

Caring for the elderly rabbit...



Old rabbits need extra care too.

Just like human's rabbits age at different rates. One rabbit could be elderly at six years old while another may look and acts like a two year old at eight years old. The average lifespan for a rabbit is 8-10 years but ultimately it all depends on genetics, lifestyle and sometimes just a bit of luck.

Age related arthritis

Rabbits get arthritis too! It is very common for an older rabbit of five or six years old to begin to show signs of arthritis, the most common being arthritis of the spine, or Spondylosis. Like in humans it is a degenerative condition that can be managed once diagnosed. As we all know too well rabbits are subtle, it is hard to tell if something is wrong because they hide it. They are also masters of pain management and have an amazingly high pain threshold so by the time you notice something is wrong the condition is often well advanced. Signs of spondylosis include difficulty grooming and eating caecotrophs from their bottom, difficulty scratching ears, or dirty ears, hind limb weakness, or simply being heavy footed, loss of muscle over back due to inactivity and simply going off their food. A vet will need to examine the rabbit and a diagnosis is made by doing an x-ray of the spine. Quite often strong pain killers are prescribed to get the pain under control and then daily doses of anti-inflammatory drugs such as Metacam are prescribed for the lifetime of the rabbit. Rabbits tolerate NSAID's well and providing they eat a good diet they should not have digestive troubles related to the use of NSAID's. Complementary therapies such as acupuncture also work well for pain management in rabbits.

Management

The level of care required will depend on how active your elderly rabbit is. If they aren't showing any signs of arthritis or other conditions then you don't need to change anything. Just make sure your rabbit is warm enough in the cold weather. Rabbits that are severely arthritic or mildly disabled will need more day-to-day care such as bottom washing, gentle physio and medication. They will need to live indoors in an adapted enclosure or room. Fleece blankets make comfortable, non-abrasive flooring. Low-sided litter trays are a must and plenty of comfy places to snooze help too.