterinarian regarding treatment.

### **Red Urine**

Rabbits' urine varies in color from clear to yellow to brown to bright red. This is usually not a cause for alarm unless there are additional signs, such as sitting and straining to urinate, loss of appetite or abnormal temperature. When you see red urine, don't panic. Just keep your eyes open for other signs that might indicate a problem. If in doubt, you can have your veterinarian test to see whether there is blood in the urine.

### **Bacterial Infections**

The first indication of an infection may be a runny nose or eye, sometimes a high temperature, sometimes a rattling sound from the lungs or (rarely) a coughing sound. It is important to see your veterinarian as soon as the first symptoms of an infection appear, as it is more easily cured when caught in the early stages. If not totally eliminated, it can be controlled with the use of long-term antibiotics. Most of the symptoms described are quite common for many types of bacteria, so it is important to have your veterinarian do a culture to determine exactly what is being treated.

### **Digestive Problems**

The following symptoms require that you see your veterinarian immediately!

**Diarrhea:** It can be fatal. Rabbits have various kinds of diarrhea. If it's runny, messy and smelly, it's easy to identify. A more subtle form of diarrhea, which does not require the urgency of runny diarrhea, is when the droppings appear to be normal, but "squash" when you touch them or sweep them up. You may also see "clumpy" diarrhea. This will be the consistency of Silly Putty, with normal round droppings mixed in. Diarrhea usually requires antibiotics from your veterinarian.

**No Stool:** This could be a very serious condition, as the rabbit's gut may have stopped moving. Your rabbit should be taken to a veterinarian immediately.