

Planning for Emergencies

The three key elements in surviving a medical emergency with your rabbit are:

1. Have a well-thought-out emergency plan
2. Be able to recognize when a medical problem is an emergency
3. Remain calm while executing your plan

Your Emergency Plan

The first step in your emergency plan is to identify a primary rabbit veterinarian and at least one (preferably two) backup. Have the phone numbers written down and keep them close to the phone. Know the normal schedule (days and hours) of each doctor. Don't trust your memory — write it down next to the phone numbers. If you have several rabbits or one that is critically ill, also try to know their vacation and seminar schedules. This can save precious time in an emergency.

Know the quickest route from your house to each clinic. If your normal route might be clogged during rush hour, try to identify an alternate route as well. Know each doctor's after-hours emergency procedures. If this involves going to an emergency clinic, make a practice trip to make sure you know where it is and the quickest way to get there.

If your doctor's emergency plan involves paging her, calling a service which contacts the doctor, or any other process which involves someone calling you with instructions, **be sure to keep your phone line open after making the call.** Unless you have a separate phone line, this is not the time to “surf the net” for information or e-mail someone for support. Make sure your family stays off the phone until you hear back. If another call comes in, quickly and firmly tell the caller you are expecting an important call and you will have to get back to them.

If you have been trained in first aid and/or CPR, you may want to talk to your vet about showing you how to adapt these procedures — especially CPR and techniques to stop bleeding — for use on a rabbit. Keep in mind that a rabbit's bone structure and internal organs are smaller and more fragile than those of most other animals you would apply these techniques to. Also, be aware that revival techniques such as CPR have a very low success rate in rabbits, even when performed by a skilled veterinarian with the assistance of supportive medications. However, it may give you some comfort to know how to **try** revival techniques, even if they fail.

Identifying an Emergency

If your bunny shows any of the following symptoms, consider it an emergency:

- Shallow breathing and/or weak heartbeat
- Complete immobility or unresponsiveness
- Severe diarrhea (liquid stools) or mucous-covered stools
- Complete silence in the stomach
- Labored breathing
- Convulsions/seizures
- Any injury resulting in open wounds, possible broken bones, or symptoms of shock such as listlessness, limpness, or abnormal gum color (either gray or redder than normal)
- Temperature lower than 100°F (37.7°C) or higher than 104°F (40°C)

- Not eating for 24 hours, no fecals in 24 hours or increasingly smaller fecals
- Dehydration (dry, tacky mucous membranes and/or delayed skin elasticity)
- Grey/white mucous membrane color (e.g. gums)
- Loss of balance or head tilt
- Partial or total paralysis

If you are not sure whether your bunny's condition is an emergency, or if your bunny has been attacked by another animal (even another bunny), assume that you are dealing with an emergency and act accordingly.

Steps to Take If You Suspect a Medical Emergency

If you suspect a medical emergency, stay calm. **Quickly** do the following to assess your rabbit's condition:

1. Take your bunny's temperature if you have not already done so. If the temperature is less than 100°F, try to get the temperature up with a heating pad (on low) or hot water bottle (wrapped in a towel). Prepare a hot water bottle to use on the way to the vet. If your rabbit's temperature is 105°F or higher, moisten his ears and the bottom of his feet with alcohol to help reduce his temperature on the way to the vet.
2. Check gum color. If gums are redder than normal, your rabbit may be in the early stages of shock. Press a finger against the upper gums. If they don't turn pink after a momentary whiteness, or if the gums are totally white or gray, this can indicate a more serious stage of shock. Get to the veterinarian immediately.
3. Check for dehydration. Gently lift the skin along the bunny's back. Normally it will snap back into place (although in older bunnies the skin does lose some of its elasticity). If the skin stays up in a ridge, your bunny is severely dehydrated. If you have the setup and know how to administer subcutaneous fluids, administer fluids (warmed unless your rabbit's temperature is above normal) and then go immediately to your veterinarian.

Once you have assessed and stabilized your rabbit's condition, get him to a veterinarian quickly. Based on the day, time, and your veterinarians' schedules, quickly decide where you need to take the bunny. If you are lucky enough to discover the emergency during office hours and you feel you have time, make a quick call to the office to make sure the bunny veterinarian is in the office and let them know you are coming in with an emergency. **Don't** ask for an appointment. Confidently say something like, "This is _____. I have an emergency with my bunny _____. I just want to confirm that Dr. _____ is in before coming in." Don't let them tell you the doctor is "booked." If they try, simply repeat, "This is an emergency — **is she in?**" A word of caution here — most veterinary office visits should be non-emergency. The technique described above may backfire if you have a reputation for **always** waiting until the problem reaches emergency status.

If a family member or neighbor is available immediately, ask them to drive you to the veterinarian's office or emergency clinic. You can then hold your bunny on the trip, monitoring his condition. Talk soothingly to your bunny to help calm him.

If you have never faced an emergency before, expect the following differences between an emergency visit and your normal veterinary appointment:

- You probably will not be able to stay with your rabbit. He may be taken away for immediate evaluation and/or stabilizing treatment.

- It may be necessary to leave your rabbit at the hospital, at least until his condition is stabilized, a preliminary diagnosis has been reached, and a treatment started. In other cases, home treatment will be all that is required.
- Emergency care is difficult for the veterinarian (no matter how skilled she is) and expensive for the client.
- Despite what some ER shows depict, not all emergency cases are salvageable.

Finally, if you are dealing with an emergency clinic, remember that “emergency” is a relative term. Just as in a hospital ER, patients are not necessarily treated in the order they arrive. If the clinic is busy and your rabbit is taken for immediate treatment, expect a long wait before someone gets back to you with a diagnosis/prognosis.



Goldie is a “miracle bunny” who survived GI surgery after her kidneys shut down and her temperature dropped to 98°F. Dr. Bradley discovered several stomach ulcers and ended up removing a portion of her stomach roughly the size of a quarter. After several days of “round the clock” veterinary care, Goldie came home and recovered completely. (Photo by Kathy Smith)