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Myxomatosis in Rabbits

Myxomatosis is a devastating viral disease of pet rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculi*). Wild bush rabbits (*Sylvilagus bachmani*) in coastal California naturally carry this virus, but it does not make them sick. When a pet rabbit becomes infected with the myxomatosis virus, however, the result is life-threatening. The California strain of myxomatosis is reported to kill up to 99% of the pet bunnies it infects.

Myxomatosis is a constant threat in the coastal communities of California. Sporadic outbreaks are common and can occur at any time of the year. Initial symptoms of infection include swollen eyelids, lethargy, loss of appetite, and fever. Rabbits that survive this stage develop swollen eyelids, nostrils, lips, scrotum or vulva, anus, and ears. An opaque nasal discharge and labored breathing will commonly follow. Seizures and death usually occur within 7 to 14 days of exposure.

The myxomatosis virus is most often transmitted to pet rabbits via a mosquito bite, but it can also be spread by other biting insects such as mites, fleas, lice, and black flies. Rabbits can also catch the virus if they are in direct contact with an infected rabbit, or in contact with things that an infected rabbit touched.

Unfortunately, there is no effective treatment for myxomatosis once a rabbit is infected; even hospitalization and supportive care is usually not successful. Nor do we have a vaccine against this disease in the United States, as they do in Europe and Great Britain. The only way to prevent myxomatosis in your rabbit, therefore, is to prevent exposure to the virus. To this end, having your rabbit live indoors is the best thing you can do to protect it. If you cannot bring your rabbit inside, create as mosquito-proof an outdoor enclosure as you can. All rabbits indoors and out should receive a monthly dose of the flea control product Advantage, and any mite or lice infestations should be treated promptly by a veterinarian.

If you have further questions about myxomatosis, or suspect that your rabbit may have contracted this disease, please call us at 831-440-8590.