

Factsheet: Rabbits



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Neutering your Rabbit

Male Rabbits

Castration involves the removal of both testicles. The operation can be performed from 4 months of age.

The Advantages

Aggression is significantly reduced towards other pets and owners.

The scent marking or urine spraying can be modified.

Neutering enables both sexes to be housed together which provides companionship and social interaction between your rabbits. This is a very important part of the normal behaviour that would be exhibited in the wild.

Female Rabbits

Spaying involves the removal of the uterus and ovaries. The operation can be performed from 4 months of age.

The Advantages

The most important advantage is that uterine cancer is prevented. This is now a common finding in does over the age of 4 years (up to 80% are affected).

Pyometra (a life threatening infection of the uterus and womb) is also prevented. This condition requires emergency surgery which can be quite risky.

False pregnancy is also quite common in entire female rabbits and is prevented by neutering. This is a syndrome where the rabbit thinks she is pregnant, symptoms include severe hair loss and behavioural abnormalities.

Vaccinations for your Rabbit

There are two infectious rabbit diseases for which protective vaccines are available.

Both of these diseases are fatal and occur in both wild and pet rabbits. These diseases are Myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD).

What is myxomatosis?

Myxomatosis is a viral disease which causes an infected rabbit to become depressed, have a temperature and stop eating. It is characterised by swellings and sticky discharges around the eyes, nose and genital areas; other swellings are found on the skin. Secondary respiratory infections are common.

Treatment is rarely successful and affected rabbits suffer a great deal. There is also a much less common dry form of the condition which presents with mild lethargy and lumpy lesions on the skin – these cases can be successfully treated.

How is myxomatosis spread?

Myxomatosis is spread by biting insects, usually fleas or mosquitoes. As mosquitoes can fly, even if a rabbit has no contact with other pet rabbits or wild rabbits it will still be at risk. Even house rabbits can be bitten by flying insects.

How often do I need to vaccinate my rabbit against myxomatosis?

Your rabbit can be vaccinated from 6 weeks of age. We then repeat the vaccination every 6 months throughout life.

Are there any side effects of myxomatosis vaccination?

Occasionally a small lump may come up at the injection site a week or so after injection. This should settle down over the following few weeks but if it does not, please contact us to examine your pet.

What is VHD?

Viral haemorrhagic disease (VHD) is a viral disease of rabbits, which is rapidly fatal. Sadly, as it progresses so quickly, often the first clinical sign of VHD is a dead rabbit. Otherwise, affected animals may be found depressed, collapsed and/or with haemorrhagic (bloody) diarrhoea.

How is VHD spread?

VHD is spread through direct contact or so called 'fomites', which are contaminated items which have come into contact with a diseased animal. The virus is very hardy and survives for a long time in the environment – this means that it can be easily brought into your home or garden on contaminated clothes, shoes, food and bedding.

How often do I need to vaccinate my pet against VHD?

Vaccination can start at 10 to 12 weeks of age. We recommend that it is then repeated annually. Unfortunately, the vaccination for VHD can not be given at the same time as that for myxomatosis. We leave a two week gap between the vaccinations.

Are there any side effects of VHD vaccination?

A small lump may appear at the vaccination site which should settle in a couple of weeks. Some rabbits may also have a slight temperature for a few days after vaccination – if so, they may be a little bit quiet and slightly off their food. Please contact us should you have any concerns after vaccination.

Are there any other benefits of vaccinations?

Before any vaccination is given a full clinical examination is performed and there is also an opportunity for you to discuss the health and management of your pet. As a result, other health issues can be identified and dealt with before a problem occurs. This is especially important with rabbits as they are renowned for 'hiding' illness until they are very sick indeed.

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Your Rabbit's Diet

Are you feeding your rabbit correctly?

Unfortunately, often the answer is 'no'. Rabbits are a species in which the correct diet is of paramount importance in maintaining good health. The majority of unwell rabbits seen by vets have problems caused by or exacerbated by an incorrect diet!!!

Think about wild rabbits. Their diet consists of grass (fresh and dry/dead) and a wide variety of weeds and leaves. They spend most of the day chewing and exercising.

Wild rabbits almost never suffer from Obesity, Dental problems or Digestive upsets.

So...our pet rabbits, (who very frequently suffer from the above problems) will be healthier if they are fed more like wild rabbits. Obviously most pet rabbits will not be able to run around grazing all day, so we have to make a few adjustments. These are the essentials of feeding pet rabbits:

- The majority of a rabbit's diet should consist of good quality hay and grass. Grazing on grass (i.e. a run on the lawn) for some time each day is ideal, as exercise is very important for digestive health and to prevent obesity. However, if grazing is not possible, pick grass for your rabbit daily!! Hay and grass contain indigestible fibre, which is extremely important for the normal functioning of a rabbit's gastro-intestinal tract and keep the constantly growing teeth worn down.
- A wide variety of vegetables, weeds, and leaves can be fed daily. Examples include broccoli, cabbage leaves, spring greens, kale, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower and cauliflower leaves, carrots and carrot tops, green beans, parsley, and pea-pods. Weeds and leaves include fruit-tree leaves and twigs, hazel leaves, dandelions, brambles, clover and dock. Avoid over-feeding sweet or low-fibre fruit and veg such as banana, apple, iceberg lettuce or tomato – feed these at most once or twice a week. Avoid sugary treats if possible.

Commercial rabbit foods have 2 problems – over-feeding and selective feeding:

- Over-feeding – rabbits should have no more than 2-3% of their body weight in commercial pellets or 'muesli' daily. This is about 50 grams for an average rabbit. Giving more can lead to obesity, and a reduction in fibre intake. This then leads to further issues: dental disease (overgrown teeth) and digestive problems.
- Selective feeding – many commercial rabbit foods contain a mixture of ingredients, some of which are preferred over others. By feeding 'selectively' in this way, rabbits will often become deficient in certain nutrients, particularly calcium. Calcium deficiency can lead to dental disease. The best types of commercial rabbit food are those in which all the ingredients are the same.
- When changing your rabbit's diet, even if changing from a poor diet to the above regime, new foods must be introduced gradually. Change the diet over a period of at least one week. Sudden dietary change can induce digestive upsets.

- Certain individuals will need slightly different foods and quantities, for example, rabbits with certain diseases, pregnant or nursing females, or young growing rabbits. Please consult one of our Veterinary Surgeons or Veterinary Nurses for advice in these cases.

Flystrike Kills Rabbits

Flystrike is an unpleasant and distressing condition which occurs in the summer months when flies lay their eggs around a rabbit's rear end.

The eggs hatch into maggots which then feed on the rabbit by burrowing into its flesh. Sounds horrible?! It is! Prevention is better than cure; some rabbits can be successfully treated although for some it can be fatal.

Some steps to help prevent flystrike:

Examine your rabbit every day to check his fur is clean, dry and not matted, especially around the rear end. If you see any signs of maggots, remove them using soap and warm water, thoroughly dry the affected area and contact your vet immediately. Rabbits with urine or faeces around their bottom are far more at risk of flystrike. Ensure your rabbit has a balanced, complete high-fibre diet to avoid digestive disturbances and dental problems. Soft faeces clumped around the bottom area are often an indication of lack of fibre. Feed complete food from your vet to ensure that their diet is balanced with the correct amounts of fibre and protein and ensure your rabbit eats plenty of hay. They should always have fresh water available.

Change soiled bedding every day – Use plenty of good quality absorbent bedding in your rabbit's toilet area to avoid excess moisture.

Once a week, thoroughly clean and disinfect the hutch. Remove everything from the hutch and disinfect with a purpose made solution suitable for use with small animals. Allow to dry and put in clean bedding.

Use Rearguard to help prevent infestation of maggots, especially during the summer months. Effective hutch hygiene, feeding a complete diet and using Rearguard is by far the best defence.