

# Disorders of the Reproductive Tract of Rabbits



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## KEYWORDS

• Rabbit • Behavior • Reproduction • Reproductive disorders • Neutering

## KEY POINTS

- The reproductive problems of rabbits kept for meat or fur production are different from those that are kept as pets.
- Knowledge of the normal anatomy of the reproductive tract is essential in the recognition and treatment of abnormalities.
- Pet rabbits that are not neutered suffer from a range of age-related conditions of the reproductive tract.
- Abdominal palpation and examination of the external genitalia are important parts of clinical examination.
- Although neutering is an important part of treatment, complications can arise from transecting the vagina.

## INTRODUCTION

There is a difference in the reproductive problems of rabbits that are farmed for their meat or fur and those that are kept as pets (**Box 1**). A doe on a large-scale breeding farm has no individual value. She may be classified as ‘old’ after 14 litters, that is, when she is 2 to 3 years old and will be culled, rather than treated, if there are health or reproductive problems. In contrast, pet rabbits can live for up to 15 years and are not considered to be old until they are more than 8 years of age and individual health problems are investigated and treated.

Although there is a wealth of information from the rabbit farming industry about reproductive physiology and how to increase breeding performance, there is little information about reproductive disorders. Most information is obtained from surveys of health records or postmortem examination.<sup>1,2</sup> In contrast with breeding rabbits, there is plenty of information about reproductive diseases in pet rabbits. Basic reproductive data are listed in **Box 2**.

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The author has nothing to disclose.

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Vet Clin Exot Anim 20 (2017) 555–587

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cvex.2016.11.010>

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**Box 1****Reproductive disorders recorded in female rabbits**

**Breeding rabbits** (disorders found during postmortem examination at the slaughterhouse<sup>1</sup> or on farm<sup>2</sup>).

Percentages are of total number of rabbits (with or without reproductive disorders) that were examined.

In these surveys, no abnormalities of the reproductive tract of males were reported. This was probably because the external genitalia were not examined during postmortem examination. Skin disorders affecting the genital orifice, such as *Treponema cuniculi*, were not reported either.

Extrauterine pregnancy (0.1%)

Mastitis (5%)

Mummified fetuses (<1%)

Metritis (2.6%)

Pyometra (6.5%)

Pregnancy toxemia (5%)

Uterine torsion in last week of pregnancy (7%)

Vaginal prolapse (4%)

**Reproductive disorders of pet rabbits** (disorders found during routine ovariohysterectomy, exploratory laparotomy or occasionally postmortem examination<sup>17,20,21</sup>):

Uterine adenocarcinoma (45%–49%)

Other uterine tumors (20%)

Endometrial hyperplasia (22%–40%)

Hydrometra or mucometra (12%)

Pyometra (2%)

Ovarian tumors (2%–7%)

Mammary gland tumors (7%)

Percentages are of rabbits with confirmed uterine disease

Comparison of these tables shows that uterine diseases that are most common in breeding does (pyometra, metritis, uterine torsion) are rare in pet rabbits whereas uterine conditions that are commonly diagnosed in pet rabbits (endometrial hyperplasia, uterine tumors) are not recorded in breeding does.

**ANATOMY OF THE REPRODUCTIVE TRACT**

Important clinical features of the female and male reproductive tracts are listed in **Box 3**.

***Female Reproductive Tract***

Both ovaries lie in the dorsal abdomen, close to the kidneys. They are elongated elliptical structures that, in a sexually mature female, contain multiple follicles at varying stages of development (**Fig. 1**). Each long uterine tube (Fallopian tube or oviduct) opens into a convoluted uterine horn that ends in a cervix. The term ‘uterus duplex’ is used to describe the uterus because the right and left uterine horns are separate structures and are, therefore, separate uteri. Some texts refer to the horns as the right

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