



Rabbit behaviour advice:

Reducing stress in the veterinary clinic during the Covid-19 pandemic



Pandemic restrictions have meant that many rabbit caregivers and families are home-based. For both house and garden-rabbits, their environment may be more active and noisy. As a prey species prone to making fearful associations, this may give rise to acute or chronic stress, with potential health implications. If rabbits are presented to Veterinary Surgeons in this time, their threshold for coping with procedures may be reduced. For rabbits that have social bonds with their caregiver, this may be exacerbated by the need for veterinary staff to take them from their caregiver in the carpark to maintain social distancing. However, stress associated with vet visits can be limited through prior planning, recognition of stress and environmental modification.

Behavioural signs of stress or disease in rabbits

Most veterinary staff will be familiar with outward signs of stress in rabbits (anxiety, fear or frustration). These include muscle tension, wide eyes, upright or flat ears, freezing, attempts to flee and leg-thumps. Caregivers may report that at home their rabbit is aggressive, withdrawn or engaging in repetitive behaviours i.e. bar-biting, pica, barbering or fur-chewing. There may be urine-spraying and changes in faecal consistency or latrine boundaries.

As rabbits naturally mask signs of disease, caregivers can be encouraged to observe their rabbit's behaviour so that deviations from the 'norm' can be noticed. These may include huddling, drooling, grinding teeth, leaving caecotrophs on the ground, lack of co-ordination, head-tilt or changes to sociality, activity or grooming. Caregivers often fail to recognise signs of pain in their rabbit, as they assess facial expression rather than posture or other signs.

Taking rabbits from caregiver's cars into the practice

Under normal conditions rabbits often enter the practice via a waiting area, and they have their caregiver present throughout much of the visit. They may depend on the latter for a sense of security. The experience of being collected from their caregiver in the carpark will be particularly unfamiliar and, as a prey species, the approach of veterinary staff may be perceived as threatening. It can be extra stressful for rabbits if staff carry the scent of predatory species or chemicals, and if they need to wear protective equipment.

To reduce associated stress in rabbits, the pet carrier should be robust, it should contain a non-slippery substrate (i.e. a clean towel covered in familiar straw) and it should be largely-covered so that the rabbit feels less exposed. Where rabbits are bonded with conspecifics, caregivers should be asked to transport the rabbit with its companion(s). Ideally the rabbit

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will have formed positive associations with its pet carrier; achieved by this being made widely available to them, including for 'feel good' activities such as resting and eating. When taking the pet carrier, vet staff should avoid direct eye contact with the rabbit and they should carry the pet carrier in a gentle, secure and predictable manner.

Examinations and treatment

Veterinary examinations and treatment should occur in the quietest room available - ideally well away from the sight, sound and scent of dogs and cats, and away from bright lights, sudden movement or loud noises including sonic and ultrasonic. Staff trained in low-stress handling should assist if possible, and handling should be gentle for the rabbit. The rabbit should be predictably approached from in front rather than above (the latter would mimic a predator), avoiding their 60-degree caudal blind spot. They should be placed on a non-slippery surface and, if needing to be held, picked up with their body supported securely against the handlers chest. Laying the rabbit on its back to induce a dorsal immobility response should be avoided. Rabbits can benefit from being allowed an element of choice where practical; including in relation to investigation of the environment or equipment and having stress-reducing pauses if needed. Where appropriate, food can be offered as a distraction from anxiety and to promote good associations.

When treatment is complete, the rabbit should have access to their familiar pet carrier, or if needing to be admitted, they should be placed somewhere quiet and dimly-lit (their sight is adapted for dawn and dusk light intensities). This should be ideal in terms of ventilation and shelter from extreme temperatures, as it is unlikely the rabbit will have the environmental complexity such as cool soil to adjust their body temperature. They should be located away from predators and stressors (visual, sound and scent-based), ideally with their bonded companion and familiar objects that carry home scents. If bonded rabbits need separating at any time, caregivers should be advised on the need for scent-swapping prior to supervised reintroductions in neutral territory. This can be achieved by gently rubbing each rabbit with the same cloth, and by swapping used bedding for each rabbit. Veterinary interventions can alter the scent and behaviour of rabbits, which may disrupt recognition and social bonds.

Rabbits benefit from having environmental choices at all times. Their housing in a veterinary context should be partly covered, and this should have non-slippery flooring and contain a sanctuary area to hide in or behind; ideally with more than one entrance and exit point. A wide tunnel such as a drain pipe cut-off, or a cardboard box with the base and two large holes cut out, can offer this. Rabbits also benefit from having access to an elevated platform, such as on top of a cardboard box. The height of the overall housing should be such that the rabbit can sit or stand fully on their hind-legs to periscope and scan the environment. They should ideally have horizontal space to make at least three continuous hopping movements.

Caregivers can be asked about their rabbits preferences for bedding and toileting substrate - so that this can be replicated if feasible. A small amount of soiled toileting substrate provided

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by caregivers can provide familiarity and encourage use of a specific latrine area. When it is necessary to clean the latrine area, some soiled substrate should be transferred to this.

In general, good quality unlimited forage including hay should be provided. Caregivers can be asked about their rabbits preferences for other food-types; particularly if appetite is poor. The rabbit can be provided with food enrichment whilst in the vets, including scattered food to encourage foraging and puzzle feeders made using toilet or kitchen roll cardboard tubes which are tightly packed with hay, herbs and food treats - with the ends folded over.

Stress within the home environment

If caregivers report signs of stress in their rabbit at home, they can be advised to ensure that resources are optimal so that their rabbit feels secure and has outlets for intrinsic behaviour. The rabbit should have housing which allows them to stand fully and make at least three continuous hopping movements. They should also have an exercise area; ideally with ability to access this at will including at dawn and dusk. Housing should be secure from predators, and it should consider movements, shadows, reflections, UV-exposure, ventilation and shelter from extreme temperatures, draughts and noise including sonic and ultrasonic. The rabbit should have access to complexity including elevated platforms, double-ended tunnels, pipes or cardboard boxes, and soil to burrow in or turn over to expose a cool area to lie in. Diet should be appropriate regarding nutrients and activity budgets. The rabbits social needs should be met through appropriate conspecifics pairings or ideal, abundant human company.



Rabbit shed with exercise area
(connecting burrow pipe)



Enriched rabbit housing

If caregivers have concerns with their rabbit's behaviour, they can visit the following websites to locate a Clinical Animal Behaviourist:

Fellowship of Animal Behaviour Clinicians (FABC)
<https://fabclinicians.org/>

Animal Behaviour and Training Council (ABTC)
<http://www.abtcouncil.org.uk/> (see the 'Clinical Animal Behaviourist' register).