

Disease Prevention in Pet Rabbits

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A rabbit is a hardy animal and rarely becomes ill. In Australia there are two diseases that rabbits can contract. These are **Rabbit Calicivirus (RCD)** and **Myxomatosis**.

Rabbit Calicivirus (RCD) accidentally escaped from a quarantine research area in 1995. It is a virus that is spread by rabbit to rabbit contact or by vectors. Rabbits with RCD die within 30-40 hours after infection. There is no treatment. A rabbit can be protected from RCD by a yearly vaccination. A rabbit can be vaccinated once it is ten weeks old. If a rabbit is vaccinated before ten weeks it will require a booster vaccination at 10 - 12 weeks. Your vet will be able to give your rabbit its vaccination but it is a good idea to shop around as prices vary between vets. It is also a good idea to screen your rabbit's hutch to prevent access by flies, mosquitoes etc. and preventing contact with wild rabbits and unvaccinated rabbits.



Rabbits can be infected by **Myxomatosis** which is a viral infection spread by biting insects such as fleas and mosquitoes. A rabbit that is infected with this disease can rarely be saved and should be euthanased to prevent it suffering a horrible death. The first signs of Myxomatosis are running and swollen eyes, swollen ears and face. Prevention, in this case, is much better than cure. Placing fly wire over the cage to prevent mosquitoes biting the rabbit is an excellent preventative measure. If a rabbit is infected it should be isolated from other rabbits. In Australia, the Myxomatosis vaccination is not available.

Diarrhoea is a common problem in rabbits. A change in diet, stress or sometimes sudden weather changes may cause it. Mild Diarrhoea can be treated with strawberry leaves, rose leaves and raspberry cordial. Be sure the leaves have not been sprayed with any toxic chemicals. Natural yoghurt (containing live culture) helps restore the balance in the gastric system and antidiarrhoeals (such as Kaomagma) can be used.

Another problem that can occur is a condition we call "**flopsy**". The rabbit suddenly, over a couple of hours, becomes completely floppy and unable to move. This appears to be caused by a lack of Vitamin E in the food. This seems to occur most frequently in spring when the green foods and cereals have been stored since the previous harvest. If treated promptly these rabbits usually survive. Mix crushed vitamin E tablets in natural yoghurt and feed to the rabbit - by syringe if necessary. Prop the rabbit up in a box and give this mixture frequently over the next few days. The rabbit should make a slow recovery over a couple of days although it is often possible to see a marked improvement in a couple of hours. Unprocessed wheat germ is a great natural source of Vitamin E and can be sprinkled over the rabbit's food as a preventative measure.

Ear canker (ear mite) is another problem. A very small mite usually causes this. When infected the ear can become warm and swollen and crusty scabs can be seen inside the ear. The rabbit may be constantly shaking his head or trying to scratch his ears. Ear mite are contagious and the infected rabbit should be separated from other rabbits. The scabs need to be gently soaked using cooking oil and removed. Oil should be instilled in the ear once a day for several days and then again after a week. Special ear canker drops can be obtained from vets or stockfeeders if you prefer.