

# Finding a vet for your rabbit



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Veterinarians who primarily examine and treat cats and dogs may not be adequately trained and experienced in rabbit health issues or rabbit medicine to properly treat your pet. Rabbits have some unique characteristics and bodily processes, therefore finding a veterinarian who is knowledgeable in these areas is crucial to your pet's health and well being. In addition, it is important to build a rapport with your veterinarian through regular bunny wellness check ups even before your rabbit becomes ill.

## WHERE TO START?

The first step to finding a suitable veterinarian for your rabbit is to decide what characteristics you consider to be important in a veterinarian. Of course, up-to-date knowledge about rabbit health issues is very important, but there are also other equally important qualities to look for when choosing a veterinarian. A veterinarian should be able and willing to learn, should be willing to listen to you when you describe symptoms, should suggest treatment options, and should allow you to consider those options based on your own knowledge of your pet's personality and behaviour. After all, you know better than anyone what is normal for your rabbit.

You also have to be able to communicate with your veterinarian. Knowing you and your rabbit will help your veterinarian decide which treatment options are best when your rabbit is ill.

After you decide what qualities you consider to be important in a veterinarian, you should to set up a consultation with several veterinarians. Check your local yellow pages for veterinarians who mention "exotics" in their advertisement. Phone them and arrange to speak to them at their convenience or make an appointment with the veterinarian in person. You may even want to take your rabbit in for a bunny wellness check up and speak to the veterinarian at that time. This will give you an opportunity to see how the veterinarian and clinic staff interact with you and your rabbit before an emergency happens. If you are comfortable with the veterinarian and clinic, and have been able to "screen" them during a regular check up,

chances are that you will feel more at ease taking your bunny there when he is ill.

It is important to take an active role in your rabbit's health by being familiar with rabbit health issues and knowing the basics about rabbit health care.

## KNOW THE FACTS

**Indoor or companion rabbits vs livestock rabbits:** There is no right numerical answer to the question 'how many indoor or companion rabbits do you have as patients', but obviously, the more indoor or companion rabbits the veterinarian sees during the year, the better. Don't assume that just because the veterinarian treats livestock rabbits that he or she would be a good choice for your pet. Livestock rabbits are a business: companion rabbits are family members.

**Spaying and Neutering:** Even a really qualified veterinarian will occasionally lose a patient, usually because of an undiagnosed problem, but veterinarians should have high success rates (very close to 100%) with spay and neuter surgeries.

Other facts about spaying and neutering that you should know include:

1. Both the ovaries and the uterus should be removed during the spay to prevent ovarian and uterine cancers and to decrease negative, hormonally driven behaviours.
2. Closed neuters are preferable to open neuters.
3. Pain medication should be given after spays/neuters and other major surgeries.

Rabbits that are in pain recover much slower than those that have been given pain medication after a major surgery. Common analgesics currently used in rabbits include opioid derivatives [i.e., butorphanol (torbugesic) or buprenorphine] and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs [NSAIDs; i.e., aspirin, flunixin (banamine) or ketoprofen (anafen)].

**Anesthetic:** Isoflurane gas is the safest anesthetic for rabbits. The rabbit should be masked unless the veterinarian has a lot of experience with intubating. Intubating is more difficult because rabbits have small tracheas.

**Surgical Procedures:** Rabbits cannot vomit. Therefore, they do not need to be fasted overnight before surgery. Some veterinarians like to remove food from the rabbit's cage an hour before surgery, and this is acceptable. Because rabbits are not fasted, their mouths should be rinsed of all food debris before being anesthetized.

**Rabbit Safe Antibiotics:** Before prescribing antibiotics, a culture and sensitivity test should be performed to determine which bacteria, if any, is causing the illness. Giving an antibiotic, such as Baytril, for all ailments before investigating the cause contributes to the existence of resistant bacteria. Sometimes a veterinarian may start a rabbit on an antibiotic while waiting for the culture and sensitivity test results.

Antibiotics from the penicillin family, including Amoxicillin and Clavamox, should never be given orally to a rabbit. These antibiotics can destroy the beneficial intestinal flora, possibly causing death. Some forms of Penicillin can be used on rabbits if given as an injection, but this is usually considered more of a 'second line' antibiotic choice.

**GI Stasis:** Avoid a doctor who suggests surgery to treat gastrointestinal (GI) stasis, unless all other options have been exhausted. Motility drugs, such as Reglan (Metoclopramide) or Propulsid (Cisapride) can be used to help get the gut



moving again if there isn't an obstruction. If there is a complete obstruction - which can be diagnosed by an x-ray - prolonged use of gut motility drugs may cause the gut to rupture.

Keeping the rabbit well hydrated with subcutaneous fluids is also very important in treating a GI slowdown. Some veterinarians will also choose to use enzymes, such as Papain and Bromelain, which may help break down mucus binding the obstruction, or more powerful, animal-derived enzymes, which are thought to break down proteins, carbohydrates and fats. Other veterinarians feel there is no real evidence that the use of enzymes will help to break up these masses.

**Teeth:** Rabbits can develop molar spurs (sharp edges) that may cause painful abrasions to the cheek or tongue. If your rabbit's eating habits change, it may be a sign that the rabbit has developed a problem with his teeth. The veterinarian should use an otoscope or speculum to check the molars, which are deep inside a rabbit's mouth. If molar spurs have formed, they need to be clipped or ground down (performed under a general anesthetic) or filed. Rabbits with maloccluded or misaligned incisors need to have their teeth trimmed regularly or the incisors removed. Teeth should be checked during each bunny wellness visit. A rabbit with a history of tooth problems should be checked more frequently to catch problems early.

**Weekly maintenance checks:** Even if you take your rabbit to the veterinarian regularly for check ups, it is important to perform regular "maintenance" checks at home. Because rabbits hide symptoms of illness, these checks will help you catch problems early on. You should check your rabbit's ears, eyes and incisors, as well as feel for lumps and bumps, etc. weekly.

**Continuing Education:** Rabbit medicine is an ever-changing, evolving field. It is important that veterinarians continue to learn about the latest treatments either by reading, consulting with other veterinarians or by attending conferences. Remember that rabbits have traditionally been thought of as "disposable pets." This attitude is changing and, as we take more of an active interest in our pets' health, more rabbits are reaching a ripe old age. Nonetheless, rabbit medicine continues to change and evolve, and there is still so much we do not know about our furry little friends.

## THINGS TO REMEMBER

If you do not feel comfortable with a particular veterinarian, continue your search. Do not choose a veterinarian based on the cost of treatment or the proximity of the clinic to your house. Although a recommendation from another person is helpful, do not base your opinion solely on their recommendation. This is an important decision. You need to choose a veterinarian who is right for you and, of course, for your bunny. You can find a list of Ontario veterinarians that are known to treat rabbits on our web site at [http://www.ontariorabbits.org/Health\\_vetlist.html](http://www.ontariorabbits.org/Health_vetlist.html).