

MYXOMATOSIS

Unfortunately, during the last couple of months we have seen an awful lot of rabbits with myxomatosis. Clients may bring us wild rabbits that they have found who are sick with the disease, but pet rabbits are also getting infected. The disease is fatal and the only thing we can do is to euthanase affected rabbits to prevent further suffering.

Myxomatosis is a viral disease of rabbits that was originally found in the wild rabbit population of South America. It was deliberately introduced to Australia in the 1950's to control the huge population of wild rabbits that was destroying grazing land. The disease spread very rapidly and was then accidentally introduced into Europe. Again it spread like wild fire and almost wiped out all the wild rabbits.

Infected rabbits show typical signs of swollen ears, lips, eyes and around their genitals. They are very depressed with a high temperature and stop eating and drinking and sit in the corner hunched up. They invariably die within a few days. If a rabbit has some immunity the disease may be less severe with multiple skin tumours appearing, but the rabbit will still eat and drink and eventually may recover and the tumours regress.

The virus is spread by insects, particularly mosquitos and fleas, so even an indoor rabbit is at risk. Late summer, Autumn and early winter is the time when we see most cases of myxomatosis, this is when there is the highest risk.

There is a vaccine available that gives good protection against the disease. However this does not give complete immunity and some vaccinated rabbits that are infected will show a mild form of the disease.

This so called 'lumpy bunny syndrome' shows as the rabbit develops small lumps on their eyelids, lips and sometimes all over the body. The lumps often have scabs on them. Affected rabbits remain bright and are eating and drinking. As long as the scabs don't get infected, antibiotic cover is normally given, the lumps eventually go down after a few weeks although some scarring may remain. For this reason, even for vaccinated rabbits, it is best to try to prevent exposure to the virus. This means controlling the insects that transmit the disease. Fly papers outside the hutch will deter mosquitos and spot on flea treatments (ONLY ones designed for rabbits are safe) will prevent flea bites. We recommend the vaccination be boosted annually for all rabbits and we send out annual reminders, but in times or areas of high risk a booster should be given every 6 months.

At the moment there is a severe outbreak of myxomatosis so if your rabbit has not been vaccinated in the last 6 months we recommend they should be. Please call the surgery on 01256 764771 for further advice.