

FLYSTRIKE IN RABBITS – AN OWNER’S GUIDE

What is Flystrike?

Flystrike, also known as myiasis, is a serious and potentially fatal condition in rabbits. Flies will instinctively lay their eggs on an injured or dirty animal – this makes rabbits with dirty rear ends, injured skin, or urine scalding especially vulnerable. When the eggs hatch, maggots will burrow down and feed on the tissue. This causes severe trauma and is distressing and painful for the rabbit.



Common Risk Factors:

- **Dental Disease**
Rabbits with dental conditions may be reluctant or unable to groom themselves, leading to soiled, matted fur around the back end (pictured). Dental conditions are often associated with a lack of dietary fibre, which is also a predisposing factor.
- **Obesity/Arthritis**
Obesity also goes hand-in-hand with a diet high in energy and low in fibre and makes it difficult for rabbits to physically reach their rear end to clean it effectively. These rabbits may also be less active and prone to sitting or lying in close proximity to where they urinate & defecate. The same applies to arthritic rabbits, in which their flexibility is reduced and prevents proper grooming and toileting.
- **Urinary Issues**
Urinary tract infections may cause rabbits to ‘dribble’ their urine, rather than void it normally, which causes soiling and urine scald around the genital area. Rabbits are also prone to sludgy urine if they are unwell, which also causes soiling of the fur.
- **Poor Hygiene**
Buildup of faeces or urine in your rabbit’s toileting area will attract flies and increase the risk of flystrike, even if your rabbit is well-groomed! Dirty bedding and litter will also cause soiling of the fur and urine scald if your rabbit is left to sit in it for prolonged periods of time.
- **Uneaten Caecotrophs**
Rabbits have evolved to produce two types of faeces. The softer faeces called ‘caecotrophs’ is re-ingested to supply vital nutrients and vitamins. If your rabbit does not eat these, they often stick to fur around their rear instead and attract flies.

Rabbits may not eat caecotrophs if their diet is too rich in sugary or starchy foods such as carrots, fruits, or commercial bunny treats.

How do I prevent it?

- **Don't ignore any problem that leads to urine or faeces accumulating on the pet's fur.** Have your rabbit checked if this is happening so the underlying problem can be resolved. Normal rabbits are fastidiously clean so it is abnormal for their bottom to be dirty.

- **Check your rabbit regularly**

Once a fly has laid its eggs, it only takes a few hours for these to hatch into maggots which cause severe damage. Therefore, it is vital that you check on your rabbit twice a day. Seek veterinary advice if you notice any soiling.

- **Keep your rabbit's area clean**

Remove dirty litter and bedding every day to ensure your rabbit's housing and toileting area are clean and dry. If your rabbit uses an area of grass outdoors as a latrine, spot-cleaning and sweeping the area to disperse faeces and reduce buildup is also helpful.

- **Use preventative medication**

There are a number of topical products for use in rabbits. The product most recommended by vets for flystrike prevention is "Rearguard", which contains an active ingredient called cyromazine. It should be applied to the rabbit from the middle of the back to the end of the tail via a sponge. These applications, if carried out 10 weeks apart in early May and mid-late July, will cover your rabbit for the high-risk period. Other products such as those containing ivermectin exist, but are not recommended as they aren't designed specifically for flystrike.

It is important to note that whilst medication aids in prevention, it does not replace the need for suitable hygiene and husbandry.

- **Optimise your rabbit's diet**

Ensure your rabbit's diet consists of at least 85-90% grass and hay, supplemented by a cup of fresh greens and less than a tablespoon of pellets. Muesli should be avoided at all costs, as this encourages selective feeding and leads to dental issues. Do not feed fruit as this can also lead to digestive problems due to sugar content.



- **Groom long haired rabbits**

Long haired rabbits would not survive in the wild as their hair makes it difficult for them to run, see and keep themselves clean. If you own an Angora, it is important that they have the area around their bottom clipped short to help them stay clean.

How is flystrike treated?

The presence of maggots on your rabbit is an emergency. This condition can lead to a rapid deterioration due to toxin release into the blood stream and shock. The condition is also incredibly painful and should be treated without delay.

Rabbits with flystrike are almost always admitted into the hospital for treatment including:

- Pain relief which will be required throughout treatment
- Fluids to treat shock
- Removal of maggots from the affected area
- Cleaning of wounds (often under anaesthesia once the rabbit is stabilised)
- Nutritional support, often via syringe-feeding
- Gut stimulants to prevent gut stasis
- Warmth and close monitoring

Rabbits may not make it through intensive care, or very severe cases may need to be euthanized. Flystrike is a condition that demonstrates that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure!

If you have any concerns or queries, please contact us or book an appointment to visit your vet.

