



PREVENTATIVE HEALTHCARE IN RABBITS

Why prevent disease?

- **Prevention is better than cure** : There are no specific treatments for many of the viral diseases so treatment is often only supportive and may be unsuccessful.
- **Diseases cause suffering** : Most of us can't remember the last time someone suffered from Tetanus, Small Pox, Measles or Tuberculosis. These diseases have been eradicated or prevented in humans by vaccination – one form of disease prevention. Unfortunately, although human medicine has progressed to preventing disease, awareness in Veterinary medicine is lagging behind. We would like to see Veterinary Medicine catch up.
- **It saves money**: In most cases the cure is generally more expensive than prevention.
- **It increases** levels of pet health in our local community.
- **It reduces** amounts of infectious diseases around.

Our staff know that a healthy pet is a happy pet and we have devised the following eight point plan to try and keep your pet as healthy and happy as possible.

The 8 point plan.

1. **Vaccination (see vaccination leaflet)**
 - Myxomatosis
 - Viral Haemorrhagic Disease
2. **Feeding** – Rabbits have a unique digestive system, one that is designed for a high fibre but low protein and low energy diet. The trouble is that in captivity we like to think we are doing the best for our rabbits and thus all too easily give them too rich a diet with insufficient roughage. The major component of any rabbit's diet should be roughage (good quality hay, alfalfa hay, or grass grazed directly from the lawn). A selection of fresh food (weeds are best such as dandelion leaves and groundsel) as well as a little commercial rabbit concentrate (such as supa rabbit excel or timothy oxbow) is also beneficial. The key thing is not to over feed your rabbit. If you give a huge mound of mixed rabbit concentrate, your rabbit will pick and choose, eating what he or she likes and leaving important (but not very tasty!) nutritional elements behind. In this way many captive rabbits have too low a calcium intake with subsequent teeth problems. Giving a small amount morning and evening which is completely finished by your rabbit before its next helping is very important. Feeding high-energy sugar rich treats such as cake or chocolate is definitely to be avoided as it can lead to the build up of harmful bacteria in the rabbit gut which can kill.

3. **Dental Disease** – This is the most common problem we see in pet rabbits, almost always due to a poor diet. Rabbit's teeth grow continually by as much as 1-2mm per week and if unable to wear down evenly (due to inadequate diet) they can develop sharp spikes causing painful ulcers and abscesses. To prevent this a properly balanced diet should be fed as discussed above.
4. **Neutering** – This helps to prevent diseases, unwanted litters and aggression. Un-neutered males are more likely to fight and show signs of aggression. Un-neutered females can have litters every 30 days and can become aggressive. The incidence of uterine cancer is also very high in un-neutered female rabbits (does). One study suggests up to 80% of un-neutered does get this life threatening cancer! Neutering is generally performed at 4-5 months for males and 5-6 months for females.
5. **Parasitic Prevention**
 - **Blowflies** - Flystrike is a common, extremely distressing and often fatal disease occurring most commonly, during warm summer months. Flies lay their eggs on the soiled coat of the rabbit and the emerging maggots burrow their way into the rabbit's skin. Rabbits at highest risk are those suffering from obesity, dental disease, diarrhoea, arthritis and skin wounds. The flies are also attracted to rabbits when the environmental conditions are poor, eg dirty hutches. Flystrike is easily prevented with good diet and hygiene. Keeping hutches clean and dry is of utmost importance as is feeding the correct diet to avoid diarrhoea. **Rabbits should be checked at least once daily (twice or more in hot conditions)** for any soiled areas (especially under their tail) to ensure they are clean and dry. In addition to general care and hygiene we recommend applying **xenex ultra spot on** or **rear guard** to your rabbit to prevent flystrike by killing maggots and repelling flies.
 - **Encephalitozoon Cuniculi** – E.cuniculi is an intracellular protozoa which can cause a range of clinical signs including hind limb paresis, head tilt, collapse, urinary incontinence, cataract formation, lens-induced uveitis and death. Transmission is primarily via ingestion of spores shed in the urine contaminating food and/or water. We recommend a course of Panacur Rabbit once or twice yearly or if there is an introduction of a new rabbit.
 - **Mites** – Rabbits commonly get a skin mite called Cheyletiella which causes severe dandruff. We recommend **xenex ultra spot on** to prevent this.
 - **Fleas** - Just like cats and dogs, rabbits can also get fleas. These fleas can transmit myxomatosis a life threatening viral disease. We recommend **xenex ultra spot on!**

1. **Insurance** – Unexpected bills can be heartbreaking for both owners and vets if costs of treatment are prohibitive and the animal has to have less than optimal treatment or worse. Insurance represents a regular, worthwhile contribution to the health of your pet. Policies that provide lifelong cover are preferred over those which only offer 12 months of cover and then exclude the disease/condition in question from any further cover. We can introduce you to Petplan who can provide you with Free Veterinary Cover for 4 weeks and information about their other policies. If you would like us to make the introduction please tell a member of staff.

6. **Housing**
 - **Outdoors** – Rabbits that live outside must receive daily contact with the owner. The hutch should be large enough for the rabbit to stand up on their back legs and make 4 hops in any direction. The rabbits should also be exercised in an outdoor run or the home as often as possible. Both hutch and run should be placed in a location where the rabbits are safe but protected from the sun, wet weather or frost. If a hutch is raised a few feet off the ground this will protect the rabbit from potential predators and makes the owner appear smaller when trying to handle them. Rabbits should have hay/straw/wood shavings as bedding.
 - **Indoors** – Rabbits can be litter trained easily and can happily live indoors. However it is important to ‘bunny-proof’ the home as electrical cables, plants etc will be eaten! The rabbit should also have an indoor cage he/she can live in.

7. **Socialisation** - Rabbits are very sociable animals that require contact with other individuals daily. Rabbits should be handled regularly from an early age so they are well socialised and used to being handled.

A really useful website that offers lots of help and advice on rabbit health and husbandry is www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk. (The Rabbit Welfare Fund)

Finally, do think about signing up to our **VIP Health club**. This will save you money on most of the preventative health care discussed above. Please speak to any member of staff if you are interested.