

# Caring For Your Senior Rabbit

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Older rabbits, sometimes referred to as "senior" or "geriatric" rabbits, often have special needs and health care requirements. Most rabbits are considered to be "seniors" when they are 5 or more years of age.

## Senior rabbit nutrition

Older rabbits are often prone to obesity, dental problems, and other health concerns that can be directly related to diet. Obesity in senior rabbits can lead to heart disease, worsening of arthritic conditions, respiratory symptoms, sore hocks, and liver disease (fatty liver), which can complicate any other diseases your rabbit may develop. Some older rabbits, on the other hand, may have difficulty maintaining their weight. This could be due to digestive problems, dental problems, or other diseases.

In general, senior rabbits should be fed unlimited timothy, grass hay, and oat hay. Pellets should be limited to no more than 1/4 cup of pellets per 6 lbs. of body weight per day. Several servings of vegetables are required (2 cups per 6 pounds of body weight daily). Make sure to choose dark, leafy greens, and feed at least three different kinds daily. Iceberg or other light-colored varieties are NOT nutritious. Also, make sure you are offering dark yellow and orange vegetables. Treats, including fruits, must be fed sparingly. For more information on rabbit nutrition see [Rabbit Nutrition: Diet Requirements and Feeding Rabbits at Different Life Stages](#). If you have any questions regarding your senior rabbit's diet, contact your veterinarian.



## Exercise and mobility

Arthritis is fairly common in older rabbits. Other causes of stiffness and apparent weakness may also occur. Monitor your rabbit for any signs of weakness or muscle and joint pain such as:

- Reluctance to move
- Difficulty going up or down ramps
- Difficulty grooming
- Difficulty getting in or out of the litter box
- Not using the litter box
- Fecal material or urine accumulating around the anal area/urinary opening

If you notice any of these signs, contact your veterinarian.

To help your rabbit who is less mobile, consider:

- Increasing softness of sleeping areas and cage floor (eg., use artificial sheepskin)
- Decreasing the angles of ramps
- Adding more litter boxes
- Selecting litter boxes with lower sides and easier access
- Making food and water more accessible (consider placement of dishes in multiple locations, if appropriate)
- Providing good traction in litter boxes and floors
- Furnishing soft bedding
- In consultation with your veterinarian, placing your rabbit on a reducing diet if he is overweight
- Administering supplements or other medications as recommended by your veterinarian if arthritis is present
- Monitoring your rabbit for sore hocks or feet, and have any abnormalities checked by your veterinarian
- Cleaning around the anal area with a soft moistened cloth, if necessary
- Keeping your rabbit out of drafts and dampness

## Behavior changes

As rabbit age, they may show behavior changes such as:

- Increased sleeping
- Less activity
- Less able to handle stress such as changes in routine, etc.

Some of these normal age-related changes may be identical to those you would see if your rabbit was sick. If you notice behavior changes, it is best to have your rabbit examined by a veterinarian to determine the cause.

## Skin and coat

Skin abscesses are seen more commonly in older rabbits, especially if they have had a history of abscesses. These abscesses need to be surgically opened, drained, and flushed, or totally removed. The rabbit is then placed on antibiotics. The choice of antibiotics is critical, as some antibiotics can lead to severe digestive disorders, including [antibiotic-associated enteritis](#). Sometimes these abscesses extend into other tissues, including bone. These are very serious and require more intensive treatment.

[Pododermatitis](#), or "sore hocks", is a condition more commonly seen in overweight senior rabbits. It usually affects the bottom of the hind feet and hocks (the lower part of the back leg that touches the ground when the animal is sitting). There may be loss of hair on the affected foot, thickening of the skin, swelling, redness, and sometimes open, draining areas or scabs. It is a painful condition. For mild cases (slight swelling and redness), simply changing the environment and diet of the animal may be all that is needed. This may include providing:

- A smoother floor
- Softer and thicker bedding
- Dry surfaces
- Increased cleanliness
- Increased vitamin C for guinea pigs
- Fewer calories to overweight animals

For any foot problem that is more severe, veterinary attention is needed. Radiographs (x-rays) may be taken to determine if there is any bone infection. The animal will be placed on antibiotics and pain relievers, if indicated. Surgery may be necessary to remove any dead or dying tissue. The feet may need to be repeatedly soaked and bandaged with topical dressings.

Some older rabbits become less flexible and are unable to bend their backs sufficiently to reach the [cecotropes](#) that they pass. Cecotropes, also called 'night feces' or 'soft feces,' are the material resulting from the fermentation of food in a part of the digestive system called the 'cecum.' Cecotropes are nutrient-rich and are passed out of the body, like feces, but are reingested by the animal so the nutrients can be absorbed. By not being able to reach the cecotropes, the cecotropes accumulate on the skin and fur near the anus and possibly cause irritation. In addition, the rabbit may become malnourished since he is missing this important nutrient source. If your rabbit is unable to consume his cecotropes, contact your veterinarian.

In addition to fecal soiling, less mobile rabbits are more prone to urine scalding. They may not move after urinating, or be unable to clean themselves. Watch for any staining of the hair, redness of the skin, or constant moisture at the urinary opening. Keep the area clean and contact your veterinarian if the condition does not improve or your rabbit appears to be in pain.

Digestive system

[Dental problems](#) are more common in older rabbits. The incisors and molars of rabbits continue to grow throughout their lifetime. The constant gnawing that should normally occur continually wears the teeth down. If the top and bottom teeth do not oppose (meet correctly); however, one or more of the teeth may overgrow. Overgrowth can also occur if an opposing tooth is lost or if a tooth root develops an abnormality. If overgrowth occurs, the rabbit may drool excessively, rub her paws on her face, grind her teeth, and be unable to eat. Overgrown teeth need to be clipped or filed by your veterinarian. If there is a root abnormality, especially an abscess, the tooth may need to be removed.

Nervous system, eyes and ears

Older rabbits appear to have more problems with clogged tear ducts. The medical term for this is "dacrocystitis". When this occurs, you may notice the rabbit appears to have a "runny eye". The treatment involves your veterinarian placing a very small canula into the duct and flushing it. It is important to keep the area around the eye clean, or painful skin infections can occur. Older rabbits can also develop abscesses in and around the eye and cataracts. With cataracts, you may notice that your rabbit's eyes appear somewhat cloudy and he is not able to see as well. Always have any problem with your rabbit's eyes checked by your veterinarian.

Heart and respiratory

Elderly rabbits, especially those who have had respiratory infections in the past, may develop chronic respiratory disease. Signs often include sneezing and nasal discharge. The rabbit may also have a decreased appetite and weight loss. Rabbits

**Helping Your Aging Rabbit**  
Your senior rabbit relies on you to provide for his special needs. His quality and length of life, in a large part, depend on you. You can help make the "golden years" of your rabbit the very best if you:

- Provide good nutrition
- Provide a quality environment (ease of access, temperature, soft bedding, etc.)
- Perform regular grooming and personal examinations of your rabbit
- Schedule veterinary exams every 6 months and have laboratory tests, dental exams, a body weight check, etc. performed as recommended by your veterinarian
- Familiarize yourself with signs and symptoms of diseases commonly seen in older rabbits and have your rabbit examined by your veterinarian if you notice any of these signs

with any of these signs should be examined by a veterinarian.

Heart problems in older rabbits can occur, and may have similar signs of respiratory disease, including coughing, loss of appetite, and weight loss. The earlier a respiratory or heart problem is diagnosed and treated, the better the outcome. So again, if your rabbit is showing signs of disease, have her checked promptly.

#### Cancers

The most common cancer in older rabbits is adenocarcinoma of the uterus. By spaying a rabbit early in life, this disease can be prevented. The first sign of uterine cancer is usually a bloody discharge, which may appear to be bloody urine. If diagnosed early, surgical removal of the uterus and ovaries may be curative.

#### Kidneys and urinary system

Urinary tract infections can be difficult to diagnose in rabbits, but can lead to very serious consequences. Rabbit urine is normally cloudy. If you notice any changes in color or smell of the urine, or any changes in urination (increased frequency, not using the litter box, straining), contact your veterinarian promptly.

Rabbits may also develop kidney disease, with signs including increased drinking and urination, decreased appetite, weight loss, and sometimes diarrhea. Treatment may include the administration of fluids, antibiotics if an infection is present, and nutritional support.