



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH  
The Royal (Dick) School  
of Veterinary Studies



## Physical examination of rabbits

\* 'Bunny-burrito' technique may be useful

\* Our students at the R(D)SVS, are required to complete/perform a physical examination on species, such as rabbits, in order to assess their competency during a consultation or in a daily assessment of an inpatient.

\* The **order** of the examination is important especially if maintaining credible and comparable records.

### **Demeanour**

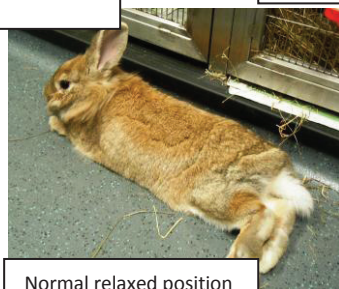
- Rabbits are considered 'prey species' which predisposes them to high stress levels as well as making them 'masters of disguise' and concealing pain and discomfort as a survival tactic to avoid opportunistic predators.
- Body posture and position and movement (neurological assessment at the end if concerned)
- Anxiety vs Relaxed; High respiratory rate and hunched position vs slow respiratory rate and stretched out, lying down
- Nervous movements
- Response to approach
- Observe the rabbit in its current surroundings before being disturbed e.g. in its carrier or in hospital cage → care if it has just arrived to the hospital then it may be worth covering the cage with a towel and allowing a few minutes to become calm before assessing (travelling stress and close proximity to predator species in the waiting room). This can be done while compiling history information from the owner.



Ears forward indicating anxiety owing to ocular pain and blindness



Hunched position due to abdominal pain



Normal relaxed position or due to overheating



Normal exploratory position

### Breed and Gender- Basic breed references can help



### Respiratory rate & character

- Normal range: 30-60 breaths/min (40-300+ in stressed animals)
- Observe movements of abdomen/diaphragm rather than the movements of the nares



I. Position for heart



II. Position for gut

### Stethoscope assessments;

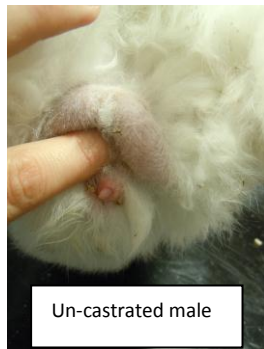
- I. - Heart rate, rhythm and pulse deficits; Femoral artery, Carpal region, Medial ear artery  
→ Normal range: 180-300 beats/min
- II. - Abdominal gut sounds; left and right sides

### Temperature;

- Normal range: 38-40°C
- Ensure the thermometer is in the correct location and in far enough



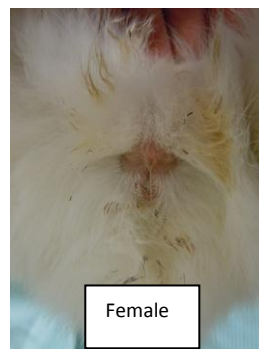
### Gender



Un-castrated male



Castrated male



Female

**Perineum/vent;** faecal and urinary material may be passed and gives an opportunity to assess if normal or not.

- shouldn't be inflamed or have scabs, scalding, calculi deposits, or abscesses (look for staining & impaction)
- inguinal folds; scent gland/sebaceous excretion material impaction and may cause infection, but care is needed if removing due to friable skin.



Normal urine



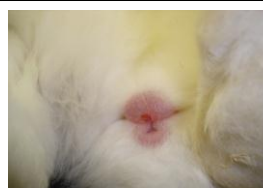
Abnormal urine



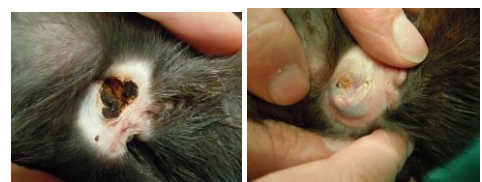
Normal faeces



Abnormal soft faeces



Abnormal perineum due to atypical myxomatosis



Inguinal scent gland impaction

**\* The above assessments are best done efficiently to minimise the rabbit getting stressed and effecting the readings taken\***

### Abdominal palpation

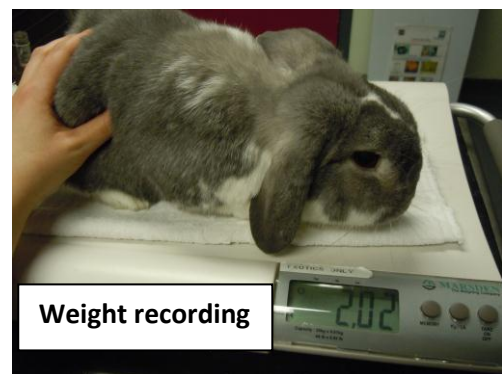
- no hardened or spongy lumps should be detected, and shouldn't appear distended or drum-sounds when tapped.
- Female mammary development and possible tumours should be assessed
- Feel for kidneys or any foreign bodies in the gut

### Lymph nodes (*not usually detected unless the rabbit is unwell*)

- submandibular, pre-scapula, popliteal, are probably the most useful

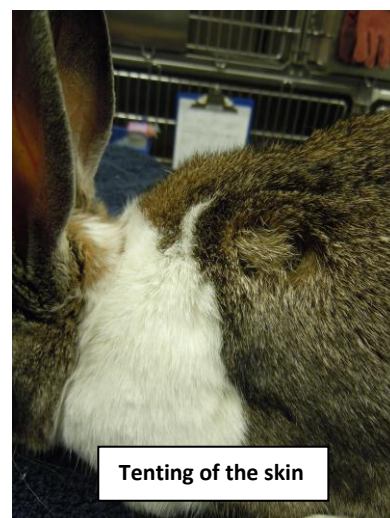
### Weight

- Human infant scales are useful, but a towel may be required to avoid the rabbit panicking and sliding about.



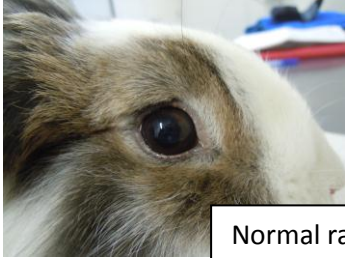
### Body condition score & hydration status

- 5 point score, tenting of the skin, sunken eyes

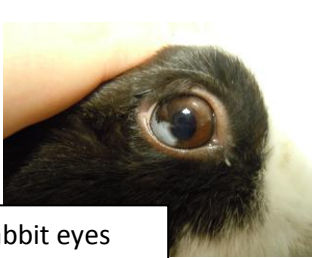


## Eyes, ears and nose

- Ensure they are free of discharge or parasites. Assess for blocked tear ducts, corneal ulcers, entropion, blocked nares (mouth breathing may be observed), Abscesses at base of ear, bite wounds on ears.



Normal rabbit eyes



Abnormal rabbit eyes



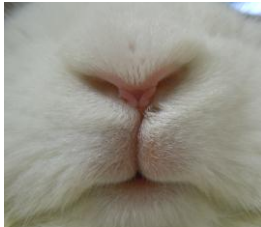
Normal rabbit ears



Aural haematoma



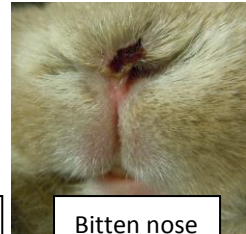
Pus in a rabbit's ear



Normal rabbit nose



Abnormal (swollen) rabbit nose and mouth



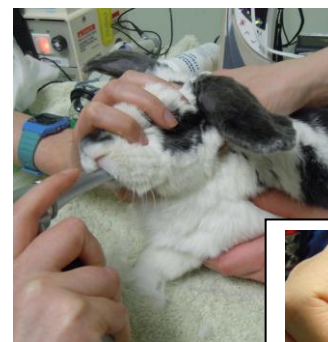
Bitten nose



Blocked right nares

## Oral cavity assessment & mucous membranes\*(may be beneficial leaving to the end of the examination).

- Only a limited view of the oral cavity in conscious rabbits, due to the dislike of the auroscope placement in the mouth and they will not tolerate having their nose touched or compressed, but incisors can be viewed and ulcers and spurs around the premolars. But enough may be seen to conclude the need for further investigation.



### Skin, hair & nails (Locomotion if concerned)

- Hair; shine, clean, no matting, no dust or soiling
- Skin; not scabby or scaly, flakes could indicate cheylitiella, look for potential fly strike during summer months, lice can accumulate around neck and bottom particularly.  
→ Pododermatitis on plantar surfaces e.g. hocks and fore-limb digit pads found in most pet rabbits (apply sudacrem gently)
- Nails; same principle as for cats and dogs, but care if panicked as they can cause dislocations and fractures of the nail bed.



Normal rabbit nail length



Abnormally long rabbit claws



### Locomotor/skeletal system

- Spine → Front limbs → ribs → hind limbs
- Assess by palpations and putting rabbit on the floor and observing its movements; Abnormal= creep or crawl with no hop could indicate skeletal problems or perianal discomfort. Refusal to move may simply indicate fear.



### Basic neurological assessment (Reflexes)

- Vision
- Hearing
- Locomotion reflexes; pinch, limb displacement

**\* Care if rabbit demonstrates Tonic Immobilation \***