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MAKING SENSE OF RABBIT SCENTS

by Amy A. Free

My animal-loving friend Peggy refers to Nestlé, my four-pound Dutch house rabbit, as "Flower Fanny." She started using this moniker after I texted her one night telling her that I had just given Nestlé bedtime kisses and his butt smelled really good, like flowers. (She texted back, said she couldn't relate; her yellow Lab, though having the sweetest doggie personality in the world, is guilty of emitting some not-so-sweet scents.)

This got me to wondering about all kinds of bunny smells, good, bad, funky, farty.

Our home has been steeped in the odor of "butt musk" while attempting to find a female rabbit companion for our fuzzy bachelor. I can easily detect the scent of recycled Brussels sprouts wafting from Nestlé's litterbox when it's due to be changed. I've had little puffs of cecotroph breath make their way up my nostrils when leaning in to smooch Nestlé's forehead. And then there's the best aromatherapy of all: flopping on the floor next to Nestlé while he chomps on fresh basil or mint leaves. Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

How do we know if the smells coming from our bunnies are normal or cause for concern? Let's get to the bottom (where most, but not all smells originate) of rabbit scents.

"Like a spring meadow"

A healthy rabbit should smell good. I give you permission to get nosy. Bury your face in bunny's furry coat and breathe in. It should smell wonderfully botanical, slightly sweet, with background notes of flowers and grass.

This rabbit, floral aroma is both unique and pleasant. It even served as inspiration for a bath and body products company! Anya Pokazanyeva, a New Jersey House Rabbit



Society member and guardian of Bunny and Other Bunny, is the founder of Bunny Butt Apothecary.

The name, Anya explains, truly came to her in a moment of gazing at Bunny, and her Web site playfully chides visitors, "...bunny butts smell like a spring meadow, didn't ya know?"

Her product description of soaps and lotions for humans could just as easily be used as a description for the way a house rabbit should live: "judiciously natural, cruelty free, and delightfully smelly, with a touch of fun."

But, as you may have already experienced, rabbits do have their moments - or days - when they're not so fresh.

Silent and Stinky

The Brassicas (cabbage, broccoli, kale, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, kohlrabi, mustard greens) contain chemical chains of glucosinolates. They also contain a special enzyme. While the vegetable is growing, the enzyme and glucosinolates are stored in separate parts of the plant. But, when a person or rabbit bites into one of these veggies, the enzyme cuts apart the chemical chain, setting the glucose (sugar) free and leaving behind sulfur. In the gut the sulfur forms hydrogen sulfide, the gas that can give bunny poops a distinctive odor, not unlike (but hopefully much less pungent than) the gas passed by a person who binged on cole slaw or sauerkraut.

If your rabbit is like my Nestlé, he eagerly devours any of the Brassicas. This is where rabbit guardians need to be careful. Bunnies love the bitter taste of kale and its cousins. Professor Irwin Goldman at the UW Department of Horticulture says that's the funny thing - Brassicas actually make the glucosinolate compound to discourage mammals and insects from eating them! Ingesting too much of this compound over time can have toxic effects on animal health by reducing the thyroid gland's ability to uptake iodine.

The other danger of your bunny eating too many Brassicas - or any veggie - is



disruption of the helpful microbes in the gut. This imbalance of bacteria is called "dysbiosis" and it's a sign that bunny needs more crude fiber. If you notice your rabbit's poops are increasingly stinky and looking more wet and soft than usual, ease up on the veggies for a while and encourage more hay. Dry, well-formed, odor-free poops will let you know that bunny's digestion is on the right track.

Musk is in the Air

Dr. Dana Krempels of the University of Miami Biology Department and HRS Board of Directors, has experienced a lot of randy rabbit scents.

"I've smelled musk from a rabbit as young as 5 months," she writes.

According to Dr. Krempels, the musk is made in specialized apocrine glands (glands that secrete substance at the hair follicles) near a rabbit's anus, and the scent is a complex "perfume" of aromatics and pheromones, the hormones that trigger a reaction between animals of the same species.

If your rabbit has not been spayed/neutered, the scent from these glands will be potent. But don't expect the smell to completely go away after a few surgical snips.

Dr. Krempels says that spaying and neutering likely does not fully shut-down musk production, but the mix of aromatics produced in the anal scent glands may change in chemical composition. The result could be a rabbit scent that is not intensely communicating a message of sexual excitement; rather, the scent produced could be a message to newcomers that announces, "Hey, I'm the resident rabbit here, and your presence in MY territory has me riled up. I'm not quite sure whether I like you yet... so get a whiff of THIS!"

Musky smells may not be our favorite of rabbit scents, but they aren't a sign of anything wrong.



The Bad (Go to the Vet!)

Bunnies tend not to have bad breath (halitosis) but if a rabbit is not eating well, stinky mouth odors are a clue that something is wrong.

Unworn, uneven, or broken teeth can cut into the soft tissues of a bunny's mouth, leaving small abrasion pockets in the tongue or cheeks that trap food. The smell of hay fermenting in the mouth is a sweet, but abnormal scent. If left untreated, bad bacteria will build-up in the oral pockets, causing an abscess. If you get close for a sniff, the smell of an abscess could be so minor that you miss it, or intensely strong from a raging infection.

"It's not easy to explain," rabbit veterinarian Carla Christman explains, "The scent of an abscess is a rotting, pungent smell. It hits your nose with a 'smack!' It's not musky. One staff member described it as, 'the stench of something dead on the road for three days.'" If you notice your rabbit has bad breath, watch for signs of pain or discomfort such as continual lipsmacking. Dr. Christman also says, "Persistent halitosis (not just occasional cecotroph breath) coupled with poor eating habits is your signal that it's time to go to the vet for a good oral exam." If you suspect infection in your rabbit's mouth, do not try to treat the area yourself; have a veterinarian drain the abscess.

Still Feeling Nosey?

Follow Anya's advice: "Live happy, smell pretty, and go kiss a bunny!"