Hypothermia – low body temperature

Healthy rabbits can tolerate low temperatures if provided with an appropriate sheltered environment. Hypothermia (low body temperature) can occur if they are exposed to damp or draughty conditions or are unwell. Underweight animals, neonates and rabbits recovering from surgery may also be susceptible. Hypothermia is an emergency and treatment must be provided immediately.

Towels and warm fluid bags are useful for treating rabbits who present with hypothermia.

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What is hypothermia?

Hypothermia occurs when there is a decrease in body temperature below the normal range for a rabbit. The normal body temperature for a rabbit is 101-104°F (38.5-40°C). Hypothermia can lead to a decrease in heart rate, poor blood circulation and cold extremities.

What are the common causes?

Hypothermia is less common than hyperthermia (overheating), but there are several risk factors. Rabbits are susceptible to hypothermia if they have undergone an anesthetic and surgical procedure. Anesthetic drugs can affect the rabbit’s ability to control its body temperature. Other causes can be due to poor health; a rabbit may have a low body temperature if it has been unwell for a long period of time with severe infection or in cases of advanced diarrhea or gastrointestinal stasis. A cold, draughty, we environment can cause a rabbit to be hypothermic. If rabbits are acclimatized, then hypothermia is not likely to occur if a rabbit is housed outdoors and has adequate shelter. Hypothermia can occur if a rabbit is suddenly housed outdoors during the winter particularly without adequate shelter. Neonates are also more susceptible to a drop in body temperature.

What are the signs of hypothermia?

In the early stages, rabbits will become lethargic, and extremities such as limbs and ears will feel cool to touch, and look pale. As hypothermia progresses breathing will become shallow, and the heart best becomes weak. If it continued to progress, the rabbit may go into a coma and die.

What should I do if I think my rabbit has hypothermia?

If you think your rabbit has hypothermia, you must take it to see your veterinarian immediately. Call your veterinarian and take your rabbit to the surgery for emergency treatment. During the time taken to get to the surgery, slowly warm you rabbit up. Heat can be provided by wrapping your rabbit in blankets, but take care not to compromise breathing if you wrap your rabbit up. Hot water bottles can be used, but these must be wrapped in towels and care must be taken not to cause burns as the site of contact with the heat source. Bubble wrap can be used to cover extremities such as feet. A hair dryer can be used to provide heat, but care must be taken not to burn your
How can I prevent my rabbit from getting hypothermia?

Rabbits must be provided with a sheltered environment away from wind, rain and draughts. Check the temperature of the rabbit’s environment; ideally the temperature range should not exceed 64-70°F (18-21°C).

Further Reading

Refereed papers

Other sources of information