



## RABBIT FACT SHEET 1.

### Understanding Myxomatosis

#### What is myxomatosis?

Myxomatosis is a severe viral disease of rabbits that decimated the wild rabbit population when it arrived in Britain 50 years ago. Domestic rabbits are also susceptible to the disease and deaths in pets are reported every year.

#### Is my rabbit at risk?

Myxomatosis poses a threat to all pet rabbits – but the risk varies depending on whether your rabbit lives inside or outside.

Pet rabbits at greatest risk are those living outside, especially if they may have any contact with wild rabbits or hares. Pet rabbits affected by rabbit fleas are also at very high risk - rabbit owners who also have a dog or cat that hunts wild rabbits (or foxes that visit the garden and nose around rabbit hutches) must be particularly careful, in case rabbit fleas are brought back to the pet bunny.

House rabbits living permanently indoors are at less risk than outdoor rabbits, but can and do get myxomatosis. They must be vaccinated and protected from possible sources of myxomatosis transmission too.

#### How is it spread?

Pet rabbits could contract myxomatosis in a variety of ways:

- Bites from mosquitoes carrying the Myxoma virus.
- Bites from fleas carrying the Myxoma virus (fleas can survive for many months in hay).
- Myxomatosis can also be spread by Cheyletiella fur mites.

#### What happens when a rabbit catches myxomatosis?

The classic form of myxomatosis is seen in rabbits that haven't been vaccinated. It is a dreadful disease that causes immense suffering; affected rabbits can take a fortnight to die and treatment is usually futile, which is why euthanasia is usually recommended.

Classic myxomatosis starts with runny eyes and in the very early stages can be confused with other causes of conjunctivitis. However, myxomatosis differs as the genitals are also swollen. It rapidly progresses to a severe conjunctivitis which causes blindness and is accompanied by lumpy (nodular) swellings on the head, plus lumps on the body. Excessive amounts of thick pus discharges from the nose and swollen eyes (which are often sealed shut). 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 develops myxomatosis, the disease is usually 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



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swellings and conjunctivitis more like classical myxomatosis. The difference is that vaccination turns a fatal illness into one that is treatable.

What about myxomatosis vaccination?

Domestic rabbits do not have any genetically based immunity against myxomatosis. If an unvaccinated pet rabbit catches myxomatosis, it will almost certainly die. Vaccination is a vital part of a package of measures you can take to protect your rabbit and the RWA urges all rabbit owners to make sure their rabbit is vaccinated with a licensed veterinary product and boosters are kept up to date.

Vaccination can start from as young as 6 weeks of age, but only healthy rabbits should be vaccinated and the vaccine can't be administered to pregnant animals.

Even if your rabbit is vaccinated, you must also take steps to prevent biting insects getting to your rabbit.

- Try to buy hay from farms free of myxomatosis
- Fit insect screens to outdoor hutches and runs
- Eliminate standing water from your garden (and preferably from any neighbouring gardens as well!) 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 on their noses! It wouldn't hurt to treat them as a prophylactically anyway!
- Make sure that rabbits living outdoors cannot make contact with wild rabbits or hares.
- If your rabbit has any signs of Cheyletiella fur mites (e.g. "dandruff" on the back of the neck, take him to the vet for prompt treatment.

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 with intensive nursing and treatment with antibiotics to prevent secondary bacterial infection. Most affected pets in this situation are put to sleep as soon as the diagnosis is made, to prevent futile suffering.

Treatment is usually successful in the vaccinated rabbit with a good vet, nursing care and a bit of luck. But if the rabbit is unlucky enough to be badly affected, intensive and prolonged veterinary and nursing care (weeks rather than days) is occasionally required.

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 usually live to tell the tale if they catch it.

If you know anyone with a pet rabbit, please do tell them about the importance of vaccination against both VHD and myxomatosis, as well as insect proofing measures.

Information taken from the Rabbit Welfare Fund. [www.houserabbit.co.uk](http://www.houserabbit.co.uk)