

4-H RABBIT PROJECT HEALTH SUPPLEMENT



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4-H Veterinary Science project members investigate the normal health of several animal species. It's important that you become familiar with the normal health of your project animals so that you can recognize when one of your animals isn't well.

This rabbit project health supplement should acquaint you with common health characteristics.

Think about your doe or buck. If your rabbit is normal they are probably quite sturdy, gentle, content, and unexcitable. It's easy to ignore such a quiet pet. Observe your bunny daily to maintain her good health. You are important to your rabbit because it's your job to keep them well and to know when they need veterinary care.

Recognition of the following normal characteristics will help you and your veterinarian work as a team to keep your rabbit in good health.

You should keep a record of any abnormalities which do occur. This record will be important as a case history when your veterinarian begins to formulate a diagnosis. You can create your own chart or use Wisconsin 4-H Publication No. 4H369A.

Your rabbit's **attitude** is a characteristic with which only you are familiar. An abrupt or gradual change in your animal's behavior may be an indication of sickness. Is your doe normally crabby when you handle her? Does your buck regularly stomp in his cage when he wants fresh water or pellets? Most rabbits carry a look of continuous disinterest as their facial expression. It's difficult to measure attitude from a rabbit's eyes. But maybe your bunny is different. Do you think they smile or scowl? A change in behavior must have a reason. Try to find the cause.

Your rabbit's **stance** varies. Most rabbits sit with hind legs hidden under their bellies, and forelegs in front of their chests. A doe often rests her head on her fluffy dewlap as if it were a built in pillow! Some rabbits "flip" onto their sides to sleep when they're really tired. You should know whether or not your rabbit does this, or should you suddenly see your bunny flat out on its side you would be needlessly alarmed!

Your rabbit may often "sit up" on their hind legs for a special carrot treat or as a request to be released from her cage. A rabbit's top line is normally rounded. Ears may be erect or flop down depending on breed.

Abnormalities in these characteristics may be genetic or due to disease. Myxomatosis causes a rabbit's ears to fall down and nose to appear rounded due to fluid accumulation. However, the French and English Lop rabbits normally have roman noses and floppy ears.

The rabbit's normal **gait** is to hop. Your rabbit may also appear to walk when moving very slowly to nibble grass or sniff flowers. Take note if your rabbit stumbles or drags a limb. A rabbit's light bone structure injures easily. Problems with movement could imply paralysis due to a neurological disorder. Handle your rabbit properly so they won't struggle and fall. They could easily damage their back or spinal column.

Keep track of your rabbit's **weight**. Normal weight varies with breed, age, and pregnancy. A tiny adult Polish rabbit weighs about 2 1/2 pounds, while a French Angora may surpass 8 pounds, and a Flemish Giant tips the scale at 22! Increase feed gradually to maintain your pregnant doe's weight. Be concerned with a sudden or gradual weight loss. This is a sign of several rabbit disease problems, such as, parasitism or pseudotuberculosis.

The normal rabbit **fur condition** is smooth and glossy, although this varies with breed and age. Don't mistake normal seasonal fur shedding for hair loss caused by ticks or other fur diseases. A six to fifteen week old rabbit normally molts. This is not abnormal, but adding one-half teaspoon of vegetable oil to the diet per day will help replace lost natural oils.

Scruffy fur may indicate mucoid enteritis. Circular patches of hair loss are signs of ringworm, a fungal disease. Formations of crusts in the ears are signs of ear mites. You should notice these abnormal conditions early so that your veterinarian can prescribe treatment.

Skin and mucous membranes (color and condition) are important indicators. Normally a rabbit's skin is soft, loose, and pliable. Tight skin may be a sign of water loss or dehydration.

Mucous membranes line all body openings, such as, the eye, ear, nose, mouth, rectum, and vagina. These membranes should be pink and moist in a healthy rabbit. Skin rash or scabs may indicate rabbit pox or vent disease. Wet dewlap or hutch burn may redden skin.

An obvious characteristic to notice on your project animal is their **bodily discharges**. Fecal droppings should be round, firm, black, and dry during the day. However, a rabbit releases two types of droppings. At night softer, more brown, moist droppings are released and re-ingested by your rabbit. This practice is called coprophagy. It is not only normal but necessary. These "super" drop-pings contain many nutrients and vitamins which would be lost if your rabbit were not able to eat them. This practice is necessary because of the unique design of your rabbit's digestive system. Abnormal feces would contain blood or mucus. These may be signs of mucoid enteritis, coccidiosis or pneumonia.

A rabbit's urine is normally more copious (thicker and whiter) than a dog or human, for example.

What about your rabbit's **voice**? Rabbits can grunt and growl when they're provoked and angry. They can also scream when subjected to severe pain. However, when content, your pet probably doesn't have much to say.

A healthy rabbit has a good **appetite**. They enjoy pellets, lettuce, celery, and carrots. A rabbit doesn't like dusty or dirty food, however. Watch how much food your rabbit consumes in one sitting. They probably save some for later in the day or at night. Many rabbits prefer to eat at night or early morning.

Know your pet's habits so you can recognize any abnormalities. You know you don't like to eat when you're not feeling well!

Observe your rabbit's **nails**. Hold their paw toward a light. The tip of the nail should protrude only slightly beyond the "quick" or nail blood supply. Lack of contact with a solid surface eliminates the friction which would normally wear down your rabbit's nails. Too long nails break easily, often causing digital abscesses, and are dangerous. Trim with human nail clippers within 1/4 inch of the quick.

Normal **teeth** are necessary to keep your rabbit in good health. Provide them with items for constant chewing and gnawing. Malocclusion or wolf teeth are a genetic problem where the lower jaw is shorter or longer than the upper jaw. A rabbit with this problem cannot eat properly. Your veterinarian may correct this temporarily by cutting back the teeth.

The normal **temperature** of a domestic rabbit is 102.5° F (plus or minus 10). You can measure this with a rectal thermometer. Lubricate the thermometer with Vaseline and insert to about one inch. Remove after two or three minutes and read the temperature.

Practice recognizing and recording many of these common health characteristics on you rabbit every day. When you need to contact your veterinarian, be prepared with a complete report of all the signs you have noticed.

If you'd like further information on animal health, join the 4-H Veterinary Science project. You may use your rabbit as a Veterinary Science project animal!

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