

Do all affected rabbits die?

Not all affected rabbits die. Although recovery is rare in the wild (probably less than 10% of wild rabbits eventually recover from myxomatosis), recovery may be more common in pet rabbits with intensive nursing. (If care is taken with feeding, making sure that water is available and that medical care to combat pneumonia is given, then recovery rates in pet rabbits are higher than in the wild but are variable depending on the severity of the disease.)

However, a word of warning - myxomatosis can be a very protracted disease and affected animals may take weeks or months to recover. Even then, there may be severe scaling, scabbing and scarring on the head and body.

How can the disease be controlled?

The disease can be controlled by two main methods:

1. Control of insect parasites
 2. Use of vaccines
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Controlling insects

Flea control is important and may involve not only keeping wild rabbits away from pet animals but also positive use of flea control measures such as sprays, dips and insect repellent strips. Incidentally, there is some evidence that the domestic cat, which can often be infected with rabbit fleas, may be a secondary transmitter of the rabbit flea. Obviously, isolating pet rabbits from possible close contact with wild rabbits is sensible. Do not forget to control mosquitoes - it may be possible to use mosquito nets and insect repellent strips. Care should be taken that the bedding of animals is kept dry and that pet rabbits are not kept in moist conditions which favour mosquito activity. Veterinary Practitioners will be able to give advice on flea and mosquito chemical control.

Vaccination

Vaccination can never guarantee protection against any disease but, when properly used, offers the best available chance of producing immunity against myxomatosis.

Microchipping

You vaccinate your rabbit against the risk of disease. But what do you do to identify your pet and guard against the risk of your rabbit getting lost? Microchipping is administered in the same way as vaccination (by simple injection) and involves placing a tiny microchip under the skin of your rabbit. If your rabbit should get lost, this unique microchip number can be retrieved by a simple portable scanner held by all charity, welfare and animal organisations who can use this number to link to your personal details stored on the national database. Therefore, your pet becomes uniquely identifiable to you following one simple visit to your vet.

Please ask your Veterinary Practitioner for further advice on vaccination and microchipping.

Myxomatosis, an important disease



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What causes myxomatosis?

Myxomatosis is a disease of rabbits and is caused by a virus. The virus is a type of pox virus which grows best in the skin of rabbits. Like all viruses, the organism is minute and can only be seen with an electron microscope.

What are the signs of myxomatosis?

The very first signs we can see are puffy, fluid swellings around the head and face. 'Sleepy eyes' are a classic sign, along with swollen lips, tiny swellings on the inside of the ear and puffy swellings around the anus and genitals. Within a day or so, these swellings can become so severe as to cause blindness and there may be some distortion around the face, mouth, ears and nose.

Which rabbits are susceptible to myxomatosis?

In this country, the European rabbit (*Oryctolagus*) is highly susceptible to the disease. The European brown hare is sometimes, but rarely, affected with myxomatosis.

What breeds of rabbit are affected?

All breeds of rabbit are affected, including our wild rabbit found in the countryside and all breeds of pet and show rabbits, including Dwarf rabbits, Lop-Eared rabbits and Exotics. There is little evidence that one breed is more susceptible than another.

Where did myxomatosis come from?

Originally, myxomatosis was imported from Brazil (where it was first discovered in the 1930's) to Australia in 1950. This was to control the massive populations of rabbits in the sub-continent. In Brazil, the Cotton Tailed rabbit (*Sylvilagus*) is affected by the disease to a minor degree as only tiny lumps are produced by this self-limiting disease. However, in Australia the disease was devastating and markedly reduced the rabbit population.

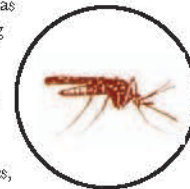


How did the disease get to Britain and Ireland?

The disease was transmitted from Australia by a French Physician, Dr A Delille, who wished to control the rabbit population on his country estate near Paris. The disease rapidly spread into the wild population in France and then was brought, entirely by accident, from France in 1953. There is no evidence that the disease was intentionally brought into Britain and Ireland but there is no doubt that some farmers moved the disease around using diseased rabbits in order to control the local wild rabbit population.

How is the disease spread?

Myxomatosis is spread by blood-sucking insects. A major insect parasite which transmits the disease in this country is the rabbit flea which is frequently found on wild rabbits, although is less common on pet rabbits. In other countries, including some in Europe, it is known that mosquitoes are a major insect vector of myxomatosis. Although this has never been proven in Ireland or Britain, there is strong circumstantial evidence that mosquitoes transmit myxomatosis in Britain. Incidentally, myxomatosis is NOT easily spread by simple contact from one rabbit to another. For instance, if a myxomatosis-infected rabbit is placed in the same hutch as a healthy rabbit and neither animal is parasitised by fleas or mosquitoes, then the disease is virtually never transmitted by contact. Myxomatosis virus can remain alive in the blood of fleas for many months and it is probably by over-wintering of fleas in rabbit burrows that the disease is transmitted from year to year.



What happens when a myxomatosis-infected flea bites a susceptible rabbit?

As the mosquito or flea bites the rabbit, a small amount of the live virus is placed in the skin of the rabbit as the insect sucks blood. Within a few days the virus is transmitted to a local lymph node and then passes into the blood of the rabbit which enables it to be moved around to several sites. The virus mainly multiplies in the skin around the eyes, nose, face, soft skin inside the ears and also skin around the anus and genitals of the rabbit.

What is the incubation period of myxomatosis?

The incubation period varies slightly from one animal to another but can be as short as five days and as long as 14 days (incubation period is the time from the point of introduction of the virus into the animal to the first time that clinical signs of illness are seen).

After infection, how long do rabbits usually survive?

This also varies. Some animals may survive for weeks or months after infection but, in general, if an infection is severe in a susceptible rabbit, death occurs within 12 days.

How does the disease progress?

Within a short space of time, affected rabbits become blind because of the swelling around the eyes and, for this reason, feeding and drinking is often difficult. However, one can sometimes see wild rabbits suffering from myxomatosis quietly grazing. Of course, at this stage many rabbits become prey to animals such as foxes and other predators. Other rabbits may well become injured or killed on roads but the common cause of death is a secondary lung infection which often occurs around day 8 after the initial incubation of the disease. In pet rabbits, the disease often progresses more slowly and death is not so rapid because of the care which the owner gives the rabbit.