

All About Pets

The national pet care information service

EUTHANASIA OF RABBITS



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity

The life expectancy of a pet rabbit is generally much longer than that of a rabbit living in the wild.

On average a pet rabbit may live for about six to eight years and some even survive past 10 years. But at some stage it may become obvious that your rabbit's life is drawing to a close. It is then that you will face a painful and difficult decision on whether your pet should be taken to your vet and put gently and painlessly to sleep.



When is euthanasia necessary?

Euthanasia (often called 'putting to sleep') is the term used by vets for the process of preventing the suffering of an animal which is too old or too sick to have a happy and fulfilled life. It is never an easy decision and many owners understandably delay making it for as long as possible. Pain is not the only form of suffering, quality of life is important too and there are a number of situations in which euthanasia is the kindest thing for your rabbit.

Consider euthanasia if your rabbit:

- is suffering untreatable pain, such as severe dental disease, extensive abscessation that has spread to involve the bone or from non-healing ulcers of the legs and feet
- is no longer able to eat or drink normally
- has such severe disease in the lungs that it is unable to breathe properly
- can no longer empty its bowels or bladder without pain or is incontinent
- is unable to stand or move normally
- has become so blind or deaf that it cannot have a fulfilled life
- is suffering from a severe illness such as myxomatosis, a heavy maggot infestation, or severe inner ear disease and the vet feels that recovery is unlikely
- is ill and the emotional or financial demands of caring for it are more than you can manage

What will happen?

Your vet may shave the fur from a patch of skin on one of your rabbit's front legs or ear and insert a needle into a vein. An overdose of a drug which makes your rabbit lose consciousness (and the ability to feel pain or fear) will then be injected. Your rabbit will be asleep in a very short time (usually a matter of seconds). Breathing and heartbeat will stop a few seconds later. If your rabbit is fearful or aggressive it will often be given a sedative before the fatal injection. Alternatively, in some very sick animals, your vet may give the injection in its belly.

Will my rabbit suffer?

The process of euthanasia is completely painless. In its last moments your rabbit may give a gasp. Your rabbit is asleep and the sound is caused by a muscular spasm which is perfectly normal. Other muscles in your rabbit's body may also twitch and, as its body relaxes, its bowels or bladder may empty.

Should I be there at the end?

Discuss in advance with your vet whether you wish to be with your pet when it is put to sleep. It may be less stressful for your rabbit to be held in your arms and to be able to hear a familiar voice. You may be comforted by knowing that your pet suffered no pain and met a peaceful end. However, if you are frightened or anxious your rabbit may sense this and may also become upset.

Should it be done at home or at the vet's surgery?

Vets usually prefer to see their patients in their own clinic where all the equipment and trained staff they need is close at hand. But euthanasia is a special situation for both the vet and you. If you want to have your animal put to sleep in its own home then most vets will do this.

Who decides that the time is right for euthanasia?

It is you who must decide whether or when euthanasia is the right thing for your rabbit. Your vet will be able to advise you on what the options are and make a sensible recommendation but he/she will not make the decision for you. It is rare that a decision has to be made on the spur of the moment, so it is much better to make your choice after talking it over with your vet and with other members of your family. It is important that all members of the family are involved in the decision-making process and that they are all in agreement. Do not exclude children from this – talking with them before the decision has been made may help them to come to terms with it.

How will I feel?

It is perfectly natural to feel grief after losing a pet and there is no shame in feeling strong emotions. Sometimes the first response to the death of a pet is anger or guilt (that more could not be done to save them). However, people experience grief in different ways and there are no hard and fast rules about what you will feel. It may help to have someone to take you home after your rabbit has been put to sleep so that you do not have to return to an empty house. Talking to friends and family is important, especially your children.

How will my children cope?

Losing a pet is often the first time that a child becomes aware of death. It is usually best to be honest with a child and explain the truth as clearly as you can. Children may want time to say goodbye to their pet and seeing the dead body may help them understand what has happened. Marking the occasion with some kind of memorial such as a burial can be very therapeutic. Talking about the happy times you shared will often help them and you to come to terms with the change in your lives. Children frequently get over the loss of a pet much more quickly than adults do.

What happens to the body?

Your vet will explain what can be done with the body of your rabbit. They can arrange for your rabbit to be cremated, or you may choose to bury the body yourself. If you want to bury your rabbit in your garden check first with your local authority that this is allowed and make sure that the body is buried at least two feet (about 600 mm) below the surface. If your rabbit is cremated it is usually possible for your vet to arrange for you to have its ashes returned, but you must inform your vet of your wishes at the time of euthanasia.

Should I get another pet?

After the experience of losing a rabbit some people say they never want to own another pet. However, many others find that getting another rabbit helps them deal with their grief. The relationship you build with another pet will never be the same as the one you had, but it can be equally rewarding.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your rabbit please contact your veterinary surgeon who will be happy to advise you.

Further information

For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit www.allaboutpets.org.uk, the national pet care information service. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is provided by The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity. We rely entirely on your support to enable us to continue our vital work. Any contribution would be most welcome. Thank you.

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