



# House Rabbit Network

## Caring for the Elderly Bunny

by Astrid M. Kruse, DVM

Some of our bunnies are blessed with becoming geriatric, crotchety little bundles of fur living way beyond the expected seven to ten years that are average for the house rabbit. Small breeds, and in my experience males, can sometimes live to fourteen years. Because of the increased incidence of certain health problems, rabbits over five years old should start seeing their rabbit vet twice yearly for checkups to identify issues in their earliest stages.

Many geriatric bunnies start losing weight and muscle mass despite a consistent and healthy diet. While in elderly cats and dogs routine screening blood work and urinalysis are often helpful in identifying underlying disease processes with the thyroid, kidney, and liver, rabbits do not make a diagnosis easy or clear even with extensive diagnostic testing. While almost all adult rabbits do not need pellets in their diet, as they contribute to obesity and dental disease, many elderly rabbits begin to need the extra easy calories and nutrition provided in a good quality timothy pellet to maintain a healthy weight. Rarely, they may even need the calorie boost of alfalfa pellets, although adding alfalfa has risks. Perhaps as rabbit medicine continues to evolve, more disease processes will be diagnosed that are causing the outward sign of weight loss.

Just as in other older animals, arthritis begins to affect the mobility and quality of life for our pet bunnies. The most common signs are stiffness, especially when starting to hop, reluctance to fully extend the legs resulting in a shortened hopping stride, trouble getting into the litter box, loss of the normal tail elevation during urination, and excessive ear wax. Arthritis in rabbits is often best managed with medication; however, maintaining a healthy weight is critical since each excess ounce leads to unnecessary strain on all joints including the spine. Some nutraceuticals that can be tried are glucosamine and chondroitin. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs like meloxicam (Metacam) work well for some rabbits. Others respond to acupuncture and physical therapy. Every rabbit is very different, and the key is finding the right mix for your particular bunny to remain as comfortable as possible.

Often secondary to arthritis and reduced or abnormal mobility, sore hocks become more common in older rabbits. While many rabbits have bald patches on the bottoms of their furry feet, (although common these are not normal and often secondary to poor flooring even in the distant past), some rabbits develop scabs or open sores and ulcers which are painful and can become infected. Your rabbit vet can prescribe medications or potentially bandage feet if required, but prevention and early identification of the problem in the early stages is critical. Keep your bunnies on soft surfaces - no wire, cover hardwood floors - and check the bottoms of their feet regularly.

Arthritis and the inability to curve the spine normally for urination and grooming may also lead to urine scald, where urine pools on the fur instead of being expelled farther from the body in a good stream. Excess calcium in the diet (often from pellets, sometimes from high-calcium vegetables) can contribute to forming thick pasty urine, which also leads to abnormal urination. The skin underneath the wet fur becomes inflamed and infected and painful, sometimes even peeling off, setting up a vicious cycle where the bunny becomes too uncomfortable to urinate normally. This condition can develop quickly, and any abnormal behavior in the litter box, or smell (like a poorly kept zoo exhibit), needs a vet check.

If your bunny has by luck of genetics, excellent care, or pure ornery rabbit willpower, survived to the golden years and beyond, your vigilance can help maintain quality of life. Realistically, all lives will come to an end and while the passing itself is never easy on us, who are caregivers, the sometimes long slide into decrepitude after a healthy middle age is even more emotionally draining. Medical needs need to be discovered and addressed early and aggressively for maximum comfort for maximum time.



*Walter, 11 years old, receiving extra TLC from his "dad".*