

We adopted a three year old rabbit from a rescue group. When we took her to our veterinarian for a checkup, everything was fine. Besides taking her for routine exams, when will I know she is sick and needs to be seen? We've always had cats and I don't know what to watch for.

It's great that you adopted your rabbit from a rescue group. Unfortunately, many people still buy baby bunnies at Easter time, grow tired of them and give them up for adoption. House rabbits can make great pets, but you do need to know about their special needs to keep them healthy. I'm sure your veterinarian reviewed specific feeding instructions since proper diet for these strict herbivores will prevent many of their common ailments. Litter box training, grooming and housing are all a little different than cats so make sure you know what they need to thrive.

As for signs of illness and types of emergencies, I'll review the common ones. If your rabbit isn't eating, don't think she is just getting finicky about her food. If a rabbit goes without eating, particularly hay, their sensitive digestive system gets out of balance, bloating, obstructions and toxic bacterial infections can occur. Without treating the underlying cause of the appetite loss, and supporting her with syringe or tube feeding, it could prove fatal. Also watch for diarrhea, a change in consistency or reduction of droppings in the pan. These are also signs of GI problems. Look under your rabbit's tail for moisture or stool stuck in the fur as potential problems.

Rabbits are prone to respiratory infections that can be very serious. Take her to the veterinarian if she has discharge from her eyes or nose, or seems to have difficulty breathing. Rabbits can only breathe through their noses, so if her nose is congested, she can't get enough oxygen.

Urinary problems in rabbits can be due to bladder stones or excessive mineral sludge in their bladder. If she is straining to urinate and not producing urine, or if the urine looks bloody, care is needed. Remember that rabbits can periodically have orange colored urine normally, but if it looks red, that is not normal. A sample can be easily tested to see if there is blood from the bladder. If she isn't spayed, the blood could be coming from her uterus also.

Since rabbits 28 teeth are constantly growing through life, if they don't line up properly they don't wear down as they chew. Sharp points can form that protrude into the cheeks or tongue. Your veterinarian will check for dental malocclusion at her annual checkups, but take her in sooner if you notice her salivating, grinding her teeth (a sign of pain), reluctant to eat, or losing weight. Corrective trimming of her teeth or extractions may be needed.

It's good to know what to watch for, but hopefully she won't experience any of these problems.

Francine K. Rattner, V.M.D.

South Arundel Veterinary Hospital