

Flystrike in Rabbits

What is flystrike?

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

What are the common risk factors for flystrike?

Dental disease:

- Rabbits with dental disease may be reluctant or unable to groom themselves.
- This leads to soiled and matted fur around the back end, creating the perfect environment for flies to lay their eggs.
- Dental disease is often associated with a lack of dietary fibre.

Obesity:

- Obesity is often the result of an inappropriate diet that is high in sugar and low in fibre i.e. excessive pellets and treats with little hay or grass ingestion.
- It can also occur due to a lack of physical activity, especially with a small hutch or run, lack of companionship or lack of toys.
- Obesity will physically prevent your rabbit from grooming their rear ends as they will not be able to reach leading to soiled and matted fur. It will also reduce their activity levels, making them prone to sitting or lying near where they urinate and defaecate.

Arthritis:

- Arthritis will make grooming more difficult for your rabbit because it will be painful on their joints.
- It will reduce their activity levels, making them prone to sitting or lying near where they urinate and defaecate.
- It can impair their ability to pass urine and stools because it can be difficult to enter a litter tray and uncomfortable to posture for toileting.

Urinary issues:

- Urinary tract disease like infections, sludge, stones or excessive urine production can cause rabbits to dribble urine. This means their haircoat and skin is constantly being covered in urine, and they can struggle to keep themselves clean.
- There is a risk of urine scalding around the rear end – sore irritated skin due to urine.

Uneaten caecotrophs:

- Caecotrophs are the softer shiny nutrient-rich stools that rabbits produce and should immediately eat straight from the anus to absorb vital proteins and B vitamins.
- If your rabbit does not eat these, they will stick to the fur around the rear end and attract flies.
- Rabbits may not eat caecotrophs if their diet is too high in sugar.

Poor hygiene:

- If urine and stools are allowed to build-up in your rabbit's toileting area this 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 sits in it for prolonged periods.

How can we prevent flystrike?

Check your rabbits regularly:

Once a fly has laid its eggs, they will hatch into maggots in a matter of hours resulting in skin damage. It is vital that you check your rabbit at least twice daily and seek veterinary advice as soon as possible if you notice anything of concern.

Intervene quickly if you notice urine or stools accumulating in the fur around the rear end: Normal rabbits are fastidiously clean so is it abnormal for their rear end to be dirty or soiled. If you notice this happening, we recommend you seek veterinary advice as soon as possible. In the meantime, you can bathe your rabbit in warm water with a gentle shampoo if tolerated.

Groom long-haired rabbits:

Long-haired rabbits can find it more difficult to keep themselves clean. For breeds such as Angora, it is important to clip the hair around the rear end to help them stay clean.

Keep your rabbit's house clean:

Dirty litter and bedding should be removed daily to ensure your rabbit's housing and toileting area are kept clean and dry. If your rabbit uses an area of grass outdoors as a toilet, spot-cleaning and sweeping the area to disperse faeces and reduce build-up is also useful.

Optimise your rabbit's diet:

Ensure your rabbit's diet consists of at least 85-90% grass and hay, supplemented by one cup of fresh greens and up to one tablespoon of pellets. Muesli must be avoided as this encourages selective feeding and leads to dental issues. Fruits should be avoided as they are high in sugar and can cause digestive upset.

Use preventative medication:

There are several topical products that can be used to prevent flystrike in rabbits. We most commonly recommend "Rearguard", which contains the active ingredient cyromazine. This should be applied from the middle of the back to the end of the tail via a sponge. These applications should be performed 10 weeks apart from the start of May to the end of July to cover your rabbit for the high-risk period. Other products exist, some of which contain the active ingredient ivermectin, but there 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.



How is flystrike treated?

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

Rabbits with flystrike are often hospitalised for treatment, which involves:

- Pain relief
- Fluids to treat shock
- Warming
- Removal of maggots from the affected area and cleaning of wounds (this is often performed under anaesthesia once your rabbit is stable)
- Nutritional support via syringe feeding
- Gut stimulants to prevent gut stasis
- Close monitoring

Sadly, some rabbits may not make it through the treatment process and very severe cases may need to be euthanased on a welfare basis or if they have underlying disease that cannot be managed adequately to prevent flystrike occurring again. This is why prevention is so key.

If you have any concerns or questions, please contact us.

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