

WILDSIDE VETERINARY HEALTH CENTER
Handout: Head Tilt in Rabbits



Head tilt in rabbits can be distressing for pet owners, but rest assured, we're here to provide guidance during this challenging time. This condition often manifests as an abnormal head position, accompanied by symptoms like ataxia, circling, and rolling. While it can be alarming, understanding the potential causes and available treatments can help you navigate this situation with confidence.

Common Causes of Head Tilt

Head tilt in rabbits can have various underlying causes, with the top differentials being Encephalitozoon cuniculi infection or otitis interna. In some cases, both conditions may coexist. Other less common causes include neoplasia (tumors) and bacterial meningoencephalitis. Otitis interna may occur with or without otitis externa, and untreated ear mites can lead to secondary bacterial infections that affect the middle and inner ear, contributing to head tilt.

Diagnosis and Testing

To pinpoint the cause of your rabbit's head tilt, a comprehensive diagnostic approach is essential. This typically includes:

- A thorough physical examination.
- Additional testing such as complete blood work.
- Testing for Encephalitozoon cuniculi (E. cuniculi) infection.
- Skull radiographs and, in some cases, CT scans for a more detailed view.

Treatment Options

Treatment strategies for head tilt in rabbits can vary based on the underlying cause and the severity of the condition. We may recommend:

- A prolonged course (4-8 weeks) of antimicrobial treatment.

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- Administration of a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) like meloxicam.
- Meclizine, an antihistamine that can help alleviate vertigo associated with vestibular disease in rabbits.
- Syringe-feeding for rabbits that are not eating.
- Ear canal ablation in cases of severe or unresponsive ear infections.

Providing Support

Environmental support is crucial for rabbits experiencing head tilt, especially if they have balance issues. Suggestions include:

- Providing a safe, contained environment, ideally padded with fleece or toweling.
- Gently wedging the rabbit in place with rolled towels to offer a sense of security and stability.
- Frequent cleaning to prevent urine scald.
- Lubricating the eyes if there's evidence of blepharconjunctivitis (inflammation of the "down" eye).

Quality of Life

In some cases, head tilt may not fully resolve despite treatment. However, many rabbits adapt well to a significant head tilt, and their quality of life remains satisfactory. The impact on their daily activities can be minimal.

We understand that caring for a rabbit with head tilt can be overwhelming initially. Please don't hesitate to reach out with any questions or concerns you may have. Our goal is to provide the support and information you need to ensure the well-being of your beloved pet during this challenging time.

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