



Caring for your elderly rabbit or guinea pig!

So your little furry friend is getting older... As with any older animals, geriatric critters require an increase in hands on care and observation. Rabbits and guinea pigs are very good at hiding any signs of illness and so it is extra important to spend plenty of time with you bunny or piggie to notice their own unique habits. Changes in behaviour, appetite, urine, faeces or their coat can be an indication of disease in an older rabbit or guinea pig.

Well maintained pet rabbits may live to an age of 8-12 years, and guinea pigs may live up to 8 or 9 years. Your furry friend may require some changes to give them the best of their golden years.

OSTEOARTHRITIS

Like all animals, bunnies and guinea pigs do suffer from arthritis! Arthritis is a disease of the joints and you may see a number of signs pointing to this. You may see a decrease in activity, a hunched posture, varying levels of stiffness and an inability to clean themselves. Sometimes we see an animal that is just not grooming as well as he/she used to or one who sits around more between bursts of energy.

Diagnosis can be based on clinical signs in many cases however often it is best to take x-rays to confirm this. In many cases, it is not until we trial treatment that we see a big difference in a bunny we thought was okay!

Management of arthritis generally involve a combination of things. Owners should conduct regular bottom inspections as rabbits with arthritis are prone to developing problems with faecal or urinary build up. Pentosan polysulphate injections can often help as they assist in joint lubrication and increasing the mobility of joints. Some rabbits require long term or intermittent, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory (usually meloxicam) to keep them comfortable. A bunny brazilian (clipping up their bottom) is a very useful service we can provide your older bunny to help keep him clean and tidy.

RENAL (KIDNEY) DISEASE

Renal disease is a common condition seen in elderly rabbits. Your rabbit may show signs of excessive drinking and urinating, not wanting to eat, diarrhoea and weight loss. These signs may be very mild and may be difficult to notice especially in pair or group situations. If in doubt a simple blood and urine test can often put our minds at ease.

In most cases there is no cure for kidney disease however there are management options in some cases.

SORE HOCKS (PODODERMATITIS)





Sore hocks, or pododermatitis, are frequently seen in sedentary rabbits and guinea pigs. This can range from an area of irritation on the weight bearing point of the hock, to scabs, open wounds and sometimes abscesses. These abscesses can infiltrate into the underlying bone in severe cases and can be difficult to completely cure. Poor nutrition, inactivity, abrasive surfaces (such as rough carpet, wood, bricks or wire) and obesity all contribute to the development of sore hocks. This disease is generally seen in the back feet, however is sometimes seen in the front ones.

It is a reasonably painful condition and can lead to bleeding and infection. Prompt treatment is always recommended to contain the condition. Treatment can include antibiotics, pain relief, bandaging of feet and managing our bunnies environment to provide soft bedding.

MITES

Mites are a skin parasite of rabbits and guinea pigs, which can be confirmed in some cases by a fur pluck test or by taking a small scraping of their skin. The condition itself is easily treated however is often a sign of underlying disease. A thorough health check and regular blood tests should be conducted in our elderly patients.

TUMOURS

As with other species, older rabbits and guinea pigs are more prone to tumour formation (cancer). The most common and preventable tumour we see in rabbits is uterine cancer. Desexing your female rabbit at a young age will completely prevent this tumour from occurring.

Knowing what may occur to your rabbit or guinea pig as they age is helpful in keeping a close eye on any changes you may see. It is important to seek veterinary advice as soon as you notice things are 'not right'. Any delay in treatment may make it difficult to resolve or control these conditions that are common in older rabbits and guinea pigs.

Signs to watch out for in your bunny or guinea pig...

- Urine or faecal staining around the bottom: this may get to the point of actually burning the skin, and you may notice red raw skin around their bottom. Infection may set in with severe cases. This can be caused by diet, urine leakage, an inappropriate environment, dental disease, arthritis, obesity, neurological issues, pain, bladder disease, kidney disease or a combination of these.
- Increased frequency of urination and or drinking
- Rabbit appearing scruffy and unkempt.
- Wounds on the underside of your rabbits feet or elsewhere
- Loss of hair and/or scaly skin

So what can I do?





Simple strategies to put in place for elder buns are as follows:

- Changes to housing: It is all about comfort! Think about padded surfaces and non-slip material under footing. Providing easy access to heights, eg. ramps rather than steps. Some rabbits or guinea pigs may require a move from a multilevel complex to a single story home. Providing reasonably flat litter trays to minimise 'jumping'. Lifting your rabbit up and down from surfaces rather than allowing them to jump. All of these things can make a big difference to your pet's quality of life.
- 3-6 monthly veterinary checkups: As any pets age it is important to keep a close eye on their health and general wellbeing.
- Annual blood screening: Blood tests are able to pick up internal changes early that may not be being outwardly expressed.
- Biannual calicivirus boosters should continue to be administered as elderly rabbits are still susceptible to this disease

If you have any further questions please do not hesitate to contact us.

