

Feeding and caring for senior rabbits

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Even as little as a couple of decades ago, it wasn't typical to see many senior rabbits.

Nowadays with increasingly knowledgeable owners and advancing veterinary care, senior rabbits are a relatively common occurrence.

However, as rabbits age, their needs often change and in order to support our OABs (Old Age Bunnies!), some adjustments to their care are often required.

When is a rabbit classed as being senior?

This is slightly complex since, as with dogs, rabbits come in many shapes and sizes, and age differently, so classing a rabbit as a 'senior' isn't set in stone.

The small breeds of rabbit, such as the Netherland Dwarf and Polish are often long-lived and can be expected to have a lifespan of anywhere up to 12 or 13 years of age. These small breeds may not be deemed as senior bunnies until they reach around 8 years or even older. Medium sized breeds of rabbit, ranging from dwarf lops to those of up to around 3.5-4kg in weight, potentially may live up to 9 or 10 years, or more in some circumstances. These rabbits could therefore be classed as senior rabbits from around 6 years of age.

The large and giant breeds of rabbit, Continental Giant, French Lop, Belgian Hare, New Zealand White etc, may only have an expected lifespan of 4 – 7 years, and therefore could be categorised as senior at just 3 or 4 years of age.

These are all general guidelines and some rabbits may show signs of aging sooner than others, and therefore the individual rabbit should be assessed and considered rather than simply generalising and categorising by age alone.

Feeding

As with any rabbit, senior rabbits still require ad lib amounts of fresh hay, fresh water and fresh greens daily.

Many food companies now offer extruded nuggets specifically manufactured for the dietary needs of senior rabbits.

Adult rabbits require no more than a tablespoon of pellets per kilogram of body weight per day, but senior rabbits may require slightly more in order to maintain their bodyweight.

Conversely, senior rabbits are generally less active than their younger counterparts, so may require fewer pellets. Monitor your rabbit's weight carefully. You will need accurate scales to pick up slight increases and decreases in weight. Weigh your rabbit weekly and if it's losing or gaining weight, then adjust its pellets accordingly.

It is slightly more complicated when you have a pair of rabbits, with one who requires more calories than the other. In this situation, you may need to separate the rabbits for half an

hour a day, to give each of them the proper amount of pellets. The rabbit who is getting less can be offered a few handfuls of grass so it doesn't feel left out! Ensure that both rabbits can still see and smell each other and put them back together as soon as they have finished eating.

Supplements

Generally senior rabbits do not require any form of supplementation. A good diet should provide all of the vitamins and minerals they require and giving extra can prove dangerous, especially an increased calcium intake. This can lead to stones or sludge forming within the urinary tract, since rabbits metabolise calcium differently from other mammals.

If you feel that your rabbit may have a need for supplementation, you should discuss this with your vet beforehand.

Common ailments and treatments

Many senior rabbits may have some degree of dental disease. This is often diagnosed long before the rabbit reaches a senior age, but traumatic malocclusion can occur at any time. Any rabbit eating less, favouring different foods, losing weight, salivating, producing fewer droppings or showing any swellings around its mouth and jaw, should have a thorough dental examination, including skull x-rays to assess the tooth roots.

Arthritis and spondylosis are much more common than is realised, and vastly under-diagnosed in pet rabbits. Many perceive the rabbit as simply slowing down with old age, but in truth the rabbit is very probably suffering from arthritis and/or spondylosis.

Your vet can take x-rays to assess the bones/joints for these problems and medication (which is often for the rest of the rabbit's life), can be prescribed. This often makes a vast improvement to the rabbit's mobility within a short space of time.

Keeping their bottoms clean, may be a problem if they are arthritic or overweight, so ensure that these problems are rectified and help the rabbit keep itself clean in the meantime.

Senior rabbits are often less active than their younger counterparts and may require their claws to be clipped more frequently as they will not be naturally wearing them down.

Senior entire female rabbits are at a massive risk for reproductive cancers (up to 80% of entire females by the age of 5 years). Symptoms are often unnoticeable until the disease is advanced. Therefore spaying all female rabbits at a young age cannot be recommended enough.

Pressure points/sores and Pododermatitis may develop if the rabbit isn't housed on thick and absorbent bedding. Vetbed, which draws any urine away from the body, is excellent for senior bunnies, and especially those with mobility problems, excess weight, or a thin layer of fur on the feet, which is found with Rex rabbits.

Adapting housing

Elderly rabbits normally have some degree of mobility problems, which will vary from rabbit to rabbit.

Indoor rabbits may need to have rubber mats placed over slippery kitchen or laminate flooring so they can grip better when hopping around.

Low-sided litter trays are often needed, since the rabbit may struggle to hop in and out of high-sided trays. Plastic dog beds make excellent litter trays for elderly rabbits, since they have an entrance cut out of them but still have high sides around the rest.

Outdoor rabbits who have a two-storey hutch, or a hutch with a ramp into the run area are likely to struggle to get up and down the ramp. It may be necessary to revise their accommodation so that the ramp is no longer needed.

Losing a companion

Ultimately this is the saddest part of owning a rabbit, but companion rabbits may also grieve, especially if they have lived with the other rabbit all their life.

Allowing the rabbit who is left behind time to be with the other rabbit's body may be necessary so they are able to understand that their companion has gone. This should be supervised, and once the rabbit has lost interest in the other's body, it should be taken away.

Spending extra time with the rabbit who is left behind, stroking and talking to it, giving it an extra treat, extra toys and understanding that it too may be grieving will all help it to accept the situation.

Senior rabbits who have lost a companion or have never had one are normally accepting of a new bunny friend, so a suitable companion should be sought.

Senior bunnies are wonderful and should be treasured. Their personalities shine through, and their aging faces and grey hairs make them more endearing. With special considerations given to their needs, they can live full and active lives. They may be less active, sleep more and need extra care, but they will thank you tenfold just by sharing your life with them.