

Summer is a Killer for Rabbits and other Small Animals

By Caroline Charland

In most of the US the summer heat is at record highs, and in some places it is higher than 100 degrees. If your rabbits are living outdoors, or indoors without air conditioning, they are in grave danger.

Unlike people and other animals, rabbits cannot pant or sweat to cool themselves off in hot weather. Imagine being in hot weather with a fur coat on and not being able to cool yourself down. The end result is often death. People sometimes think that because wild rabbits live outside, domestic rabbits can, too. But this is far from the truth. Domestic rabbits that live outside are often kept in cages or hutches which are dreadful for rabbits. Not only are they often too small, they are not predator proof and they do not protect the rabbit from the heat. Wild rabbits such as cottontails make burrows in the cool earth where they spend most of the day away from the hot weather. A cottontail's life span is only about three years. But a domestic rabbit kept indoors, spayed or neutered on a proper diet can live to more than twelve years of age.

Of course, the best way to keep a rabbit cool is in your home with the air conditioning on. Even if you can't keep your rabbit indoors all the time, consider setting up an indoor enclosure or putting your rabbit in your bathroom with a litter box, water and food and bring your rabbit in for the hotter part of the day. It could save your rabbit's life. If that is not possible, even bringing your rabbit in, in a large carrier for the hotter part of the day will help. If for whatever reason you can't do that, here are some tips and suggestions to help keep your rabbit cool.

If your rabbit is living outdoors in a hutch, cage or run, make sure the area has complete shade all day long.

Do not use metal cages as they retain the heat and your rabbit will not be able to keep cool.

Fill several 2-liter soda bottles with water and freeze overnight. Put a couple of bottles in the cage with your rabbit in the morning. Your rabbit will lie against the bottle to keep cool. Always have extras so you can replace them in the afternoon, plus make sure you have some bottles freezing to be ready for the next day. Peel off the outside labels so your rabbit does not chew them.

Cool clean water is very important. Water that is kept in a small water bottle or small bowl will become warm when the weather is hot. Use a large heavy crock and fill with fresh cold water twice a day, plus use a large 32 oz. water bottle. That way if the crock is knocked over, your rabbit still has the bottle. Or, if the bottle leaks or breaks, your rabbit will still have the crock. Putting ice cubes in the water helps it stay cool a bit longer.

Marble and ceramic tile tends to stay cool, and your rabbit will like to lie on it to keep cool. To make it even cooler, you can put a tile in the fridge overnight and put it in the rabbit's area mid-morning when it starts getting hot.

Misting systems work well, too, to keep the air cool. Make sure you place them so your rabbit can get cool, but still has enough dry area to get away from the mist if he wants to.

When using misters, you must change the litter box and hay often to make sure there is no mold forming, and to keep flies away.

Fans will not cool a rabbit, but can be used to move the air around in a room or patio area. Or, if you put a wet towel over part of your rabbit's area and direct a fan at the towel, it will help to cool the air. Of course, you don't want a fan blowing directly on your rabbit, and you need to make sure your rabbit cannot get to the electric cord.

If your rabbit is indoors without air conditioning, many of the above ideas will work to help keep your rabbit cool. It is important to have ventilation by leaving the windows open a bit, and having fans circulate the air.

If you notice your rabbit is wet around the nose and or mouth area, is breathing with his mouth open, does not seem himself, and/or is either subdued, restless or cannot get comfortable, he is more than likely suffering from heat stroke and could very well die. Wrap him up in a cool wet towel, put a little cool water on his ears and get him to a rabbit-knowledgeable vet straight away.