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Flystrike in rabbits – is my pet at risk?

‘Fly-strike’ can occur when flies lay their eggs on animals which then hatch to become maggots. Once hatched, maggots are pre-programmed to crawl and chew away from the light and so they start to feed on the animal - literally eating them alive. The intense itchiness caused may cause rabbits to frantically groom. However some will feel so unwell that they may hide away quietly and show no other signs.

Any animal can be affected, but rabbits are the most common animals at risk from this tragic condition. Flies are attracted to areas which are moist and smelly – consequently animals with an open wound, or with diarrhoea or urine staining around their bottoms are very susceptible targets.

What can I do to prevent fly-strike?

1. Make sure your rabbit’s environment is as clean as possible. Any hutches should be regularly cleaned out, and in warmer weather, use of a fly net over the hutch entrance can be useful.
2. Check your rabbit’s bottom at least once daily and twice daily in warmer weather when there are more flies about. Fly eggs can hatch out in under 24 hours. If your rabbit’s bottom is mucky, it needs to be cleaned, & dried immediately as soiling attracts flies and increase the chance of fly-strike occurring. It is wise to seek advice from your vet as if your pet does have a dirty bottom, this can be due to an underlying problem that requires addressing, such as an inappropriate diet, diarrhoea, dental disease, urinary problems, obesity or mobility issues e.g. arthritis.
3. There are some veterinary products on the market that can be used to prevent or slow the progression of fly strike. Reargarud® is a solution that can be placed on your rabbit’s fur every 8-10 weeks and will help prevent any maggots that hatch out from developing further and harming your pet. This cannot be used on very young, and pregnant rabbits however. If you have any questions about preventative products, then ask your vet about what may be suitable for your pet.

What should I do if I suspect my rabbit has fly-strike?

If you ever find maggots on your rabbit, this is a medical emergency and you should contact your vet immediately. Affected rabbits will quickly die without prompt treatment.

All maggots must be removed and any wounds cleaned thoroughly. Sometimes the wounds are so severe that the rabbit may require an anaesthetic to try to remove the dying tissue and retrieve maggots that have eaten their way deep into skin. In addition, the pain, dehydration and infection resulting from maggots can result in shock which can be fatal, and many patients require pain killers, antibiotics and fluid therapy. Despite these intensive actions, a number of patients may not make it, or have such severe problems that they may sadly need to be ‘put to sleep’. But acting early and getting your rabbit to the vets as soon as possible will give him or her the best possible chance of survival. Contact your vet for any further information on prevention or treatment of fly strike.

