

Flystrike in Rabbits

Flystrike (myiasis) occurs when damp fur - often due to damaged skin or soiled by urine or faeces - attracts the green bottle fly (*Lucilia sericata*). The fly can lay up to 200 eggs on the skin which hatch into maggots within nine hours and fully mature within 43 hours. Used for centuries to help manage wounds, maggots will first eat away at damaged tissue to clean the area. However, once clean they will then continue to feed on healthy tissue and can cause extensive damage. The high levels of irritation and pain lead to stress and shock, which can be fatal.

Over 44% of rabbits presenting in first opinion practice with flystrike result in euthanasia. A 2003 study showed that over 10% of all rabbit deaths were caused by myiasis. Rabbits over five years of age are almost four times more likely to be affected by flystrike. The risks are also increased in entire female rabbits compared to those that are neutered.

Preventing flystrike involves ensuring rabbits and their environments are kept clean and dry. Other factors to be considered are:

- ❖ Examination - rabbits should be examined at least twice a day paying particular attention to their bottom area.
- ❖ Grooming - some rabbits may need to be groomed regularly - especially if they struggle to groom themselves due to obesity, dental disease, or arthritic conditions. Dirty bottoms should be washed twice daily.
- ❖ Diet – avoid feeding too many fresh greens and fruit which can cause diarrhoea. At least 70% of a rabbit's diet should be high fibre, such as hay.
- ❖ Medication – spot-ons are available and can help to deter flies for up to 10 weeks, but remember to tell owners they are not a substitute for regular checking and good hygiene
- ❖ Environmental – using fly screens around hutches and planting certain herbs such as rosemary, green oregano, peppermint and basil can help to reduce fly numbers.
- ❖ Risk – NADIS have a blowfly alert map created for sheep farmers, which gives a good indication of fly numbers throughout the year across the UK. <https://alerts.nadis.org.uk/>

Treating flystrike must begin with a full examination. Priority should be given to managing shock and treating any hypothermia and/or hypovolaemia. Intravenous fluid therapy and assisted feeding may be given depending of severity of condition. Analgesia will be required and occasionally sedation may be needed. Manual removal of all larvae and eggs is essential and then ongoing wound management can begin. Treatment is often intensive and investigation into potential predisposing factors must be carried out to prevent future infestations. A good clinical history and owner education are also key to prevent recurrence.

Omnimatrix is a skin healing cream which is licensed for use in rabbits. It can be used at all stages to support wound healing and is great to use as a barrier cream. Find out more here <https://www.vita-europe.com/animalhealth/pet-health-supplement-products/omnimatrix-skin-regeneration-cream/>

References:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0167587717307729>

<https://veterinaryrecord.bmj.com/content/vetrec/186/14/451.full.pdf>

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