

SMALL PETS 10

Rabbits and **surgery**



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Rabbits and surgery

The most common reasons for using anaesthetics on rabbits are for dental work and routine neutering. However, there are other conditions that can mean that your pet will need an anaesthetic.

Why neuter – the benefits

Rabbits are social animals and should be kept in pairs or groups. The best combination is a male and a female so neutering is essential, as rabbits are justifiably famed for their breeding abilities. Same-sex pairs can be kept together, but they will tend to fight unless they have been together since young (less than ten weeks old). They will also get along together better if they are neutered. They should not be separated or may fight when put back together.

Neutering is also beneficial for health, especially for females. Cancers and infections of the womb are common in older does. Neutering whilst young reduces the risk of diseases of the breast, such as cancer. Rabbits tend to become territorial at sexual maturity – and defend their territory against other rabbits, and sometimes people! Both sexes become less aggressive and easier to handle following neutering. Spraying (scent-marking with urine) is reduced, and they are easier to house train.

In the male, neutering is performed when the testicles have descended at around three to four months. Females can be neutered from sexual maturity, usually around six months of age, depending on size and breed. After neutering, sexually mature couples should be kept apart for three weeks, as males retain some of their fertility.

Is there a risk with the anaesthetic?

For any animal – or person – an anaesthetic involves a small degree of risk. However, anaesthetic techniques and drugs are getting safer all the time, and the risk is minimal. Rabbits are common pets, and vets are used to anaesthetising them. It may set your mind at rest if you ask your vet how many rabbit neuterings they do annually.

It is best to take your pet along to the surgery for a check-up before booking an appointment for neutering to ensure your animal is in good health. This is particularly advisable in older rabbits (over three years old). Pain can easily put rabbits off their food so you may wish to enquire about the use of painkillers after surgery. Also tell the vet if your pet has ever suffered from respiratory diseases.

What happens on the day of surgery?

For routine surgeries, such as neutering, your pet will probably only have to spend one day at the vet's. It is usual to take your pet to the clinic in the morning, and pick it up late afternoon or early evening, but check with your vet. Rabbits should not be starved overnight before an anaesthetic as it can weaken them.

Carry your pet in a secure box or basket, labelled with your name and address. You will probably have to sign a consent

form and leave a contact telephone number. Occasionally, some rabbits take longer to come round, and may need to stay at the vet's overnight.

Collecting your pet after surgery

Ensure that both the carrying case and the overnight cage do not have material, such as sawdust or straw bedding, that could stick to the wound. Find out whether your pet needs any medication, when to return for any postoperative check-ups, and take an emergency contact number for the practice. Some fur will be shaved from where the operation was carried out, and probably also from the leg and ear for the administration of drugs.

When you get home, place your pet in a cage, in a warm and quiet room. Rabbits do not usually have to wear Elizabethan collars after surgery as many vets use surgical glue or stitches under the skin. Collars also prevent caecotrophy, see the pet care leaflet, Basic healthcare in rabbits (S11). Contact the vet if your pet is chewing at the wound.

Offer tempting foods such as carrots, fresh herbs or freshly pulled grass. After neutering, female rabbits are usually quiet for the evening and may

not want to eat. Males are quicker to recover, as their operation is shorter, but most rabbits will be sleepy for a short while. If your rabbit does manage to remove any stitches, if there is bleeding or swelling at the operation site, or your pet is not eating after 24 hours, contact the vet.

Check the wound at least daily, and contact the vet if there is any discharge or swelling. You must phone the vet immediately if your rabbit is miserable, reluctant to move or seems weak at any time. Monitor the droppings as well – if none are being produced, tell the vet.





Abscesses

Any rabbit with an abnormal swelling should be taken to the vet. Rabbits are unfortunately particularly prone to abscesses following wounds and injuries or if they have dental conditions, and some develop spontaneously for no apparent reason. A thick covering usually surrounds them and the material within is dry and thick. This means rabbit abscesses cannot be easily treated by simply opening and draining.

Depending on the part of the body involved, some abscesses can be successfully treated with surgery but, unless they can be removed with the covering intact, recovery can take a long time – or may never happen. Nursing, with good hygiene, is essential. Sometimes an area of the wound has to be left open so

that the abscess cavity heals from the outside in, and infection is not trapped under the skin.

Other abscesses may not be treatable, especially if they are internal or the infection has penetrated the bone. Some do not seem to cause problems for months or even years but, in other cases, they cause pain and illness. There is also a risk they may burst internally causing sudden and severe illness, or may “seed” infection, producing abscesses in other parts of the body. If the rabbit is suffering and the condition is not treatable, it is kinder to choose euthanasia.



Dental disease

Rabbits have three types of teeth. The incisors are the long teeth easily visible at the front of the mouth. Molars and premolars are inside the cheeks and not easily visible. The teeth are very different from human ones in that they grow continually throughout the rabbit's life.

This is essential in the wild because rabbits spend six or seven hours daily eating fibrous foods, which continually wears down the teeth.

Problems can develop with both types of teeth. Overgrowth of the incisors can easily be seen, as the long curving teeth are visible at the front of the mouth. Overgrowth of the back teeth cannot be seen. Signs of dental problems include loss of weight, dropping bits of food out of the mouth, a preference for soft foods, dribbling, or stopping eating. Affected rabbits cannot groom themselves properly so hair may become matted, with faeces stuck around the back end. The vet will want to examine your rabbit's mouth and sedation or anaesthetic is often needed to allow inspection.

Overgrowth of the back teeth can cause problems other than difficulties eating and grooming. The teeth normally



grow towards their biting surface and overgrowth here causes pain by the development of sharp edges that cut into the gums and tongue. The teeth can also start to grow from the root. This will press on other structures in the head, and is a common cause of discharge from the nose and eyes.

Overgrown roots of the cheek teeth (molars) can become infected and turn into abscesses. These can be difficult to treat, particularly if the infection has spread into bone.

The main cause of dental problems is poor diet, although it may also be partly genetic. Many pet rabbits are simply fed too little fibre so the teeth do not wear down as they should. Furthermore, high fibre foods are a source of calcium, so diets low in fibre are too low in calcium. A diet deficient in calcium makes the bone surrounding the teeth softer, so the teeth can move out of their correct alignment, making overgrowth more likely.

What is the treatment?

Overgrown incisors need regular trimming, usually performed with a dental drill.

A more permanent solution is extraction of the teeth – rabbits can usually eat perfectly well without their incisors.

Where the back teeth are affected, they will also need regular trimming or burring, usually under anaesthetic. This may need to be repeated as often as every four to eight weeks. Afterwards, the diet needs to be improved to prevent, or at least slow down, recurrence. Calcium supplements may be necessary but you should only do this if your vet thinks it is advisable. Extraction of the cheek teeth is difficult, and cases where abscesses have developed can be very difficult to treat. Some rabbits with facial abscesses are so badly affected and in so much discomfort, that euthanasia is sadly the only option.

Don't forget...

- Rabbits should be kept in pairs or groups
- Neutering is beneficial for health and happiness – in both sexes
- Feed lots of hay and other high fibre foods
- If you think your rabbit is unwell, do not delay – see the vet as soon as possible.



Happy, healthy pets

Blue Cross advice leaflets are packed full of top tips to help owners with their pet questions. They cover a wide range of topics, from training a puppy to caring for an older cat. So if you need some support to help you with a pet problem, whether it's about a dog or a degu, we're here for you.

You can read and download our leaflets online at www.bluecross.org.uk

Visit our website to take advantage of all its features, including:

- blog posts from Blue Cross experts
- latest news
- events near you
- pets needing new homes

Or you can join in the chat on our online communities. Find us on Twitter and Facebook – just search for Blue Cross.



Blue Cross

Blue Cross has been dedicated to the health and happiness of pets since 1897. Abandoned or unwanted, ill or injured – we do what's needed to give every pet a healthy life in a happy home. We're a charity, so the more help you give us, the more help we can give pets.

How you can help

Blue Cross doesn't receive any government funding, so we rely on the generosity of pet lovers like you. There are lots of ways you can help the sick, injured and abandoned pets in our care, like making a donation, fundraising for us or leaving us a legacy.

Please call us on 0300 777 1897 or visit www.bluecross.org.uk



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