



Rabbit calendar

Plan your rabbit's year

Now that we've all got new 2012 calendars, it's a good time to plan out our personal happy, healthy rabbit year, and pencil in important dates so that vital appointments and checks for our rabbits are not missed. Vet Richard Saunders has prepared some useful reminders of the many things that need to be done throughout the year to help keep our pets fit and well. The months of the year are only intended as guidelines, to make sure that nothing is missed. You may already have booked appointments in other months, and of course, that's fine.

January:

Claw clipping: This should be carried out depending on need, throughout the year, but if rabbits are usually kept outside, claw clipping may be more frequently required when and if they are kept inside during the colder months of the year. Claws should be checked at least monthly, more frequently for rabbits who are kept on soft surfaces, or who have foot or nail deformities.

It's particularly important to check the innermost claw on the front feet as this may curl round into the skin and cause quite severe damage before being noticed. If you are not comfortable checking or clipping your rabbits claws, ask a vet or vet nurse, or an experienced rabbit keeper, to show you the first time, so that you know when they need clipping and how much to take off. Many rabbits will never need any claw clipping at all.

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February:

Regular grooming is a year-round activity also, but there are peak moulting periods in the year in spring and autumn when large amounts of excess fur may be trapped in the rabbit's coat. This may help to cause skin problems through matting against the skin, and contribute to flystrike. Solid mats of fur, especially from the feet, may be eaten and slow gut motility or even block the gut.

March:

Myxomatosis vaccination should be carried out twice yearly, at six monthly intervals. One of these may ideally be performed in very early spring, to ensure that the vaccine is given before the time of highest risk and is at its peak efficacy when that time arrives.

VHD vaccine: the timing of the VHD vaccine is less crucial as this should simply be given once every 12 months. It should not be given within two weeks of a myxomatosis vaccine, but this does not mean that they have to be given two weeks apart. It may be more sensible to stagger this further, and give it midway (three months) between two myxomatosis vaccines, either in mid summer or winter. This provides the opportunity to have a veterinary check-over three months apart rather than merely two weeks apart. Rabbits with a tendency towards flystrike would probably benefit from planning this during the summer. However, this visit should not be waited for if problems are developing (see flystrike below).

April:

All rabbits are potentially prone to flystrike. However, any rabbits that are obese, have fur problems, mobility problems, dental problems, caecotroph retention problems or urinary tract problems, are at especially high risk. These rabbits should be checked out at the

beginning of the warmer weather by your vet, with regard to all of the above. This is the opportunity to ensure that they are mobile, and plan a programme of exercise, weight loss, medication or other environmental changes if they are not. From then on, such rabbits should be checked at least daily for evidence of flystrike.

The consequences of missing flystrike are potentially fatal. If caught early on, the chances of survival improve, but rabbits where the problem is not picked up soon enough will require more intensive and expensive treatment, and have a much reduced chance of survival.

In addition to helping your rabbit to look after itself, and checking them regularly, on high-risk rabbits you can use spot on fly repellants, and insect growth hormone regulators, to discourage flies from landing on the rabbit, and help prevent their eggs hatching. However, these should never be relied on by themselves. They are not an alternative to daily inspections.

May:

Hutch hygiene is another year-round issue. During the winter months, any outdoor rabbits will use the indoor portion of their environment more than average, and so they will need frequent cleaning. However, the warmer weather of the summer months will lead to faster bacterial growth, and greater risk of flystrike and infections.

Disinfectant should be pet safe, and remember that disinfectant cannot work without a thorough surface cleaning. Rabbit urine is particularly resistant to removal due to its significant calcium content - it is like thick limescale. Physical removal is often necessary. *E. Cuniculi* spores are resistant to many disinfecting agents, and so thorough physical cleaning is vital.

June:

Avoiding heatstroke is vital in the rabbit. For an animal evolved to cope with the much warmer climates of North Africa and Southern Europe, rabbits do seem to struggle in the summer heat of the UK. This is most likely to be because in the wild they can choose a microclimate which is cooler and better shaded (typically underground). It is worth looking at the siting of the outdoor environment in early summer and ensuring that shade is provided by trees, fences, or awnings, that any enclosed house is not placed in direct sunlight, and that any other steps are taken to minimise the risk of heat stroke or hyperthermia. Reflective foil may be used on the roof of any enclosure, draft barriers that may have been placed over ventilation grilles in the winter should be removed, and water may need to be provided in larger amounts. Bottles and bowls will need to be refilled and cleaned more frequently as sunlight encourages algal growth.



K Mills



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July:

Teeth checking can be done at any time, and is best carried out regularly, as part of normal grooming, to get your rabbit used to it, and so that problems can be spotted early.

The incisor teeth can be seen by gently parting the rabbit's upper lip and looking at the upper and lower front teeth. These should be symmetrical, white to slightly yellow, with shallow vertical grooves in the upper teeth. There should not be any horizontal barring or grooving, and they should not be overlong or distorted (you may need to ask your vet to show you what is normal, or look at images of normal teeth).

The back teeth (cheek teeth) are far more difficult to examine, and really require sedation or specialist equipment to view properly. However, feeling your rabbits' skin over the bones of the jaw to get a feel for the normal shape of the skull, may help to identify problems early.

August:

The hottest days may carry a severe risk of overheating, even with all the measures already put in place. Consider fans, air conditioning, and cooling your rabbit down by providing frozen bottles of water wrapped in a towel for them to lie close to. If you use parasols to shade your rabbits, always anchor them down securely so they do not blow away if a breeze gets up.

September:

The end of a long wet summer can lead to high numbers of mosquitoes as well as other biting insects, and fleas - both of which may carry myxomatosis. The humid weather can still lead to rapid growth of fly eggs into maggots. Insect control, using screens and safe repellants, may still be required to avoid these threats. Tick levels also peak at this time of year, in affected areas.

October:

More thorough grooming may again be necessary in some breeds or individuals about now, as in the spring.

November:

Don't forget that grass stops growing when the soil temperature drops below 6 degrees centigrade. Although rabbits may be acclimatised to being out in colder weather, and obviously eat grass in the wild all the time, there is often not enough grass in a garden to support rabbits at this time. Greater dependence on dried grass and hay means that amounts should be increased gradually over the late autumn and winter months, until fresh grass starts to grow again.

December:

The cold weather can bring its problems too. Frozen water bottles may be avoided by refilling them frequently, initially with warm water, and insulating them with commercially available or home made wraps. Never add salt or any other chemical to the water to prevent it freezing. Rabbits can be kept outside all year round, provided their accommodation has good enough insulation and the environment is free of draughts and kept dry. Extra insulation should be used as the temperature drops, and grilles may be covered to avoid draughts, but not at the expense of creating a stuffy, poorly ventilated enclosure that may lead to respiratory tract disease. Indoor rabbits are protected from such extremes of cold, but ensure that they are not placed in an area that becomes excessively warm when central heating is switched on.



M Grover



M Grover

Monthly checks:

- Weighing your rabbit is worth carrying out monthly. This gives an early warning as to both weight gain and weight loss. Weight loss is an early indicator of diseases such as kidney failure and dental disease, and weight gain is worth controlling in the early stages, before it starts to cause problems. Using kitchen scales for smaller rabbits, or bathroom scales for the large ones, is not as accurate as purpose made infant or small animal ones, but gives a good idea of approximate weight.
- Ear mites, and fungal and bacterial infections, can develop in rabbits' ears, and may be present for some time before getting to the point where they are easily noticed, for example by causing the rabbit to hold one ear down, or to scratch, rub or shake its head. Sometimes the first sign of anything wrong is a foul smell due to infection, or discharge out onto the side of the face. Regular ear checks, lifting up the ear itself, and looking into and smelling the ear canals, can help to identify problems early on, when they are easier to successfully treat.

Weekly checks:

- Checking the teeth and claws of rabbits known to have problems should be done weekly. Weighing rabbits who have already been diagnosed with dental disease should be carried out at least weekly.

Daily checks:

- Remember to check your rabbit daily for flystrike. Check around the rear end, from just above the tail to the genital area. Also check on the back around and above the tail. If you find evidence of flystrike seek veterinary help immediately.