

SORE HOCKS

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The technical name for sore hocks is pododermatitis which means, literally, an inflammation (-itis) of the skin (-derma-) of the foot (podo-). In reality, it is a sore on the bottom of the foot. This condition usually starts with the back feet. Because this makes sitting on the back feet uncomfortable, the rabbit tilts forward and places more of its weight on the front feet. This abnormal posture is one of the characteristic signs of sore hocks. In time, because of the extra weight on the front feet and the abnormal position, the rabbit may develop sores on the front feet as well. When this happens, you will often see the rabbit "dance" because it is not comfortable putting any of its feet down and cannot find a comfortable resting position. With such serious cases, the rabbit often becomes nonproductive because it doesn't eat normally.

Sore hocks usually starts with a minor wound or bruise on the foot but, because the rabbit continually walks and sits on it, it gets progressively worse. It may also become infected with bacteria such as Staphylococcus or develop into an abscess if it is not treated. The development of the sore is similar to the situation you might run into if you were on a long hike and developed a blister on your foot. If you had no way of protecting the blister or resting the foot until it healed, you would develop a severe wound which would get progressively worse as you continued to walk on it.

A number of factors can cause or contribute to sore hocks. Normally the foot is protected by a thick pad of hair. If this pad is thin because the rabbit is in poor condition, for genetic reasons, or because the hair has thinned because the rabbit is old, the skin is not as well protected and is more susceptible to wounds. Nervous rabbits tend to move abruptly around the cage and to stomp their hind feet. This breaks the hair on the pad which reduces the protection and the movement is likely to cause wounds or bruises. Even if the foot pad is in good shape, sharp projections on the cage floor, unsuitable or improperly installed floor wire, or floors which are wet with urine or water may cause development of sore hocks.

Cages are normally built with the sides and tops made of 1" x 2", 14 gauge wire which is fairly stiff. The floors are usually made from 1" x 1/2", 16 gauge wire. This has more 'give' than the heavier wire (the size of the wire increases as the gauge decreases) and, some people feel, is less predisposing to sore hocks than the stiffer wire. (Personally, based on experience, not science, I don't agree with this.) A common mistake in constructing cages is that the floor wire is installed upside down. When the floor wire is made, the wires are welded together so they are 1" apart on one side and 1/2" apart on the other. To provide as much supporting surface as possible for the foot, the floor should be installed so the rabbit can walk on the wires that are 1/2" apart. We have some European cages in our rabbitry that have plastic floors. The plastic strips are wide enough to provide good support for the feet yet the openings are big enough that the cages stay clean with relatively little maintenance. We have had them in use for over six months and have been very pleased.

After the cages are built (and occasionally after they are in use or when you have a case of sore hocks) you should run the palm of your hand over the surface of the floor to see if there

are any sharp projections. If you find any, smooth them off so the rabbit's feet won't be injured. If the floors get rusty after they are in use for awhile, you will have to wire brush them regularly to keep the roughness from affecting the feet. Cage floors should always be kept clean and dry.

Treatment of sore hocks is difficult at best. If you put bandages, salves, ointments or powders on the foot, the rabbit will just chew or lick them off. The hope in using these treatments is that the medication will have some healing effect before the rabbit gets it off. You can provide resting boards of plywood or sheet rock for the rabbits to sit on. This will make the rabbit more comfortable and will help with healing but will make sanitation more difficult. Resting boards must be changed regularly to keep them dry. The plastic resting boards now available from Europe are excellent and are easy to keep clean and dry.

Even when a case of sore hocks has healed, the condition has a tendency to recur because of damage to the hair follicles and the underlying tissues. As a result of this damage, the hair does not grow back. There also is permanent damage to the underlying tissues so the feet are never really normal again. An excellent article on the permanent effects of sore hocks was published (in French) in World Rabbit Science (4:143-148, 1996). I did a short summary of this paper that was published (in English!) in Domestic Rabbits (25(2):17, March-April 1997). We reproduced some of the photographs from the original paper, but they did not copy as clearly as I had hoped.

When sore hocks occurs, the cages should be checked to be sure there are no sharp projections to cause injuries and that there are no other problems with the cages. If the cages are dirty, they should be cleaned. If the rabbit has thin foot pads due to poor body condition, steps should be taken to improve the nutrition as well as treating the foot problem. In the case of thinning of the hair on the pads due to age, there is little that can be done. In terms of productivity and the potential for animal suffering, it is probably advisable to cull severely affected animals. This is especially true in the commercial situation where time is valuable and all animals must remain in a productive state.