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MYXOMATOSIS IN RABBITS

Myxomatosis is a common disease in rabbits caused by the myxoma virus – a pox virus. In the domestic rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculi*) it is almost always fatal. In its natural host - wild rabbits of South and Central America the disease is limited to the formation of cutaneous fibromas – or 'pox' marks.

The virus is most commonly spread by vectors such as mosquitoes, fleas, flies, fur and harvest mites. Contagion by close contact, inhalation and fomites is also possible. The viral incubation period is 8 – 21 days.

The most commonly reported clinical signs are: swellings of the eyelids and genitals, white ocular discharge, pyrexia, lethargy and anorexia. Rabbits showing such signs will usually die within 14 days – often from secondary bacterial infections due to immunosuppression. Due to the poor prognosis euthanasia of these rabbits on humane grounds is recommended. A hyper acute presentation can also occur. Such rabbits present with an acute haemorrhagic pneumonia leading to sudden death.

A milder form of the disease is encountered with previously vaccinated rabbits. In such rabbits the virus is confined to the formation of the skin lesions. Such rabbits will often present with pox marks on the nose, face and ears. Treatment of rabbits with these milder clinical signs may be successful.

Preventing myxomatosis

- The most important step in preventing myxomatosis is annual vaccination of your pet rabbit. Vaccines are advised for all rabbits, even those kept indoors as they may still have contact with fleas or flies. Vaccines can be given from 5 weeks of age and protect against myxomatosis for a period of 12 months **– please speak to any of our team for more information on getting your rabbit vaccinated**

- Controlling exposure to the agents that spread the virus is also important. Regular application of flea preventatives suitable for rabbits would be advised. Minimising exposure to mosquitoes by using mosquito netting or eliminating stagnant water sources where mosquitoes like to breed may be useful in high risk areas.