

WHAT IS MYXOMATOSIS?



After its introduction to the UK in the early 1950's myxomatosis was so virulent that an estimated 95% of wild and pet rabbits had died by 1955. In the year 2000 we again experienced one of the worst outbreaks of Myxomatosis ever recorded, and this disease is still affecting rabbits, particularly during the late summer/autumn season.

Below: edited extracts from an article written by Dr Linda Dykes, published in Fur & Feather's November 2000 issue.

Myxomatosis is a viral disease which decimated the wild rabbit population when it arrived in Britain nearly seventy years ago. The number and severity of outbreaks varies over time as the myxomatosis virus is notorious for its ability to mutate from year to year, and the background immunity in the wild rabbit population also varies.

Rabbits at Greatest Risk

Domestic rabbits do not have any genetically based immunity against myxomatosis. If an unvaccinated rabbit catches myxomatosis, it will almost certainly die.

Rabbits at greatest risk are those which live outside, in contact with wild rabbits or hares, or affected by rabbit fleas – so people with a dog or cat that hunts wild rabbits must be particularly careful.

However, myxi can also be spread by mosquitoes, so any standing or stagnant pools of water where mosquitoes may breed should be removed.

The virus can also survive in overwintering fleas and mosquitoes in hay and in houses.

How is it spread? What happens when a rabbit catches myxomatosis?

Myxi is usually spread by biting insects (fleas, mosquitoes) carrying the virus. However, direct rabbit-to-rabbit spread can occur.

The disease starts with runny eyes and swollen genitalia. If full blown myxi then develops, the

rabbit will be a pitiful sight. Severe conjunctivitis causes blindness and is accompanied by swelling of the head and genital region plus lumps on the body.

The rabbit can take a fortnight to die and treatment of the "classic" form of myxomatosis is usually futile.

There are also two atypical forms of myxomatosis: one causes pneumonia and a snuffles-like illness; the other ("nodular myxomatosis") mainly affects skin and carries a better prognosis.

If a vaccinated rabbit does develop myxomatosis, the disease tends to be much less severe.

The exact pattern of disease seen in vaccinated animals is very variable, and impossible to predict. It depends upon how much immunity the rabbit has.

Some rabbits develop just a few odd skin lesions and remain otherwise well; others become quite poorly and suffer from swellings and conjunctivitis more like classical myxomatosis.

Myxomatosis vaccination?

Vaccination is a vital part of a package of measures you can take. Make sure your rabbit/s are vaccinated and keep boosters up to date.

Even if your rabbit is vaccinated, you must also take steps to prevent biting insects getting to your rabbit. For example, fit insect screens to outdoor hutches and runs and eliminate standing water from your garden (where mosquitoes could breed).



Be especially careful if you have a dog or cat that hunts wild rabbits, as they could bring rabbit fleas home or into the rabbitry on their noses! You also need to make sure that rabbits living outdoors cannot make contact with wild rabbits or hares.

Can rabbits with myxomatosis be treated?

If an unvaccinated rabbit catches myxomatosis and develops the full-blown classic form of the disease, survival is very unusual, even when treated with antibiotics to prevent secondary bacterial infection.

Most affected pets in this situation are put to sleep, to prevent further suffering.

If a vaccinated rabbit is unlucky enough to catch myxomatosis, the situation is much less gloomy. How severely any one vaccinated rabbit will be affected is impossible to predict. It depends on how much immunity they developed after their vaccination. Some rabbits simply develop a single skin lump and remain perfectly well. A few become really poorly. Others fall somewhere in between, such as

being a bit "off colour" with a few skin lesions.

Treatment is usually successful in the vaccinated rabbit with a good vet, nursing care and a bit of luck. But it is important to realise from the outside that if the rabbit is badly affected, intensive and prolonged veterinary and nursing care (weeks rather than days) may be required.

Rabbits treated for myxomatosis will need:

- Careful nursing care in a warm environment (21-22 degrees centigrade).
- Regular bathing of sticky eyes and genitalia.
- Fluid therapy – subcutaneous fluids are usually used.
- Tempting food and force feeding/tube feeding if necessary.
- Antibiotics to prevent secondary bacterial infection.

This doesn't make vaccination a waste of time – far from it. Rabbits that have not been vaccinated will almost certainly die if they catch myxomatosis – rabbits that have been vaccinated and catch myxi usually live to tell the tale.

RECOMMENDED READING:

Rabbits Health, Husbandry & Diseases by vet Virginia Richardson (Blackwell). Softback, 188 pages. RRP £58.50 – £33 to F&F readers.

