

Rabbit Diseases

Pasteurellosis

"Pasteurellosis" is the designation for all the diseases associated with *Pasteurella multocida*. The signs of the disease vary and may include snuffles, pneumonia, pyometra, inflammation of the ear canal, conjunctivitis, skin abscesses and presence of bacteria in the bloodstream (septicemia).

Snuffles

The mucous membranes of the nasal passages become infected by bacteria from inspired air or by direct contact with infected animals or contaminated objects. The disease is characterized by pus-filled nasal discharge. The extent to which the infection spreads into the lower respiratory passages depends on the harmfulness of the bacteria and susceptibility of the animal. If the disease is confined to the upper passages, the first signs are sneezing followed by nasal discharge. The rabbit's forepaws may be caked with the discharge because of the attempts to wipe it away from his nose.

Pasteurella bacteria are often found in the nasal passages of the healthy-looking rabbits. Stress resulting from extremes of temperature, high humidity, pregnancy, and nursing is a primary factor in the development of snuffles.

By using broad-spectrum antibiotics, the symptoms can be alleviated, however, the animal will remain a carrier of the bacteria and will be able to infect the offspring and caged neighbors. Vaccines have not proved to be effective. The only effective method of control is strict culling. If a rabbit has a nasal discharge, sneezes for 2 consecutive days, cull it from the herd. If you are not sure when to cull a rabbit, "when in doubt, cull it out."

In addition to strict culling, good ventilation must be provided to control snuffles. There is a direct correlation between the level of ammonia in a rabbitry and the amount of respiratory disease.

Antibiotic combinations have been used with some success in pet rabbits. If the nasal discharge regresses, take care not to stress the rabbit.

Pneumonia

Upper respiratory disease (snuffles) may spread to the lungs and cause pneumonia. Signs of pneumonia are labored breathing, depression, bluish eye color in albinos, and nasal discharge. The temperature is usually above normal. There is no effective cure for this disease.

Pyometra

"Pyometra" means pus in the uterus. The walls of the uterus are usually dilated, and the organ is filled with pus. Pyometra results from the introduction of the bacteria into the uterus during mating and may be traced to a single buck with a chronic infection of the testicles. Does that are nasal-positive for the bacteria, are also vaginal-positive for the same bacteria. Pet rabbits can sometimes be saved by ovariohysterectomy.

Orchitis

Orchitis is an infection of the testicles. The testicle becomes enlarged and usually contains an abscess. Sometimes the infection can be limited to the membranes covering the penis, a condition called balanoposthitis. The infection is transmitted to does by infected bucks during breeding. The condition is treated by applying antibacterial ointment containing penicillin.

Skin Diseases and Disorders

Healthy rabbits should have a shiny coat, free of parasites. There should be regular periods of molting when the coat is replaced. A small, pink, callused area on the point of the hock is normal.

Warning Signs

- Dandruff
- Scratching
- Sore or bare patches in the fur
- Lumps and bumps
- Maggots
- Red or raw areas on the point of the hock, or on the pads of the feet.

Molt

The most commonly observed "skin problem" is actually a normal molt. All rabbits have slightly different molt patterns. Some will molt fully and rapidly twice a year, while others shed their coat continuously. The latter is especially true of thick-coated rabbits living in a centrally heated home. Molting can be very dramatic, with tufts of fur falling out. You may see a temporary pigmentation of the skin in the moulting area, a mark where the new fur is growing through, or an area of short coat like a Rex rabbit. All are quite normal. Molting rabbits need frequent brushing, which will reduce the chance of hair blocking up either your rabbit's intestine or your vacuum cleaner.

Mites

As you groom your rabbit, look carefully for any dandruff, particularly behind the ears and along the spine. Dandruff indicates a mite infestation. This is most often due

to a species called *Cheyletiella* which causes cheyletiellosis. This common problem is now usually treated with three injections of ivermectin, given 7 to 10 days apart. This treatment has largely replaced medicated shampoos, much to the relief of many rabbits and their owners. Some newer antiparasitic preparations are under investigation and will hopefully make treatment even more simple and effective in the near future. Mites can survive away from the rabbit, so bedding and cages must be carefully cleaned. Incidentally, *Cheyletiella* can also affect humans and cause a mild itchy rash that disappears when the rabbit has been treated.

Ringworm

Another condition that can affect both rabbits and humans (and other domestic pets) is the fungal infection ringworm. This appears as bare patches or sores on rabbits, and round scaly patches on humans. All affected parties require treatments.

Abscesses

Abscesses are serious. These collections of pus, surrounded by thick, fibrous wall, may develop after a bite or other wound. They are also found around the mouth, due to dental disease. Treatment aims to remove the entire abscess, including the wall. Sometimes, this is simply not possible and the veterinarian may have to settle for draining the pus, followed by one of a variety of strategies to try and kill off any residual bacteria. Antibiotic-impregnated beads, glucose paste, and commercial gels are all under investigation. With intensive nursing and wound care, combined with rational use of surgery and antibiotics, the outlook for rabbits with abscesses is improving. However, they can be a recurrent and long-term problem.

Myxomatosis

The deadly viral disease myxomatosis may cause lumps to appear in the skin. Other early signs of myxomatosis include swelling around the eyes, ears, and genitalia. Fortunately, myxomatosis in house rabbits is essentially unknown.

Flystrike

Flystrike occurs if flies lay eggs on wet or dirty skin and eggs hatch into maggots. This disgusting condition is found in rabbits kept outdoors in poorly ventilated, dirty caging, especially during warm months. Older, obese rabbits are particularly at risk, but long-coated animals are also vulnerable.

The maggots of some fly species can eat their way deep into normal tissue, releasing toxins and making the rabbit desperately ill. Immediate treatment is vital—a badly fly-blown rabbit will be lucky to survive even with intensive and expensive therapy. Prevention is better than cure, so for your outdoor rabbits, perform daily bottom checks, keep older rabbits well groomed and at their correct weight, and keep litter boxes and hutches clean.