

MYXOMATOSIS

As the days get longer and the weather gets warmer, we are likely to see the usual annual increase in the number of rabbits with myxomatosis. Rabbit owners should be fully up-to-date on how this life-threatening and highly contagious disease can be effectively prevented and controlled.

Myxomatosis is typically spread by blood sucking insects and in particular the rabbit flea, *Spilopsyllus cuniculi*, which is frequently found on wild rabbits; transmission in the absence of bites is unusual. All breeds of domestic rabbit are affected by myxomatosis, with little to suggest that one breed is more susceptible than another, and whatever the lifestyle of your rabbit there is a potential risk of this disease.

History of myxomatosis

Myxomatosis is caused by the myxoma virus, a type of pox virus that only affects rabbits. It was first discovered in 1896 in Uruguay and was imported to Australia in 1951 to control its large rabbit populations – initially having the desired devastating effect.

The disease was illegally introduced to France in 1952 and it appeared in Britain the following year. It quickly spread to both wild and domestic rabbit populations and within a few years had spread throughout Europe. It has been a threat to wild and domestic rabbits ever since.

Signs and symptoms

The incubation period varies depending on the strain and its virulence and is typically at least five days. Accompanying the classic bulging eyes that most of us associate with myxomatosis, are localised swellings around the head, face, ears, lips, anus and genitalia.

Severe swellings can lead to blindness and distortion around the face within a day or so of the onset of symptoms, leading to difficulty with feeding and drinking. Bacterial respiratory infection often complicates the disease resulting in a fatal pneumonia.

Progress of the disease may be slower in well cared for pet rabbits and recovery is sometimes possible with intensive care.

However, myxomatosis can be a very protracted and profoundly unpleasant disease and euthanasia is generally recommended.

Recovery in the wild is generally rare and for animals with severe signs death usually occurs about 12 days after initial infection.

Management of myxomatosis

There is no specific treatment for the virus and any treatment offered is merely supportive. Treatment is occasionally contemplated but would



not usually be recommended for rabbits with the full-blown disease since affected individuals suffer dreadfully, have a low chance of survival and remain a source of infection for other rabbits.

The occasional individuals with milder disease may, however, recover with appropriate care.

Control of myxomatosis

To help prevent rabbits from contracting myxomatosis it is important to put various controls in place, for which there are two main methods: control of parasites and vaccination.

Flea control

Always keep a regular check on animals for any signs of fleas and consider the regular use of insecticidal

treatment from your vet. There is evidence to suggest that mosquitos and other biting flies may transmit myxomatosis in the UK, so nets and insect repellent can be used to combat this threat in warmer weather.

Your vet will be able to advise you further on these measures, since not all products are suitable or safe for rabbits.

Vaccination

An animal health company, Intervet, launched the only licensed rabbit vaccine to immunise against myxomatosis in the UK in 1994 - Nobivac Myxo*. It is a live vaccine containing the Shope fibroma virus, which is closely related to myxomatosis but does not cause disease in the European domestic rabbit.

The only clinical sign that may occasionally be seen is a slight temporary lump, or nodule, at the vaccination site.

The technique of using a different virus in order to protect an individual against a serious disease is an old and well-proven technique, first used by Edward Jenner when he used the live cowpox virus to vaccinate people against smallpox.

Vaccination schedule

Intervet recommends that a single dose of Nobivac Myxo* is given to all rabbits over six weeks of age who are healthy and not pregnant.

The vaccination should ideally take place in early spring so that rabbits have the best protection during the period of year when they are most at risk - although it must be remembered that myxomatosis can affect animals at any time of the year.

Following vaccination, rabbits should not be exposed to infection for at least 14 days.

Boosters are recommended once or twice a year, depending on the likely risk of exposure to myxomatosis.

A high risk may be indicated in multi-rabbit households, where other health problems are present, where there may be close association with wild rabbits or indeed if there is a succession of warmer winters.