

Rabbit Health

Body Temperature

Jan Langer, House Rabbit Resource Network, 2/2001

The body temperature of a rabbit can differ by several degrees between individuals as well as by time of day in a particular rabbit. Because of this, the “normal” temperature range falls between 100.5 and 103.5 degrees. However, if your rabbit is stressed (such as a trip to the vet or being handled when not used to it) the temperature may be elevated to 104 or even slightly higher. Additionally, temperature may tend to run slightly higher in the evening hours.

The best way to know what is normal for your rabbit is to take its temperature at several different times (on different days and different hours). Also, becoming familiar and adept with the procedure of taking the temperature will reduce stress for both you and your rabbit and lend a “more normal” reading. Unfortunately, many people are much more uncomfortable with the idea of taking the temperature than the rabbit is — rabbits don’t have modesty issues with the use of a rectal thermometer. Rather the act of being restrained or turned on their back is what makes a rabbit uncomfortable with the whole procedure.

Although your veterinarian will probably take your rabbit’s temperature while it is standing up, our fosterers find it far easier to take the temperature while the rabbit is cradled on its back in a person’s arms. This allows visibility of the area, easy viewing of the temperature gauge and, perhaps most importantly, minimizes the chance of the rabbit jumping and injuring itself while the thermometer is inserted. Most people find that a digital thermometer is easiest to use because it beeps when a stable reading is reached rather than looking through fur for the temperature gauge. Alternatively, a glass rectal thermometer can be used. Just make sure to lubricate one inch of the end of either type with either petroleum jelly or KY Jelly™ to make insertion easier.

It cannot be emphasized enough that you need to learn and practice the skill of taking your rabbit’s temperature until you are adept at getting a correct reading. Feeling the warmth of your rabbit’s ears is not an adequate indicator of rabbit temperature. If your rabbit’s temperature becomes seriously depressed or elevated (as discussed in the following paragraphs), being able to take its temperature in an emergency may be the difference between life and death!

An elevated temperature, above 105⁰ F, particularly if repeated over several hours or accompanied by reduced appetite or other symptoms of illness, may indicate a systemic infection or an underlying medical condition which needs prompt veterinary attention. A temperature over 106⁰ F needs immediate attention on your part — the rabbit must be cooled down at once — wet the ears or more of the body, move the rabbit to a cool location (particularly if in a hot area), put the rabbit in a breezy area (such as a fan or air conditioning vent) or, in non-responsive situations, ice down the rabbit. Very high temperatures should be brought down on the spot and once reduced, medical attention needs to be obtained promptly to determine the underlying cause. Rabbits can suffer permanent physical damage from prolonged high body temperatures.

Reduced temperature (below 100⁰ F) means the rabbit is starting to go into or already in shock. Your first clue may be a rabbit with decreased responsiveness to stimulus (e.g. the rabbit is sitting with its feet pulled up under the body, eyes closed or eyelids drooping, and when petted or touched responds little or none). The temperature needs to be checked immediately. A rabbit with a slightly lowered temperature (99⁰ F or above) may warm up adequately if held on a lap and covered with a towel. As body temperature becomes lower, the rabbit becomes more limp and non-responsive and immediate measures need to be taken to bring the temperature up. Use of a heating pad set on high and wrapped in a towel and placed under or over a rabbit that is covered up by a towel or blanket may be effective. The heating process may take up to an hour or so depending upon how depressed the temperature is. Just make sure that your rabbit can get away from the heat source on its own when it gets warmed up. Never leave the rabbit near a heating pad unattended. Usually the rabbit will let you know it is warmed up by becoming restless and wanting to cease being held or will move to a cooler location and its responsiveness will become normal.

Rabbits often have the unfortunate response to severe pain by “shutting down” and going into shock. This may be accompanied by tooth grinding, particularly early on, but this is not always the case so do not rely on this as an indicator. After the body temperature is brought up to a more nor-

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mal level (monitor during and, for a while, after the warming process), you can attempt to determine why it occurred. Veterinary treatment can then be obtained.

Pain from bladder or digestive ailments is frequently a cause. Severe cramps from intestinal gas have been observed numerous times in our foster homes. We have many examples of rabbits that were in shock and near death. After being warmed up they received simethicone for gas and a pain reliever and went on to eating and acting normally within a couple hours when they could very easily have died if this had not been detected, temperature measured and received immediate treatment. No one wants to lose their rabbit to shock from such a treatable condition.

Learn how to take your rabbit's temperature, have a thermometer on hand, be alert for changes in behavior and be prepared to act at once if temperature is seriously low or elevated.

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