

Coping with Loss

Whether your rabbit dies unexpectedly or following a long illness, you will face a number of practical and emotional challenges. The practical questions may include:

- How do I tell the rest of the family?
- Should I have a necropsy (an animal's autopsy) done?
- What do I want done with the body?
- Do I want another rabbit?

Emotional issues are often harder to address. If you were especially close to your rabbit, expect to go through the full grieving process — and realize that most people will not understand the depth of your grief. If you don't have friends who also have companion rabbits, you probably have a few friends who are true animal lovers. Spend as much time as you can with people who consider their dog or cat part of the family. These people will be able to empathize and give you comfort. Minimize contact with people whose attitude is "it was just a rabbit; get over it."

Resist the urge to blame yourself — or your veterinarian — for your rabbit's death. It won't bring your rabbit back and it is **not** what your rabbit would want! Hindsight is always 20/20 — it is often easy to look back, with more information than you had at the time, and perhaps wish you had made a different decision. Remember that you and your veterinarian, working together, probably made the best decision you could with the information available at the time.

If you honestly believe that your rabbit's death was the result of a mistake you made, acknowledge your error, learn from it, and move on. In mental conversations with yourself, instead of saying, "What if . . ." or "If only . . ." say "Next time I will know to . . ." If you correspond with other rabbit owners (e.g., via e-mail), you may find it therapeutic to write about your experience. Not only will that help you work through your grief, sharing what you have learned could help countless other rabbits.

If you honestly believe that your rabbit's death was the result of veterinarian error, wait until you can be calm and rational, then sit down and discuss the problem with her. Don't accuse her of making a mistake. Instead, ask for her opinion on why your rabbit died and whether she would do anything differently next time. Listen objectively to her response, keeping in mind that medicine is not an exact science and your veterinarian is only human. Even if you feel your veterinarian made a poor choice, be open to the possibility that it **was** the best decision she could make with the information available to her.

At the end of your conversation you should either be comfortable that your veterinarian made the best decision possible or that she knows what she would do differently next time. If you don't feel this way, begin the search for a new veterinarian. Add to your list of questions something about how she would handle a situation like the one that led to your rabbit's death, but don't let that be the only question you focus on. After interviewing other veterinarians, you should either find someone new to work with or have renewed confidence in your present doctor.