

Obese Rabbits At Risk

by Dr. Jackie Schulman, DVM

Editor's note: Dr. Schulman is a veterinarian at Companion Animal Clinic in Gainesville, Virginia. She adopted a beautiful fuzzy lop girl named Freda from the House Rabbit Society.

Those of us with house rabbits know that any rabbit worth his weight in carrots loves a good snack. Treats are often used as training rewards, as expressions of love, and as coaxing tools during unsolicited games of hide and seek. Many rabbit owners delight when their pet hops onto the sofa for a nibble of popcorn or cookies during a movie. Unfortunately, choosing the wrong snacks can lead to obesity, a condition which puts rabbits at risk for potentially serious health problems.

Obesity can detrimentally affect many body systems. Severe skin conditions, for example, may result from excessive weight and inevitable diminished activity. "Sore hocks," or ulcerative pododermatitis, involves severe and often infected lesions on the bottoms of the feet. Wire-floored cages, soiled bedding, and a sedentary lifestyle can predispose a rabbit to developing these lesions. Excessive body weight places added pressure on the feet, both contributing to the problem and complicating treatment. This frustrating condition can even escalate to bone infection, called osteomyelitis. This complication can become so severe as to require limb amputation.

Another skin problem related to obesity is urine scald. Urine scald can contribute to sore hocks, but most commonly involves the delicate skin of the ano-genital area. Obese rabbits may be more likely to remain in one place after urination, allowing the urine extended contact with the skin. These big bunnies also have difficulty reaching this region to groom themselves. Dedicated bathing and application of medication may be required to treat this problem. In severe cases, surgery must be performed to remove excessive skin folds where urine and feces collect.

Diminished ability to access the rear end can also keep rabbits from engaging in cecotrophy, or consumption of cecotropes. Cecotropes, are vitamin-rich fecal bundles produced in the cecum. These nutritious meals are usually eaten directly from the anus, but obese rabbits have difficulty accomplishing this maneuver. They may even become too sedentary to turn around and ingest deposited cecotropes, leading to poor overall health and intestinal problems. Owners of obese rabbits may have to collect cecotropes and feed them to their rabbits.

Furthermore, an obese rabbit who has stopped eating due to illness or other reason is at risk for hepatic lipidosis, a life-threatening liver disease. Rabbits may go off feed due to heat stress, stomach blockage, or dental disease, for example. A state of negative energy balance leads an obese rabbit's liver to undergo fatty changes that may only be reversible with dedicated nursing care and supplemental nutrition.

Finally, an obese rabbit with an orthopedic disease such as arthritis will have a much more difficult time maintaining mobility. The added weight places further stress on the joints and bones. Heart Disease is

also becoming more common in rabbits. Quality of life as well as lifespan may be diminished unnecessarily due to continued overzealous feeding.

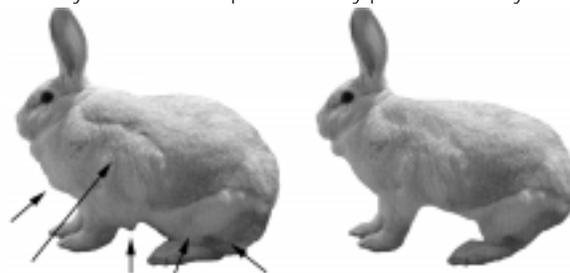
The best way to prevent these problems is to prevent obesity. Obesity prevention can be as simple as making

educated decisions regarding food choices. Regulated portions of a high quality pelleted diet (1/4 to 1/2 cup or even less per day depending on your rabbit's size), high quality grass hay such as timothy, and 1 cup or more of fresh vegetables (try to include at least 3 different "green" things, for example, kale, parsley and romaine). If your rabbit does not consume all the vegetables in several hours then you are feeding too many vegetables. Believe it or not, even too many vegetables (esp. carrots) can make a rabbit fat or cause him to eat less hay than he should. Sweet treats can contribute to obesity and cause intestinal upset. This includes sweet fruits as well as "junk food." Overweight rabbits should not have either in their diet. Most rabbits will attack their favorite vegetable with as much enthusiasm as a morsel of forbidden food. In addition, all rabbits should be weighed regularly and their diet adjusted accordingly. You might even consider taking periodic ariel view photos like the one at the bottom of this page to monitor weight gain.

It is essential to encourage play and exploration, rather than accepting sedentary behavior. Rabbits should have supervised play time every day for as long as possible. You can provide more exercise time with a suitably bunnyproofed indoor space where your rabbit can exercise even when you are not available to supervise. If your rabbit occupies a cage when unsupervised, the cage must be large enough to allow comfortable activity. Finally, a yearly visit to a rabbit-friendly veterinarian should be an essential part of any rabbit's health maintenance plan. If your rabbit is already obese, or if you are uncertain how much is too much, your veterinarian will help formulate a plan for safe and effective weight loss. Responsible feeding will ensure that your rabbit escapes the many perils of obesity. ♡



When feeding a pair, be sure that one isn't eating up all the food!



The rabbits pictures on the left are actual, unretouched pictures of obese rabbits (both males). The arrows indicate "obesity hotspots"--i.e. elbow pouches, bulging chests (not normal for a male rabbit). The images on the right are the same pictures, retouched by computer to show the ideal appearance of these rabbits.



A rabbit of ideal weight.