



# Rabbit Ear Diseases

Rabbits are a very popular pet seen at The Unusual Pet Vets, for a variety of reasons. Some come in for their routine vaccinations or a check-up, where others can be seen for serious conditions such as hindlimb paralysis or head tilts. A number of rabbits, particularly those with lop-ears, also come in for ear disease.

## **What is ear disease?**

Ear disease in rabbits is unfortunately a very common problem. Ear infections (the most common form of ear disease seen in rabbits) are classified by which part of the ear is affected. Those affecting the external ear are known as otitis externa and middle and internal ear infections are called otitis media and otitis interna respectively. The rabbits that are most vulnerable to these infections are the rabbits that have anatomically small or closed-off ear canals, which are the lop-eared breeds. These rabbits have been selected for their endearing droopy ears but have unfortunately developed very narrow and occasional completely closed ear canals. This means everyday cleaning of their ears is difficult, and bacteria and wax often build up in this dark, warm environment.



## **What can I do to prevent ear disease?**

There are certain breeds of rabbits that are more resistant to ear infections, such as Netherland dwarfs and large breeds with upright ears. However, if you have a rabbit that is prone to ear disease there are several things you can do:

### 1. Make sure your rabbit is cleaning their ears

Most rabbits will naturally clean their ears but as they get older, disease such as arthritis can prevent them from cleaning their ears well. There are several treatments older rabbits can be placed on to make them much more comfortable performing these everyday tasks.

Bonded rabbits will also clean each other's ears, if you are lucky enough to have a few rabbits at home.

### 2. Regular veterinary health checks

A standard part of every rabbit consult is an ear exam. In younger rabbits a veterinarian can often predict how vulnerable your rabbit will be to developing external ear infections in the future and can discuss signs to monitor in your rabbit. Swabs can also be taken of your rabbit's ear to check for infections that may be causing your rabbit to have chronic pain.

It is not uncommon for rabbits to hide their ear infections for weeks or even months, so having regular ear checks can help pick up any underlying disease your pet may be hiding.

## **My rabbit has an ear infection. Is there anything that can be done?**





Fortunately, ear infections can be managed in several ways. Depending on the type of ear disease your rabbit has, your veterinarian may offer you one or more of the following:

1. Daily ear cleaners– this option is for very mild ear disease where wax may be building up in your rabbit’s ears.
2. Antibiotic ear flushes– this is often the first treatment offered when your rabbit is diagnosed with an external ear infection.
3. Long term antibiotics– this is an option for persistent ear infections where further tests or treatment is not a viable option for your rabbit.
4. Surgical ear flushing– if the infection of your rabbit’s ear is severe but limited to their external ear, a veterinarian may offer to clean your rabbit’s ear under a general anaesthetic. At the Unusual Pet Vets, this technique is combined with an endoscope to look deep inside their ears to treat more stubborn infections.
5. Advanced imaging and surgery– many rabbits have underlying middle ear disease that spreads to the external ear. In these cases, treating the external ear infection alone is often unsuccessful, so surgery of the middle ear is performed. Middle ear disease can only be confirmed on advanced imaging such as CT, so imaging is routinely performed at the Unusual Pet Vets before surgery is recommended.

There is no one treatment that will be successful for every rabbit with ear disease, and some rabbits will have more than one option that is offered for them.

### **What signs of ear disease should I look for at home?**

Rabbits can show a variety of clinical signs with ear disease, but many will show no signs at all. Depending on what part of the ear is affected, rabbits may show different signs:

1. Scratching at their ears more frequently
2. Appearing quieter or less interested in food
3. Repeated episodes of gastrointestinal stasis
4. Head tilts or facial asymmetry (drooping of one side of their face)

