

How to Tell If a Rabbit is Sick

It can often be difficult to tell if a rabbit is sick or injured because they tend to hide their symptoms. Rabbits hide their symptoms because they are prey animals and in the wild showing signs of weakness would make them a bigger target to predators. Because of this, it is especially important to be very observant of the shelter rabbits when cleaning kennels or socializing with them. The more you get to know the rabbits, the easier it will be for you to notice when something is off or just not quite right with a rabbit.

Signs of a Sick Rabbit

Since rabbits have a wide range of behaviors and personalities, it can often be difficult to know what is “normal” behavior for an individual rabbit (especially if you have not spent a lot of time socializing with it). Some rabbits are very active and outgoing, eager to come up to greet you and run around in their kennel. Other rabbits are much quieter and sedate, preferring to lounge all day and avoid human contact.

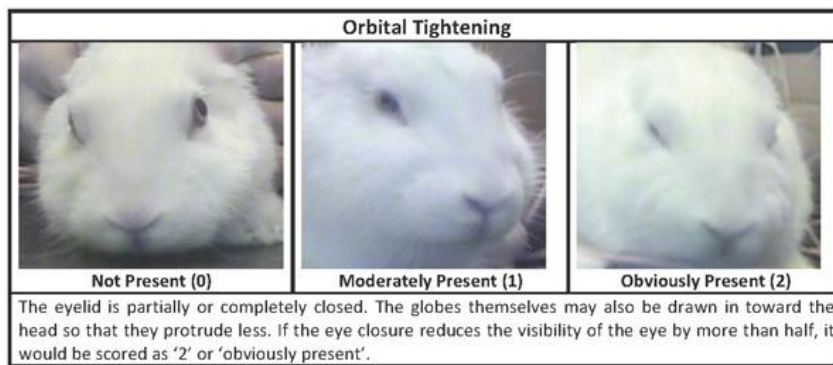
That being said, there are a few universal signs you can look for to tell if the behavior you are seeing from a rabbit is abnormal or cause for a vet check.

Loss of appetite: Rabbits have a very special digestive tract that requires they eat steadily throughout the day. Going without eating for 8 to 12 hours or more can be life threatening to a rabbit.

If you come in the morning before the cages have been cleaned and it looks like a rabbit hasn't eaten at all (they still have all their pellets, veggies are untouched, lots of hay leftover) OR if you are cleaning / socializing a rabbit and you notice the rabbit is refusing its fresh food, special or favorite treats, you should fill out a vet check form and let a supervisor know right way.

Lethargy & Body Posture: Though some rabbits are simply low-energy individuals, any rabbit that seems lethargic, especially when coupled with loss of appetite, merits filling out a vet check form and notifying a supervisor.

Often a rabbit in pain will sit hunched up, unwilling to move. A rabbit that sits hunched up, with eyes half closed, and firm teeth grinding is likely in pain and needs a vet check form filled out and supervisor notified. Below are some pictures of rabbits showing signs of pain, note the half closed eyes and hunched posture.



Rabbits have very delicate bones and spinal columns. If handled improperly they can easily become injured, or even suffer spinal damage that can cause partial or total limb paralysis. Rabbits that are floppy, weak, sitting or lying in an odd position might be injured or dehydrated. It is important to carefully observe rabbits and get to know their natural behaviors and positions so you can notice when something is abnormal. If ever in doubt, always let a supervisor know so they can check on the rabbit and make sure everything is normal.

Abnormal Rabbit Postures



Tooth grinding: Loud tooth grinding is a sign of pain in bunnies.

While rabbits do have what is known as “tooth purring” (a quiet, gentle grinding of the teeth that sounds like purring) that is a sign of contentment in a rabbit, it is very different from painful tooth grinding. If you can hear a rabbit grinding its teeth firmly, OR if you hear a rabbit clacking its teeth together in short loud snaps, you should fill out a vet check form and let a supervisor know right away.

Runny eyes or nose, labored breathing or chronic sneezing: These could indicate allergies, upper respiratory infection, a blocked tear duct or other problems. If you observe these symptoms, fill out a vet check form and let a supervisor know.

Note: A rabbit’s normal respiration rate is 30-60 /minute and tends to be very quick. If a rabbit is feeling stressed it may breathe faster than 30-60/min. The time to get worried is if the breathing is irregular, long and labored, or is accompanied by grunting. If the lips and tongue of the rabbit are blue tinted, it might not be getting enough oxygen and you should contact the shelter supervisor immediately.

Wet chin or drooling: Usually a sign of tooth problems, or malocclusion. You may also notice a decrease in appetite and ability to eat hard foods such as whole carrot. Left untreated, tooth problems can lead to infection of the jaw bone, which is very difficult to treat. If you observe these symptoms, fill out a vet check form and let a supervisor know.

Loss of balance or a head tilt: This is often called wry-neck, and usually indicates an inner ear infection. This can come on suddenly. Although treatment can be lengthy, a head tilt can usually be cured if treatment is begun quickly. If you observe these symptoms, fill out a vet check form and let a supervisor know. Below are pictures of abnormal head tilt:



In one end, out the other: A rabbit's litterbox contains a wealth of information. A healthy digestive tract will produce large, round fecal pellets. “Caecotrophs”, which are dark colored, shiny, and sometimes sticky or smelly are also normal.

Increasingly smaller, irregularly shaped droppings or droppings strung together with fur (or carpet), may indicate a problem. Proper grooming by you, especially during a molt, and plenty of fresh hay will help produce optimum digestive tract health, along with appealing to the rabbit's urge to chew.

Runny, watery, or very soft droppings may also indicate a problem. Runny stool or diarrhea could be caused by too much rich food (like carrots). Changing their diet will usually fix diarrhea, but you should always fill out a vet check form and let a supervisor know if you observe any diarrhea in a rabbit. Shelter Supervisors are also the only ones who can authorize a change in diet, it is important to make them aware of the problem so they can take steps to remedy it. Rabbits are small and dehydrate easily, so leaving diarrhea untreated can lead to serious and dangerous health complications for a rabbit.

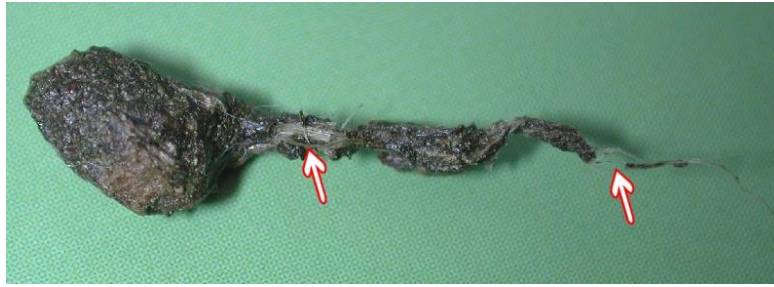
Regular / Normal Droppings and Caecotrophs:



Irregular Shaped Droppings:



Strung Together Irregular Droppings:



Irregular, Soft or Diarrhea:



Body heat & Heat Stroke: Rabbits regulate body temperature by their ears. Very cold or hot ears could indicate a fever or a drop in body temperature. This, coupled with other warning signs, could warrant a trip to the vet.

Rabbits cannot sweat and are susceptible to heat stroke; even in temperatures we might consider quite comfortable (70 – 80 degree Fahrenheit). Remember, rabbits have thick fur coats that retain heat very efficiently.

Signs of rabbit heat stress: fast, shallow breathing, hot or reddened ears, listlessness/lethargy, open mouth panting or excessive salivation.

If you notice these signs it is very important that you let a supervisor know and immediately take steps to cool the rabbit off. Bringing the rabbit inside or into the shade, making sure the rabbit has access to lots of water, dampening the rabbit's ears with cool (not cold) water or wiping the rabbit's ears with an alcohol wipe, and providing a frozen water bottle for the rabbit to lay on are all good ways to help reduce heat stress in a rabbit.

Sources:

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Rabbit stool:

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Rabbit Grimace / Pain:

<https://www.nc3rs.org.uk/news/rabbit-grimace-scale-%E2%80%93-new-method-pain-assessment-rabbits>

Head tilt:

http://wabbitwiki.com/wiki/Head_tilt

Paralysis:

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<http://dora.missouri.edu/rabbits/traumatic-vertebral-fracture-paralysis-of-the-hindquarters-broken-back/>

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