



ELDER
BUNS

special needs and concerns with
aging rabbits



Getting old is not fun at all, at least not physically. We all want our furry friend's older years to be as comfortable and pain-free as possible. Most of what our animals go through in their old age is very similar to the issues we humans face. We just have to learn what to look for, and how we can alleviate symptoms.



Photo and statue by Franz Bergmann

IS YOUR RABBIT AN ELDERBUN?

House rabbits usually live between 8 and 12 years, but years alone is not a very useful way to predict whether your rabbit has achieved Elderbun status or not. Usually it is the medium-sized rabbits who have the longest life spans, but size isn't a really good indicator either. Happy rabbits, rabbits who get lots of exercise and mental stimulation, have a good weight, have close bonds with another rabbit, and have a deep relationship with their human seem to live longer and stay healthier.

How can you tell if your own rabbit is starting to fit into the "geriatric" category? There is no hard and fast rule. Rabbits do tend to get some little white hairs around their ears and face. Their coat may change, either feeling softer and finer or coarser and shaggier. Their nails can begin to turn outward, so it becomes even more important to keep those nails clipped. The paw pads can start to get calluses, where nails have started to grow funny. Elderbuns can become less active. They may have trouble getting into their litter box, and stop jumping up

on furniture. Most older rabbits lose weight, but sometimes the opposite is true and they gain some ounces.

There are also elements of aging that you can't see. Their eyes may begin to fail, so they may begin running into things. You may not even notice this at first, or just think it is a clumsy moment. Those high-maintenance teeth can become even more of an issue, and cause trouble with healthy eating or even sinuses. Kidneys don't usually work as well, and bladders can build up sludge more quickly. Livers start to be less efficient too.

The point is this: at a certain age, your rabbit is going to have some special needs, and it will be even more important than ever to keep a close eye out for changes in habits. Avoiding certain activities can tell you about pain that your friend is trying to avoid – so, for instance, if your rabbit quits using the litter box, is it because she's got arthritis and it hurts to jump over the side and into the box? Has your rabbit quit eating as much hay because of dental pain? So watch. Carefully. Notice everything, and try to figure out what might be causing the change in habit.

WHAT GOES ON INSIDE THE OLDER RABBIT

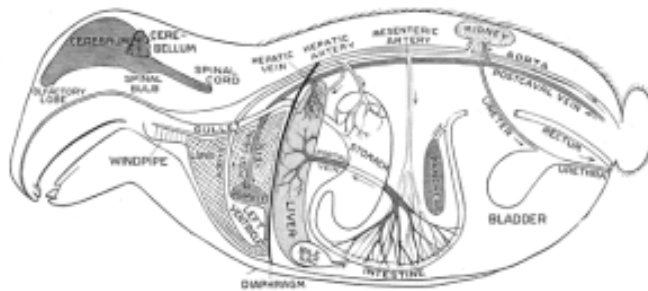


Photo credit: Buel P. Colton, Zoology: Descriptive and Practical

You can see some signs your rabbit is getting older. She's not jumping up on the couch to snuggle with you and watch Grey's Anatomy. He's not as good about keeping his poo in the litter box anymore. What kinds of things might be happening on the inside of our Elderbuns? What is the part of aging we can't see?

For rabbit's who have been obese, we always have to worry about cardiac problems. And some older rabbits can develop hind leg paralysis, for any number

of reasons (subluxation, joint fusion, inflammatory illnesses, tumors, etc).

A great number of rabbits will end up with some compromise in kidney and/or bladder function, and a decrease in liver function is often involved. As all of us get older, things just start to wear out and become less efficient. This whole process snowballs, though. As one part starts to slow down, the other parts are overtaxed and they get damaged. The whole cycle feeds on itself.

Kidney failure happens when the kidneys just can't clear the toxins from the body well anymore, and those toxins begin to build up. Your rabbit may be drinking enormous amounts of water, and there might be way more urine than usual.

Bladder problems also give us signals, if we are watching. Stones and sludge can cause your rabbit to sit for a very long time in the litter box without making any urine, or straining to urinate with little to nothing coming out. Your rabbit may start going (or trying to go) in "inappropriate" places. She may have pain if her abdomen is touched.

Older rabbits who lose their appetite (from dental issues, or some other illness) run the risk of hepatic lipidosis. This is a situation where the fat stored in tissues is metabolized, caecal bacteria are all out of whack, and there is a general breakdown of how nutrients are processed. The end result is that the pathways that the liver uses to process fats become clogged and the liver shuts down. It is critical to keep rabbits eating, and any lessening of appetite is cause for concern!

POOPY BUMS



Photo credit: BobtailsRescueUK

Older rabbits aren't as flexible. They've got tired bones and things just aren't as bendy as they used to be. This means it is harder for them to reach those private parts and keep everything nice and tidy. You may notice the dreaded streaks on your floor, or even a less than flowery odor. The thing is this: there are far more serious problems here, and ones we've got to do something about.

As the poo accumulates on your rabbit's bum, it starts to dry. This dried poo can be like having pebbles stuck in their fur. Imagine sitting on that! And the fur is being pulled too, since it is stuck in the matts, and this makes things even more uncomfortable. Ouchie!

Urine gets soaked up or trapped by this mess as well, so the rabbit will often end up with urine scald - irritated skin caused by the urine staying in contact with the skin. Urine scald can be painful, and the skin can become infected. In the worst cases, there can be open sores.

So now your bun is sitting on a gravelly mess with very tender skin underneath it. That is no good thing.

This mess also gets in the way of the caecotrophs that your rabbit needs so much for nutrition. If caecotrophs are lost in the mess, or they smell funny and your rabbit won't eat them, we've got an even bigger problem on our hands. You may not think an evening giving your bunny a bum bath sounds like a rockin' good time, but you'll be doing your friend a HUGE favor.



Photo credit: bbbunny

Contrary to some very popular videos that continue to make the social media rounds, please do NOT bathe your entire rabbit. This can be very traumatic for them. It can also make their fur felt like a Woolrich blanket, making them fur-bound and preventing free movement.

You CAN soak your rabbit's bum in a nice lukewarm stream of water (it should feel no warmer than body temperature to your hands), and use your fingers to gently loosen the goo. Make sure your rabbit feels secure – the more you can support every part of your rabbit, the better. Go slowly, take your time. Remember, you are working with an already irritated area, and rabbits are sensitive!

If your rabbit is upset by a bum bath, you can use a large bowl instead of the sink. Just lower your rabbit into the bowl gently, and make sure that if your rabbit jumps out he won't jump off a table! Towel dry very gently as much as possible (remember, there can be some sensitive skin under there), then air dry, and then take a good look at the situation. If there is any pink skin, any signs of urine scald, get some help from your veterinarian. It may help to clipper the area, and there are creams and antibiotics to prevent or get rid of any infection. Your bunnies' behind is going to need some careful monitoring.

THE ACHES AND PAINS OF OLD AGE

Arthritis is common across species. How does a rabbit complain about arthritis? If you watch, you can see the same things that happen with dogs, or cats, or people. We all get stiff and sore and stop doing some things. Your rabbit may shorten his stride, refuse to hop up on furniture or upper levels of huts, and not stretching those hind legs out fully anymore. Binkying may stop being a full body thing, and just be a slight hop with the front legs.

Litter boxes can become difficult to manage. There are some do-it-yourself options, as well as some special solutions on the market. If you choose to do it yourself by altering a litter box you already have, just remember it is super super important to file down the edges of the cut. There can't be any rough edges on which your rabbit could hurt himself. Their skin is so delicate, and at an advanced age, they will have trouble avoiding a problem edge on the box.

Here are some examples of options.

The already done commercial variety:



The DIY versions:



A softer surface might be appreciated when bones are achy. A softer area for resting can not only ease aching joints, but also helps keep hocks from getting sores and infections. Your rabbit may or may not be able to jump up onto a bed like the one pictured below, but there are some other options too. Certainly, foam comes to mind, covered with a nice thick blanky. The issue with foam is chewing: is your friend going to chew up all that foam? That wouldn't be good at all. Nobody should eat foam. Folded towels can work for some rabbits - a nice thick towel folded up into a mattress. Again, chewing can be a factor. You may have luck placing foam or bubble wrap under a piece of carpet.



photo credit: bunnyapproved.com using doll bed from Ikea

Sometimes, warmth feels good. Sometimes, cold helps more. You may need to do some experimenting to see what your elder friend appreciates.

It can be difficult to find a good way to provide warmth since we never want to give rabbits the chance to chew on those gel-filled hot packs. Even many of the ones that say "animal safe" are dangerous if ingested. Of course, the heating pads that plug in are not an option. Here's a hint: heat up a pizza stone in the oven at about 150 degrees. Then take it out and LET IT COOL for a bit. When you can rest the palm of your hand on it comfortably, wrap in in a towel and put it in your rabbit's area. Make sure your rabbit has enough room to get away from it if she becomes too warm, and never put it under a rabbit who has any difficulty moving. Remember - overheating is a very dangerous thing for rabbits especially. Make sure your rabbit can avoid the warm area if he chooses!

Some rabbits may prefer a cool place to rest when sore. Same trick, really. Take a ceramic tile and stick it in the freezer for a while, wrap it in a blanket and put it near your rabbit. Same rules as above apply: make sure you rabbit can move away from it, and never place it under a rabbit who cannot move off of it. Some people freeze folded towels, but then the towels must be put into a plastic bag before use...and we don't want anyone (not naming names, just pointing here to all the small animals) chewing the plastic bags.

CONSIDER SOME ACUPUNCTURE? OR HERBAL SUPPORT?

If you are lucky enough to have a veterinary acupuncturist in your area, you may

want to consider making an appointment. Acupuncture can be a terrifically effective therapy, and avoids the use of prescription medications that often have nasty side-effects. Here is a site that will tell you if there are any veterinary acupuncturists in your vicinity: <http://www.aava.org/search/>.

If you are interested in herbal support, take a look at Small Pet Select's Vitalicious Essentials, coupled with Young at Heart Blend. Vital-Licious Essentials supports all the body's systems, and Young at Heart is an added boost just for seniors. Feed both together, along with tons of good hay and at least three types of fresh greens daily to give your older friend the best whole nutrition possible.

AND THAT BRINGS US TO NUTRITION...

Some older rabbits get a bit chubby since they aren't moving around much anymore. If this is the case, cut back gently on those pellets and push the high fiber hay...lose weight slowly slowly slowly, since liver issues can result from a speedy weight loss. (see more about this in our booklet titled "The Chubby Bunny"). More often, though, older rabbits tend to lose weight. They just aren't as interested in their hay anymore, and their muscle mass is decreasing from lack of romping around. Decrease in appetite may also mean dental problems, so it is worth having those teeth checked out. You can use maypops or oat tops to give your friend a few more calories. To get your older rabbit a bit more interested in hay, try mixing up hay types, or adding good smelling, safe herbs and flowers either to the storage area or to the hay itself. NOTE: there is an introduction process for herbal blends...please see the info on the bag. You don't want to put the new stuff on the hay until your rabbit has accepted it, or your poor bun may go off hay entirely. Exactly what we don't want!)

NOTICE EVERYTHING

The takeaway: any changes are worth noting. If your rabbit has stopped eating, get to a vet ASAP. Not after dinner, not Monday morning, NOW. It IS an emergency.

Elderbuns need more attention paid to details, but they have a dignity that can't be pulled off by a young pipsqueak. They've been our best friends all these years, and we know each other so well. They deserve our respect, our help, and our

appreciation.

Go love on your Elderbun!