

# Observation is the key to helping rabbits beat the heat

Heat stroke can be a killer and is not always obvious until an animal is in great distress. **Bruce Waddell** of Willows Veterinary Group explains how to help prevent it

Rabbits are very susceptible to heat stroke and it is important that owners know this and are aware of the signs of overheating. Rabbits are often seen as 'easy' pets and spend long times abandoned in their hutches. Often these hutches are placed in a position most convenient for the householder rather than the rabbits' welfare.

Although rabbits have very small sweat glands on the inside of their mouths, they do not pant effectively, so have difficulty in cooling themselves down.

They dissipate heat through their breathing, air passing over mucous, and their ears – which have a lot of blood vessels near the surface. A rabbit will also stretch its body out as far as possible to cool through radiation/convection.

Rabbits have a large body surface area for their small size, which means that in warm weather they can also dehydrate very quickly. Older, overweight and pregnant rabbits are even more at risk, as are long-haired breeds.

The symptoms of heat stroke in rabbits are:

- Fast, shallow breathing/panting
- Salivating
- Reddening of the ears
- Lethargy



- Weakness
- Acting confused
- Convulsing

Because they are prey animals, it is not in a rabbit's nature to display signs of weakness. So, when a rabbit does display these signs it is already in a great deal of dis-

stress. The first sign that an owner may notice is difficulty in breathing. Rabbits normally breathe through their noses, so if a rabbit is breathing through its mouth it is usually a sign that it is in difficulty. The rabbit will then become weak and more lethargic, then may start convulsing and may die if prompt action isn't taken.

As always, prevention is better than cure and there are a number of steps owners can take to ensure their rabbit doesn't fall victim to heat stroke.

Firstly, pets should be kept out of direct sunlight. The hutch/run should be placed in the shade and ceramic tiles on

the floor will give a nice, cool surface for the rabbit to lie on.

Long-haired rabbits should be groomed to help get rid of excess fur during the warmer months.

Frozen water bottles can be left in the hutch/run. Rabbits will enjoy lying in the cool air around the bottles.

There should always be a supply of cool, fresh water. If they drink from a bowl, pop a couple of ice cubes in.

Give their ears a quick misting with cool water from a plant sprayer but avoid getting the ears completely wet.

Give them some fresh vegetables to keep them hydrated.

If a rabbit is exhibiting signs of heat stroke, it should be taken to a vet immediately. Do not immerse them in cold water, as this can shock them, but you could try misting their ears or wrapping them in a cool, damp towel and giving them cool water to drink. This should only be done until their temperature comes down to normal as over-cooling can cause hypothermia.

The vet may use intravenous fluid therapy to bring the animal's temperature down and will closely monitor its temperature.

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As well as heat stroke, rabbits can suffer from sunburn on their ears. This can be protected by the use of sun block. As rabbit sun block is not available, use a hypo-allergenic sun block designed for children and conduct a patch test on a small part of their ear first to check for any reaction.

Contact the Willows Veterinary Group on 01606 723202.



## TIPS FOR SQPS

- If people ask about sun block, direct them to a vet.
- Advise on siting the hutch out of direct sunlight – bearing in mind that the sun moves round during the day.
- Rear Guard is a fly repellent that lasts for 10 weeks and can work alongside good husbandry: for example, good siting of hutches, regular cleaning of bedding, and checking the rabbit's bottom at least twice a day to help prevent fly strike, which is another common condition seen in rabbits at this time of year.