Client information sheet

Rabbit Osteoarthritis



What is osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis is a type of inflammation that causes pain and stiffness in the joints. It is more common in rabbits over six years old, although it can also appear in rabbits as young as two years old. It is a very painful, progressive disease that cannot be cured. However, there are different ways to manage it, improve your rabbit's wellbeing and help it keep a full and active life.

What are the signs of osteoarthritis?

Rabbits are prey animals and, for that reason, they are experts at hiding pain. This means that the signs of osteoarthritis are rarely obvious until the disease is quite advanced. The most common sign in the early stages of osteoarthritis is a change in behaviour. Other signs you should look out for are:

- Do you notice stiffness when it moves?
- Has it changed the places it is willing to go or the surfaces it can jump onto?
- Do you notice it losing its balance or wobbling when it moves?
- Is it limping?
- Can your rabbit still eat caecotrophs (soft droppings it produces mainly at night) directly from its bottom, or does it have to move around and eat them from the floor?
- Have you noticed that its rear end is dirty or that it gets soiled with droppings or urine? Rabbits with arthritis may find it difficult to get into the correct position to urinate, which can stop them from emptying the bladder completely and increase the risk of developing bladder sludge or bladder stones.
- Does your rabbit have difficulty grooming itself? Have you noticed areas of matted fur?
- Does it move less when it is cold or rainy?
- Has its appetite changed?
- Have you noticed behavioural changes, such as aggression towards you or its companion that it did not show before?

If you have answered yes to any of these questions, it is important to contact your vet so they can assess whether your rabbit has arthritis.

How is osteoarthritis diagnosed?

If you notice changes in the way your rabbit moves or behaves, your vet will start by asking you about the changes you have noticed, how long they have been present and other aspects of its health.

They will then carry out a complete examination and examine your rabbit's joints. This usually includes flexing the joints to detect stiffness, swelling, increased temperature, pain and crepitus (a grating or clicking sensation inside the joints), assessing its mobility and checking for changes in the muscles. If arthritis is suspected, they may recommend:

- **Physical examination,** which usually includes flexing the joints to detect stiffness, swelling, increased temperature, pain and crepitus. They will also assess your rabbit's movement (if it is willing to move) and possible changes in the muscles.
- **Therapeutic trial,** to check whether signs improve with anti-inflammatory pain-relief medication. If, after the physical examination, arthritis is strongly suspected, your vet may recommend this trial as a first diagnostic step.
- **Blood tests,** to rule out other causes of weakness or joint pain and check liver and kidney function before starting certain treatments. These tests may be carried out regularly if your rabbit is receiving medication.
- **X-rays or computed tomography (CT) scan,** to rule out other causes of lameness and look for signs of arthritis. In many cases, the changes are not visible on X-rays until the arthritis is advanced. Ask your vet whether they think these tests are suitable for your rabbit.

How is osteoarthritis managed?

It is essential to keep your rabbit comfortable, active and able to eat. There are currently no painkillers specifically licensed for use in rabbits, but your vet can use different medicines to relieve pain that can be given long term and help keep your rabbit comfortable for the rest of its life.

Your rabbit will need regular check-ups with the vet to make sure it is comfortable and that the medication is not causing side effects. As the arthritis progresses, other treatments may need to be added.

Consider the following as part of the long-term management of your rabbit's arthritis:

- It is important that your rabbit keeps a suitable weight, as being overweight puts extra pressure on the joints and increases pain. If your rabbit is overweight, the nursing team at your veterinary practice can help you set up a suitable weight-loss plan.
- Cover slippery areas with rubber-backed mats or yoga mats to stop your rabbit slipping and injuring its joints, which are already affected by arthritis. This will make movement easier, but watch that it does not nibble them!
- Choose a litter tray that is easy to access, with a low entrance. If you cannot find a suitable one, you can adapt a plant tray or a tuff tray. If you need to modify it or cut down the sides, make sure you sand them well to avoid sharp edges.
- Help your rabbit stay warm in winter. You can use microwaveable heat pads both overnight and during the day when it is cold and damp. If your rabbits live exclusively outdoors, you may consider moving them indoors during the coldest months.
- Make its usual space easier to access by fitting ramps or steps where necessary. You can make them less slippery by covering them with rubber mats or carpet.
- Make sure your rabbit has enough space to move around. Moderate daily exercise helps keep joints affected by arthritis supple.
- Keep offering toys and environmental and feeding enrichment.
- Check your rabbit's rear end often. Rabbits with arthritis may find it difficult to keep this area clean, which increases the risk of flystrike. Brush it regularly and use preventive flystrike treatments. If you have any doubts, talk to your vet.
- Look out for sores on the paws (pododermatitis). Lesions on the toes and hocks (ankles) are common in rabbits with arthritis and can become infected. Talk to your vet for guidance.
- Keep the nails short, as in older rabbits and rabbits with arthritis they can become deformed and grow unevenly.

- Remove obstacles from its usual space. Rabbits with arthritis can easily become tangled or catch their legs when moving around. They also find it harder to get around obstacles, so keeping the floor clear helps them move with more safety and confidence.
- Avoid picking your rabbit up, except when necessary for check-ups or care. This reduces the risk of forcing or twisting its painful joints.
- Attend regular check-ups with your vet. If you notice changes in the way your rabbit moves, it can be useful to record videos to show them during the consultation.

What is the prognosis/outlook for osteoarthritis?

Unfortunately, arthritis cannot be cured and is a progressive disease. The pain and loss of mobility associated with arthritis are among the main reasons why many owners end up making the difficult decision to say goodbye to their rabbits. However, working closely with your vet to find the most suitable combination of treatments and attending regular check-ups can help your rabbit enjoy many years of active, happy and pain-free life.

Useful Resources

- RWAF - Arthritis in Rabbits | Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund (RWAF)
  https://rabbitwelfare.co.uk/arthritis-in-rabbits/

