

Rabbit Diseases Fact Sheet

Dental Issues

Rabbits have amazing teeth! They grow constantly throughout their lives at a rate of up to 1cm a month. 1cm a month in a tiny mouth – that’s a lot of teeth! Rabbits are designed to eat grass and this causes their teeth to wear down as they grow. The most common cause of rabbit dental disease is poor diet. Your rabbit’s diet should consist of 80% good quality hay – they should eat an amount of hay similar to their own body size each day. The hay needs to be good quality or your rabbit will not eat it. Rabbits also like to gnaw on apple or pear tree branches, as well as fibrous vegetables such as broccoli stumps. If your rabbit has inherited teeth problems then it is essential that their diet be correct from early on in life and that you are prepared to pay for corrective dentals.

Rabbits that dribble, drink excessively, change their eating habits or become reluctant to eat are very possibly suffering from dental diseases, and may also develop facial swellings, jaw bone changes and runny eyes. This is because of the way rabbit teeth grow – if they can’t grow down into the mouth because they aren’t being worn down, then they will grow up into the face, and/or down into the jawbone. It then becomes incredibly painful for the rabbit to eat and they may develop abscesses associated with these swellings.

Dwarf rabbit breeds seem particularly prone to dental issues, but any rabbit can be affected, so all rabbit owners need to be aware their rabbit may need regular dental treatment throughout their lives, and this needs to be factored into the cost of keeping them.



Uterine Carcinoma

Female rabbits, or ‘does’, are very susceptible to developing womb cancers or ‘uterine adenocarcinomas’. Over the age of three years, up to 60% of female rabbits will have early stage cancers, rising to 80% over the age of six years. Uterine adenocarcinoma is an aggressive type of cancer that tends to spread to other parts of the body. Does with this cancer may develop bloody urine, difficulty urinating, aggression, behavioural changes, weight loss and anaemia.

The easiest way to prevent this disease in does is to have them spayed. Female rabbits should be spayed, ideally before the age of 1 year. This serves three purposes: it prevents the development of uterine cancer, mammary cancer and it allows them to be housed happily with a companion.

Flystrike

Flystrike occurs when flies lay their eggs in matted or dirty fur, usually around the anus of a rabbit. This is excruciatingly painful for the rabbit as the maggots begin to eat the rabbit's skin and flesh, and can even enter their anus and start to devour the intestines, eating your rabbit from the inside out. The rabbit may huddle in a corner, silently or screaming, collapse or spasm in pain. Sadly we see several horrific cases of flystrike every summer, all of which could have been prevented by good husbandry.



Neglected rabbits kept in wet or dirty conditions, rabbits that are obese and cannot clean themselves, and elderly rabbits with arthritis that can no longer bend to groom themselves, are all more likely to suffer from this disease.

It is imperative that during the months when flies are active (usually April to October) that rabbits are kept clean, monitored daily and cared for. This is because the eggs laid by flies on wet or dirty rabbit hair, will hatch into maggots within 12 hours. There are some excellent products for preventing fly eggs hatching, such as Rearguard, but they should be used in conjunction with good care of your pet.

Ear Mites

Psoroptes cuniculi are mites which live in and around the ears of rabbits. They need to be treated as they can cause serious problems and in extreme cases spread to other areas of the body. They initially cause some scaling, which can progress to a thick crust that builds up in the ears. Rabbit ears should be completely clean. Initially, rabbits with these mites will shake their heads and scratch at their ears and this will get worse as the mite numbers increase. Treatment is always most successful when the ear mite infections are caught early, so it is worth checking your rabbit's ears regularly for any signs of scaling or discomfort.



E. cuniculi

E. cuniculi is a parasite that is commonly found in domestic rabbits, with current estimates that it affects 50-70% of pet rabbits. Rabbits are often infected at birth or can even be infected while still in the uterus, but they can also be infected at any time of their lives. Infection happens by ingesting urine contaminated with *E. cuniculi* spores. A month after infection rabbits start shedding spores in their own urine and this continues for about 3 months, or even on and off for the rest of their lives. A transitory diarrhoea may occur at the time of infection.

Some infected rabbits have no obvious symptoms but others will show neurological changes such as a head tilt. A tendency to walk more than hop, head weaving or other more subtle changes have also been seen in some cases. Floppy Rabbit Syndrome can also be caused by *E.cuniculi*. Sadly in some rabbits the neurological symptoms can be fatal. As well as causing serious neurological problems, these parasites also affect the kidneys and in the long term can cause renal failure. If your rabbit is persistently wet around its bottom from urine, then *E. cuniculi* should be considered.

A blood test is available to test if your rabbit has been exposed to *E. cuniculi* or if there is an active infection (requiring two blood tests). There is some debate about whether rabbits should be treated as a matter of course for *E. cuniculi*. However if you suspect your rabbit has any symptoms or if you have any concerns about your rabbit then you should seek veterinary advice, as this very serious disease can be fatal.



Fur Mites

Cheyletiella parasitovorax is a mite that causes hair loss and flaking skin on the back or over the neck. Hair around the bald patches comes out easily, often with flakes of skin attached, leading to white clumps in the coat. These mites may or may not cause itching, but should be identified and treated to prevent progression.

Diet

So many rabbit problems are related to poor diet! Rabbits need to eat grass. Their daily diet should consist of about 70-80% hay. This needs to be good quality hay. Western Timothy hay is ideal as this is high in fibre and slightly lower in protein. Good quality hay bales for horses are also good for rabbits. Pellets or muesli should be limited and not exceed an eggcup a day for medium-sized rabbits. Vegetables can also be fed including: broccoli stumps, curly kale and cabbage leaves. If your rabbit is not used to them then they should be introduced slowly, but a handful of vegetables can be fed daily. Carrots are actually quite high in sugars and should be fed in small amounts; most rabbits adore carrot tops! Fruit should be fed in only small amounts or as a treat, including strawberries, pieces of apple, or cherries with the stones removed.

Rabbits fed an inappropriate diet will develop dental problems and will be prone to bouts of bloat. Rabbits, as well as having unusual teeth, also have unusual guts. They cannot vomit and the only way food moves out of their stomach is by exercise and eating more food. This is why rabbits need to eat lots of fibre. As rabbits groom themselves a lot, hair needs to be moved through their guts by eating fibre. This fibre is provided by hay, vegetables and grass. Ileus or bloat occurs because a rabbit is on an inappropriate diet. Bloat occurs when the intestines become filled with gas due to severe ileus (gut standstill) or an obstruction, these rabbits usually need to be radiographed. So any rabbit that is not eating needs to be seen by a vet *immediately* as this is frequently a life-threatening condition.

Runny Eyes

The main reason rabbits develop runny eyes is because their tear ducts are blocked. Although you may not always see runny eyes, or eyes with discharge around them, it is important to check the inside of your rabbit's front legs and paws – if these are wet or show signs of crusting then your rabbit may have runny eyes but because they clean their faces with their paws, their faces may be perfectly clean. The two most common reasons for runny eyes are overgrown incisor teeth or an infection that has blocked the tear ducts. Rabbits with runny eyes do need to be seen by a vet. Treatment is always most successful when these cases are seen early.



Obesity

Recent reports suggest that as many as 1 in 3 rabbits may be suffering from weight-related health problems. Lack of exercise, under-sized living space, diets too high in starch and low in fibre, and the fact that rabbits have a sweet-tooth, are all contributing factors to rabbit obesity. Carrying too much weight predisposes your rabbit to: difficulty grooming, soiling around the bottom, flystrike, heart disease, cystitis and other urinary tract problems, arthritis, diabetes and fatty liver.

The best way to prevent your rabbit from gaining excess weight is to weigh him or her monthly at home and record their weight. If you see extra grams creeping on then you can adjust their diet appropriately and encourage a more active lifestyle. Remember: no more than an egg-cup full of pellets or mix a day for a medium-sized rabbits, but plenty of good quality hay.

Bunny Snuffles

Bunny Snuffles or Rhinitis is a group of bacterial, respiratory disease which affect rabbits, causing mild runny eyes and noses. However, because rabbits are such clean little animals and usually groom so meticulously, you may only ever notice that the inside of their paws are wet. The clear fluid which discharges from their eyes and nose becomes thicker as the disease progresses, and your rabbit may begin to cough and sneeze. If the bacteria are not treated with antibiotics, the infection can start to attack the bones of the nose. Sadly, when this happens the disease becomes almost impossible to treat, and the infection can quickly move down into the lungs to cause pneumonia. Rabbits that develop pneumonia are very ill, and will be listless, feverish and often off their food. Unfortunately, antibiotic treatment at this stage is frequently ineffective as the disease is too advanced, so early detection is vital.

VHD and Myxomatosis

Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD, sometimes known as HVD) was first reported in Europe in the early 1980's and since that time has entered the UK to effect both our wild and pet rabbit populations. The virus is highly contagious, affecting rabbits aged 8 weeks and older, causing a variety of symptoms, including fever, depression, anorexia, and diarrhoea. The disease is so debilitating, that frequently the rabbit is just found dead within 12 hours of being apparently normal.

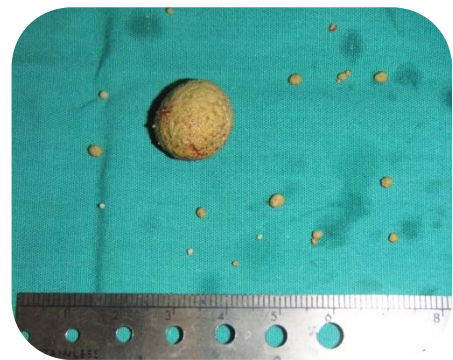


Myxomatosis is the most serious infectious disease effecting both wild and pet rabbits. It is particularly common in the Biggin Hill area, and sadly we see many fatalities every year. The symptoms include skin lesions, anorexia, lip, nose, eye and genital swellings. The virus is transmitted from rabbit to rabbit via insects such as fleas. Myxomatosis is highly contagious and the fatality rate in unvaccinated rabbits is depressingly high, even with intensive veterinary treatment.

Fortunately both Myxomatosis and VHD can be simply prevented with a single vaccination each year, so it's always worth ensuring that your rabbit's vaccinations are up to date.

Cystitis and bladder stones

Urinary tract conditions were previously uncommon in rabbits, but have been seen much more frequently in the past few years. Rabbit's urine is much thicker than in other animals due to the chalk crystals which it contains, and it is often coloured, depending on the rabbit's diet. However, sludging of urine, where it appears semi-solid, can lead to urine scald around the bottom and thighs and is particularly painful. Bladder stones and kidney stones, associated with bloody urine, inability to urinate or a painful abdomen are now not uncommon. Both conditions are associated with high levels of calcium in the diet, and require careful correction of the diet to prevent reoccurrence and long term cystitis. Obesity tends to play a role in the development of this disease also, and may be the reason that bladder conditions are on the increase.



Overgrown Nails

Rabbit nails should be checked regularly to ensure that they are not overgrown, so that your rabbit can exercise and groom comfortably. If you are unsure about cutting your rabbit's nails, we are always happy to demonstrate safe nail trimming or do it for you in a nurse clinic.

Pododermatitis

This is an uncomfortable condition of the skin on the back of the lower hindlimbs, and is usually associated with wet, soiled bedding, obesity, inactivity, and sometimes genetic factors (particularly in Rex breeds who lack guard hairs). Typically examination of the lower hindlimbs will reveal pink skin in hairless areas, sometimes with associated scabs and crusting. If bacterial infections are involved, then antibiotics as well as anti-inflammatories may be required, but simply improving the rabbit's husbandry and providing plenty of clean bedding and space to move around, should prevent this painful condition.

Heat Stroke

Nowadays we're all aware of the dangers of leaving dogs in cars on sunny days, but sadly rabbits with heat stroke may be overlooked, resulting in many deaths each year. Those most at risk are the larger breeds, obese rabbits, and those which suffer from epilepsy, but any rabbit left in full sunlight with inadequate shade, or in a poorly ventilated hutch can be affected. The signs of heat stroke are often not very specific, but tend to include panting, puffing, lethargy or collapse. Application of a cold wet towel or a fan, together with prompt veterinary attention, are all required to prevent dehydration, shock and death.

Obviously rabbits can be affected by many more ailments than we have covered here, but whatever the cause, we are always on hand to answer an queries or concerns you may have about your rabbit. Please never hesitate to call the practice for advice on any aspect of rabbit health, diet or behaviour, on 01959 541153.