

# Pain in Rabbits



**A**ccording to the theory of natural selection, only the strongest animals survive in the wild. Animals learn early in life to hide weakness or illness—if they don't they're destined to become some hungry hunter's lunch. With pets, this protective instinct sometimes comes at a cost because you don't always recognize your furry friend's pain.

Because pets will never be able to tell us where it hurts, you must rely on keen observation to detect pain—and your veterinarian's expertise to uncover its cause.

Signs of pain include:

- > grinding teeth
- > rapid and shallow breathing
- > pulling hair
- > decreased grooming
- > hunched posture
- > lethargy
- > increased thirst and urination
- > a reluctance to move
- > bulging, strained, staring, or unfocused eyes.

Some bunnies appear to breathe from their abdomens instead of their chests, and others will press their tummies to the ground or extend their necks.

Without relief, your bunny will stop eating and defecating and his body may shut down: circulation will decrease, body temperature will drop, and eventually he may die.

## CAUSES

Just about any injury, disease, or infection can be painful. Some problems are obvious because you also see bleeding or swelling, diarrhea, or appetite loss.

Painful musculoskeletal injuries include broken bones, bone tumors, and spinal disk rupture or fractures. Infections or foreign objects in the ear can be

unbearable, especially if the eardrum ruptures. Other painful conditions include ulcerative pododermatitis (sore hocks), enteritis (intestinal infection and inflammation), and bladder sludge or stones.

Some aches and pains that might be harder to detect include lacerations or abscesses hidden under fur or in the mouth. Gastrointestinal stasis, a condition in which the intestines slow down, also can cause great pain before you even realize there's a problem.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO AT HOME

Know your pet's quirks and habits—any changes should alert you to a potential problem. If you suspect your pet's in pain, carefully look him over, check out his environment for signs of illness (diarrhea or blood), and then call your veterinarian. Get to the office immediately if your rabbit acts lethargic, stops eating or defecating, or is bleeding.

## WHAT YOUR VETERINARIAN WILL DO

Your veterinarian will perform a thorough physical examination and may uncover painful conditions you didn't spot, such as malocclusion, a ruptured disk in the spine, arthritis, or an abdominal tumor.

If your veterinarian suspects gastrointestinal obstructions, tumors, or spinal problems, he or she may perform blood and urine tests, X-rays radiographs, ultrasound, or endoscopy.

Unfortunately, the causes of pain are almost infinite. If the doctor doesn't immediately identify the source, take heart. Your veterinarian will work as quickly as possible to uncover the problem and give your special companion the relief he deserves.