

Head Tilt in a Rabbit

Overview

- A head tilt in a rabbit is usually caused by a problem inside the ear or brain (where the balance centre sits).
- Inner ear infections and *E.cuniculi* (a tiny parasite that causes swelling in the brain) are the two most common causes of a head tilt in a rabbit.
- Most of the conditions that cause a head tilt also cause other symptoms such as loss of balance and flickering eye movements.
- Always contact your vet if your rabbit has developed a head tilt, and do so immediately if he/she has also lost their balance, seems distressed, is falling over, or has stopped eating.

General information and causes



Head tilt caused by E.cuniculi - image courtesy of Elisabetta Mancinelli.

Head position is controlled by the balance/vestibular centre, which sits inside the ear and brain. Any condition that affects it is likely to cause a head tilt (wry

neck/torticollis) and other symptoms such as loss of balance and flickering eye movements. The two most common causes of a head tilt in a rabbit are:

- **Inner ear infection** – a deep and serious infection inside the ear.
- **E.cuniculi (Encephalitozoon cuniculi)** – a tiny parasite that causes inflammation of the brain - very common in rabbits.

Some other less common causes of a head tilt include:

- [Ear mites](#)
- **Head injury**
- **Neck pain**
- **A drug reaction**
- **Inflammation, infection or an abscess inside the brain**
- **A brain or ear tumour**
- **Poisoning**

Other symptoms to look out for

If your rabbit has developed a head tilt, it will help your vet if you tell them about any other symptoms you have noticed, such as:

- Loss of balance and falling over
- Walking in circles or bumping into things
- Flickering eye movements, uneven pupils, sinking of the eye(s)
- Third eyelid showing
- Head shaking and itchy ears
- Tremors
- Drooping on one side of their face
- Being unable to stand or rolling over uncontrollably (both severe symptoms)

Treatment

Treatment for your rabbit will depend on what's causing their head tilt, follow the links above for more information.

Outlook

Your rabbit's outlook will depend on what's caused their tilt, how they respond to treatment and how they cope with it. Some head tilts (usually those caused by ear mites) get better with treatment, but most are permanent and stay the same or get worse over time. It's important to speak to your vet about your rabbit's outlook and quality of life when making any treatment decisions. Sadly, if your rabbit isn't coping, or is getting worse, [euthanasia](#) might be the kindest option.

When to contact your vet

Always contact your vet if your rabbit has developed a head tilt, and do so immediately if he/she has also lost their balance, seems distressed, is falling over, or has stopped eating. **You know your rabbit - even if they don't have the exact symptoms listed above its best to contact your vet if you're concerned.**

Home care for a rabbit with a head tilt

To begin with, your rabbit may have poor balance and struggle to cope with their head tilt, but fortunately, most adapt with time. You will need to keep them comfortable and safe by:

Providing a safe environment - your rabbit will feel as though the world is spinning around them, and are likely to fall over and bump into things. Keep them in a flat area with lots of padding, no sharp edges and no deep water.

Keeping them calm - stress will make your rabbit's symptoms worse, keep them in a quiet, stress free, familiar environment.

Handling them gently - moving your rabbit will make their symptoms much worse so keep handling to a minimum and if you need to pick them up, do it very slowly and hold them securely.

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