



FACTSHEET

Parasites

Cat and dog fleas will also infest rabbits.

Rabbits can suffer from a worm infestation in a similar way as cats and dogs do. They can get roundworms and tapeworms which can be prevented by regular dosing of panacur paste and veterinary spot on treatment.

Mites are fairly common in rabbits and the two main types are *Psoroptes cuniculi* (ear mites) and *Cheyletiella parasitovax* (walking dandruff) but can easily be treated with medication.

Ear mites can be easily spotted by a dark crusty and waxy substance in the ears.

Cheyletiella will often cause hair loss and give the appearance of dandruff.

E. Cuniculi is the most common parasite which affects rabbits in the UK. It is a blood born protozoa which is present undetected in many rabbits and can pass from mother to kitten as well as in infected urine. If the rabbit's immunity is compromised by factors such as stress, this can increase the likelihood of suffering from *E. Cuniculi*. Symptoms include: renal problems, head tilt, hind limb weakness, loss of vision and seizures. Its risks can be reduced by using regular dosing of panacur paste.

Flystrike

Fly strike (Myiasis) happens when flies lay their eggs on the rabbit which then hatch out into maggots.

It is most common in the summer months and when the rabbit is in poor health or living in unhygienic conditions.

There are three main causes of fly strike. Open wounds, obesity which makes the rabbit unable to clean itself properly, and damp bedding.

Flies are attracted to these situations which cause them to lay their eggs onto the rabbit.

The maggots cause extensive damage as they eat through the rabbit's tissue.

This can cause severe distress and pain to the rabbit and may even be fatal if not caught early enough.

The species which is mainly responsible for this is *Lucilia sericata*.

Neutering:

Male rabbits can be neutered from 4-5 months old and female rabbits can be spayed from 6 months old. The spaying of does and castration of bucks is strongly advised for many reasons.

It helps with behavioural problems which are affected by sexual hormones. For example, marking areas with urine, as well as aggression behaviour and mounting.

Both castration in the male rabbit (buck) and spaying in the female rabbit (doe) require a general anaesthetic and surgical removal of the reproductive organs.

There are many benefits with spaying the doe, such as the prevention of pregnancy, reproductive complications and finding good homes for the kittens. Sexual maturity is reached between 4-6 months and they may come into season up to 10 times a year. This can lead to aggression towards other rabbits and even the owner. Entire does can experience false pregnancies at which point behaviour may worsen. Spaying does will prevent uterine cancer which may be fatal.

Male rabbits also express similar aggression when entire and will also spray urine. Neutering bucks will prevent testicular cancer which may be fatal.

Dental Health:

Dental hygiene is of utmost important in all of the small furries; and rabbits are no exception!

The rabbit is born with it's full set of permanent teeth at the time of birth. The rabbit's incisors (front teeth) and cheek teeth (molars) grow continuously throughout its life, meaning it is vital to ensure your rabbit receives the correct diet to minimise the chance of dental problems occurring. It is inadvisable to breed from rabbits with dental problems as there is a great risk of these being passed from parents to kittens.

The most common dental problem that rabbits face is 'malocclusion,' where the rabbit's teeth don't wear down properly.

Malocclusion of the front incisors will not only cause physical discomfort, but will more often than not prevent the rabbit from eating properly or at all. It can also make it more difficult for them to groom themselves properly, which greatly increases the risk of fly strike.

The lower cheek teeth will grow inwards and can press on the rabbit's tongue, causing inflammation and pain. The upper cheek teeth tend to grow outwards, pressing on the cheeks themselves.

The single most effective way to ensure that you minimise the chance and/or frequency of your rabbit suffering from these dental issues is to make sure that their diet provides sufficient abrasion to wear their teeth down. This gnawing and chewing is the only way that rabbits can naturally keep their constantly growing teeth from becoming overgrown. The most important constituent of any rabbit's diet is grass and hay.

If the incisors of the rabbit are a constant problem they can be removed but will require a general anaesthetic.

Vaccinations

Myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease:

Myxomatosis is a serious viral disease that is nearly always fatal to rabbits in the UK and Europe. It affects both wild and domestic rabbits, but risk is greatly reduced when vaccinated.

It is caused by myxoma virus, which is highly contagious to rabbits and transmitted by fleas, mosquitoes, flies and mites. It is also transmitted by inhalation, contact with infected rabbits and infected objects (e.g. hutches, water bottles etc).

Symptoms arise from secondary infections causing nasal and eye discharge, pneumonia and eventually death. It is a serious and painful disease.

An infected rabbit presents with swelling of areas such as the lips, eyelids and genital regions. Myxomatosis is species-specific which means no danger is posed to any other animal species.

Viral Haemorrhagic Disease, or 'VHD' is a viral disease that is highly infectious and very often fatal. It affects only wild and domestic rabbits.

Fortunately, there is a vaccine available to prevent your rabbit catching from VHD.

Both Myxomatosis and VHD can both be prevented by a yearly vaccination. They are both given in the same injection at the same time!

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