Finally, we get to the problems that are less likely to be related to the diet. Some of these can be affected by diet, but are not necessarily directly caused by incorrect diet. We’ll start with one that is at least sometimes related to diet, but not always.

Rabbits can get abscesses, particularly from bites from other bunnies but punctures for any reason can cause infections. They can also get abscesses without any puncture wound. The bacteria can travel through the blood stream after an episode of GI stasis or because of gut wall thinning from improper diet. They can get dental abscesses that can be extremely difficult to cure. Some dental abscesses can only be partially controlled. Abscesses in rabbits can be difficult to completely clear unless they can be fully excised surgically. With abscesses that occur because of improper diet, even surgically removing the first abscess is not necessarily curative. Bacteria can be “seeded” throughout the body and new abscesses will often appear months or even years later.

Uterine adenocarcinoma (cancer) is very common in intact females over 5 years old (some report up to 50%) and the risk increases each year they remain intact. This can sometimes be cured with surgery, but this type of cancer has a fairly high risk of metastasis to other locations. It can sometimes be seen as mineralization in the uterine wall on radiographs or can be found on ultrasound of the abdomen. It is not usually found on palpation of the abdomen unless it is very advanced.

Neurological disease is fairly common in rabbits and can be from many different causes. Encephalitozoon cuniculi (E. cuniculi) is the most common cause of neurological signs in bunnies. It is a microsporidian parasite that can cause almost any symptom and mimic many other diseases in rabbits. It can affect the brain, kidneys, eyes, and even the heart. It will sometimes cause GI symptoms when the rabbit is first infected.

Acute symptoms include vestibular disease (dizziness), head tilt (other rule outs would be Pasteurellosis, Baylisascaris), seizures (epilepsy can occur in any rabbit, but is especially common in blue-eyed white rabbits), ataxia (wobbliness), posterior paresis (rear limb paralysis), and sudden death.

More chronic symptoms can be “Swaying” or “nodding” at rest, stargazing (holding the head as if looking up at the sky and not able to keep the head down in a more normal posture), aggression, deafness, blindness from retinal damage, cataracts, or lens rupture, uveitis (inflamed iris and/or retina), secondary hypopyon (accumulation of white blood cells in the eye), loss of balance, uneaten cecotrophs, kidney disease which can include increased thirst and urination, urinary incontinence, and mild or severe renal insufficiency/failure.

Ear infections/otitis media are commonly mistaken for neurological symptoms, but only rarely are true neurologic disease. Bacterial ear infections are fairly common and usually cause a head tilt which can range from mild to severe. This is another disease that can be very difficult to cure. Many rabbits will respond quickly to treatment and if they do, can often be cured of the infection. Unfortunately, those that don’t respond quickly are usually destined to a lifetime of battling ear infections.
Floppy Rabbit Syndrome is another neurologic problem in rabbits. The cause is unknown at this time. It results in flaccid paralysis where the bunny is limp and unable to move. They usually can eat and drink if the food and water is close enough. These rabbits can recover with supportive care, usually within 2-3 days.

Another fairly common problem is spinal disease and arthritis, particularly as bunnies get older. This is usually caused by spondylosis where the body builds up mineral deposits in the ligaments connecting the spinal bones to try to stabilize and protect an unstable joint. This can be caused by IVDD (Intervertebral Disc Disease), but is also thought to sometimes be a form of metabolic bone disease caused by an improper diet.

Other common problems with rabbits include heat stroke. Rabbits are very tolerant of cold, but not of heat. Most of our domestic breeds are European descent and have minimal tolerance for heat. They also do not sweat except a little through their paws and cannot pant effectively. To treat it, you must cool them quickly, but do not use ice-water, just cool water. Wetting the rabbit’s ears and blowing cool air over them is sometimes enough for mild overheating. Any body temperature over 104°F is suggestive of heat stroke. Heat stroke can dis regulate the body’s temperature control system for a variable amount of time – the bunny needs to be seen by a veterinarian! The veterinarian may need to check kidney and liver values and a coagulation panel.

Giant Breeds can be susceptible to cardiomyopathy. It can be treated with the same medications used in other species, but unfortunately is often not found until it is well advanced.

Parasites are common in outdoor bunnies. Cuterebra is a common parasite that is picked up when flies lay their eggs around the opening of burrows, the larvae hatch, then attach to a passing rabbit. The larvae then migrate into a break in the skin or can be ingested during grooming. They migrate through the body into a subcutaneous position (just under the skin) where they form a pocket with a breathing hole. These larvae can cause severe reactions if crushed and must be surgically removed. Other common parasite problems are anemia or skin disease from fleas, severe skin infections, even toxic death or septicemia from fly strike, nearly any symptom from infection with E. cuniculi, varying neurological symptoms from Baylisascaris, and diarrhea which can be severe enough to cause death from coccidial infections.

Indoor bunnies can suffer from electrocution from cord chewing. This usually causes respiratory symptoms, burns in the mouth or on the feet or tail, lethargy, or a dazed look. They can also suffer from self-inflicted injuries from getting into mischief. Climbing is more common in bunnies than most owners expect and rabbits can knock furniture or decorative items over onto themselves or fall from heights. Younger rabbits in particular are susceptible to injuries since they are more adventuresome.

Bumblefoot is fairly common in rabbits, more so in larger breeds, but is most common in overweight bunnies. Softer or smoother substrates can be helpful in preventing this problem. Rabbits are rarely overweight when fed the correct diet so the best preventative for this as well as many other rabbit diseases is an appropriate diet.

So, the third part of my rundown of basic rabbit health and sickness is done. It’s a lot of information, but I hope can provide a valuable resource for rabbit owners. If you have any questions about your bunny’s health, please call us at Pepper Square Pet Clinic, 972-386-9688.