

# Pre- Operative care of Rabbits

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Any surgery can be stressful to your companion rabbit, and there's really no such thing as a surgery that is 100% risk free. However, the following information should help you and your rabbit get through either emergency or elective surgery with a minimum of stress, and a maximum of safety.

## Pre-operative Care

1. Be sure you schedule surgery with a veterinarian who is very familiar with a rabbit's unique anatomy and physiology, and who has had a great deal of experience and success with rabbit surgeries and anesthesia. Veterinarians who specialize in "exotic" species are a good place to start when seeking a rabbit-experienced veterinarian. If you cannot find an experienced rabbit vet in your local yellow pages, you may wish to contact your local House Rabbit Society volunteer to see if s/he can help you with a referral. There is also a veterinary referral list linked to the National House Rabbit Society web site.

2. If possible, schedule the surgery so that you can bring your bunny home with you the same evening. Spending the night in an unfamiliar place, surrounded by strange people and sounds, can add unnecessary stress, and lengthen your rabbit's recovery. Very few veterinary hospitals have 24-hour monitoring staff, and your bunny will probably not be watched for at least part of the night, if he stays in the hospital. Home, where he can be monitored constantly, showered with love, and offered his favorite treats, is best.

3. If your rabbit is bonded to another rabbit, it is important to bring them both to the vet so that the mate can offer moral support during the pre-operative waiting period and during recovery. It also will help prevent the dreaded un-bonding phenomenon which sometimes occurs when one member of a bonded pair comes home smelling of strange and scary hospital. The last thing you want your bunny to suffer after surgery is violent rejection by his/her own mate! Unfortunately, this goes for bonded groups, too. Its best to bring everyone in for moral support and to prevent post-operative social rejection.

4. **DO NOT FAST YOUR RABBIT PRIOR TO THE SURGICAL APPOINTMENT**, even if the person scheduling your appointment (usually a receptionist, who is instructed to give everyone the same instructions for pre-surgical care, but knows only what is appropriate for a dog or cat) tells you to do so. Here are the reasons why some clinic staff might suggest fasting, and why these reasons do not hold true for rabbits:

a. Some surgical anesthetics can cause nausea. One of the reasons vets fast most animals pre-

operatively is because of the risk of vomiting during surgery or recovery. Rabbits lack the vomiting reflex, and are physically almost incapable of regurgitation. In rabbits, the risk of post-operative vomiting (which can cause accidental aspiration--liquid being breathed into the lungs) is very low.

b. Some veterinarians may be concerned that food in the intestine will interfere with their obtaining a "true body weight," which is necessary to calculate the proper dosage of injectible anesthetic. There are two reasons that this should not be a concern with rabbits.

(i) Under normal circumstances, the intestine of a healthy rabbit is never empty, and should not be. Rabbit gut passage time is relatively long (approximately 12 hours), so to get the intestine completely empty would take a very long time. Also, since an anorectic rabbit can begin to suffer liver damage in relatively short time when the gut is empty, it is not advisable to fast the rabbit before surgery.

(ii) If the veterinarian is using isoflurane or sevoflurane, the gas anesthetic of choice, body weight is not an issue, since the gas is administered through the respiratory tract. Even though isoflurane gas is more expensive than injectible anesthetics, it is worth the extra cost to ensure a safer surgery and faster recovery.

(IMPORTANT NOTE: Although intubation allows much more precise administration and monitoring of gas anesthesia, and is safer in case of an emergency cardiac or respiratory arrest during surgery, please be aware that intubation of rabbits is a delicate procedure requiring a great deal of practice and expertise. If your vet is NOT experienced with rabbit intubations, it is probably much safer for the isoflurane to be administered via mask. You might wish to ask your vet about this before you schedule the surgery. An inexperienced veterinarian attempting to intubate a rabbit can actually cause its death by over-stimulating the vagus nerve, which runs close to the trachea, and inducing cardiac arrest.)

c. Feeding your bunny before surgery helps the gastrointestinal (GI) tract remain active, which will speed recovery. Rabbits who become inappetent after surgery are more difficult to "jump start" back to normal eating habits. Even relatively brief periods (24 hours) of anorexia can result in GI stasis and some liver damage in rabbits. For more information on this condition, please refer to "Treating Ileus".

5. Take some of your rabbit's normal food (pellets and hay) along as well as a bag of favorite fresh herbs. Ask that the foods be offered to your bunny as soon as the anesthesia wears off. The sooner bunny starts eating again after surgery, the quicker the recovery.

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