Rabbits are wonderful animals and at RAW, we, like, you really want your rabbits to live a long and happy life. However, there are times that your rabbits might not be 100% and it’s important to know what to look out for.

In this booklet we will take you through a few of the most common health problems that can affect rabbits, what treatment is available and what you can do to help prevent some of the more serious conditions.

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- RAW's Top Tips
- RVHD1
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Introduction

Rabbits are wonderful animals and at RAW, we, like, you really want your rabbits to live a long and happy life. However, there are times that your rabbits might not be 100% and it’s important to know what to look out for.

In this booklet we will take you through a few of the most common health problems that can affect rabbits, what treatment is available and what you can do to help prevent some of the more serious conditions.

Rabbit Awareness Week’s Top Tips

- Take your rabbits for a vet health-check every 6-12 months, or as recommended by your vet
- Check daily that your rabbits are eating/drinking and toileting normally
- Keep an eye out for any change in behaviour
- Check your rabbits daily for signs of ill-health
  - Check they are moving/running normally
  - Run your hand all over them to feel for lumps, bumps, wounds or wetness or any signs of flystrike
- Check your rabbits’ nails weekly to check they are healthy and not too long
- Check your rabbits’ teeth weekly. If their teeth look abnormal, they have watery eyes, there is drool, partly-chewed food or weight loss then you should take your rabbit to the vets
- Make sure your rabbits have plenty of space to run around and housing high enough so they can stand up fully
- Rabbits are social animals so make sure you keep your rabbit with at least one other friendly rabbit
- Check your rabbits’ weight and body condition score once a month

Rabbit Size-O-Meter

Size-O-Meter Score: Characteristics:

1. **Very Thin**
   - More than 25% below ideal body weight
   - Hip bones, ribs and spine are very obvious to the touch
   - Loss of muscle and very little fat cover
   - The rumen area curves in

2. **Thin**
   - Between 10-25% below ideal body weight
   - Hip bones, ribs and spine are easily felt
   - Loss of muscle and very little fat cover
   - Thump area is flat

3. **Ideal**
   - Hip bones, ribs and spine are easily felt but are rounded, not sharp
   - Rump feels like a pocket full of peas
   - Hip bones rounded
   - Thump area is flat

4. **Overweight**
   - 10-15% above ideal body weight
   - Pressure is needed to feel the ribs, spine and hip bones
   - Some fat layers
   - The rumen is rounded

5. **Obese**
   - More than 15% above ideal body weight
   - Very hard to feel the spine and hip bones – ribs can’t be felt
   - Tummy soft with obvious fat padding
   - Rump bulges out

Please note

Getting hands on is the key to this simple system. Whilst the pictures in the Rabbit Size-O-Meter will help, judging whether your pet is the right weight purely by sight alone has its difficulties. A long coat can disguise ribs, hip bones and the spine, while a short coat can make a rabbit’s appearance more irregular and highlight these areas. You will need to gently feel your pet which can be a pleasurable bonding experience for both of you!

Your pet is a healthy weight

Seek advice about your pet’s weight

Seek advice as your pet could be at risk

Very Thin More than 25% below ideal body weight

Thin Between 10-25% below ideal body weight

Ideal Hip bones, ribs and spine are easily felt but are rounded, not sharp. Rump feels like a pocket full of peas. Hip bones rounded. Thump area is flat

Overweight 10-15% above ideal body weight

Obese More than 15% above ideal body weight

www.pfm-a.org.uk
**About the virus**

*Rabbit Viral Haemorrhagic Disease 1 (RVHD1)* is an extremely infectious virus that is usually fatal. The RVHD1 virus kills by causing internal bleeding.

**Symptoms**

RVHD1 often has no symptoms, meaning that it is very hard to spot. There is sometimes bleeding from body openings such as the nose, eyes and/or anus, but these are very easy to miss without daily checks.

**Mode of transmission**

It is a myth that RVHD1 can only be caught through contact with an infected rabbit. In actual fact the virus can be carried by:

- Birds and insects and their droppings
- The wind
- Soles of shoes, car tyres or other pets’ feet
- An infected rabbit or their droppings
- Owners’ hands or clothes

The virus can survive months in the environment, especially in cold temperatures.

**Prevention**

Your vet can vaccinate your rabbits against RVHD1 (this is often done with the Nobivac combined vaccination for myxomatosis and RVHD1). Your vet will then advise what booster vaccinations your rabbit will need (usually every 12 months).

**Treatment**

There is no specific treatment available for RVHD1, though your vet can offer supportive care.

**Prognosis**

RVHD1 is usually fatal within a couple of days to weeks. There are very limited examples of rabbits surviving the disease.

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**About the virus**

*Rabbit Viral Haemorrhagic Disease 2 (RVHD2)* is a new strain of the virus RVHD1. Cases of the disease were first reported in the UK in 2015. As with RVHD1 the virus causes internal bleeding.

**Symptoms**

RVHD2 often has no symptoms, meaning that it is very hard to spot early on. Where symptoms do occur these signs are easily confused with other health conditions: fever, lethargy, neurological signs (coma) and blood clotting problems.

**Mode of transmission**

It is a myth that RVHD2 can only be caught through contact with an infected rabbit. In actual fact the virus can be carried by:

- Birds and insects and their droppings
- The wind
- Soles of shoes, car tyres or other pets’ feet
- An infected rabbit or their droppings
- Owners’ hands or clothes

This is just a small section of the list of ways RVHD2 can be carried. Practically, there is no way to stop the virus getting into your rabbits’ indoor or outdoor environment. Therefore, the only way to protect your rabbits is through vaccination.

**Prevention**

Your vet can vaccinate your rabbits against RVHD2 (this is a separate vaccination to the combined myxomatosis/RVHD1 vaccine). Your vet will then advise what booster vaccinations your rabbit will need (usually every 6-12 months).

**Treatment**

There is no specific treatment available for RVHD2, though your vet can offer supportive care.

**Prognosis**

There have been some cases where rabbits have recovered from RVHD2. However, in many cases the disease is fatal.
**Myxomatosis**

**About the disease**
Myxomatosis has been present in the UK since it was introduced from South America in the 1950s. It killed a very high percentage of the wild rabbits, and still kills many wild and pet rabbits every year.

**Symptoms**
The full-blown form of myxomatosis affects the eyelids, the skin of the ears, lips and genitals causing swellings.
There is a purely skin form of myxomatosis, which isn’t usually fatal, it causes small thickened lumps of skin to form on the eyelids, nose, head and sometimes the shoulders. These typically fall away after 2-3 weeks.

**Mode of transmission**
Myxomatosis is mainly spread by direct contact by fleas. Rabbits fleas are the most common carriers but flying and biting insects can spread it.
Rabbits can also catch the disease through direct contact with other rabbits.

**Prevention**
Your vet can vaccinate your rabbits against myxomatosis (this is often done with the Nobivac combined vaccination for myxomatosis and RVHD1). Your vet will then advise what booster vaccinations your rabbit will need (usually every 6-12 months). Vaccination can take place from five weeks of age and take three weeks to become effective.
Vaccination is very effective; however, vaccinated rabbits can still get a milder form of the disease. The prognosis for vaccinated rabbits is very good with the majority fully recovering.

**Treatment**
There is no specific treatment available for myxomatosis, though your vet can offer supportive care.

**Prognosis**
The prognosis for an unvaccinated rabbit with full-blown myxomatosis is usually a long and painful death. Therefore, euthanasia is the kindest option.
The prognosis for a rabbits with just the skin form or a rabbits that are vaccinated is usually good with the majority surviving without needing significant treatment.

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**Gut Stasis**

**About the condition**
Gastro Intestinal Stasis or Gut Stasis is a condition where the digestive system slows down or stops completely. When this happens bacterial fermentation of food begins to build up and releases gas into the system causing extremely painful bloating, which usually results in the rabbit stopping eating and drinking, in effect starving itself.

**Symptoms**
Rabbits may start to produce fewer droppings, they may become smaller or darker and perhaps strung together by undigested fur or hay.
A rabbit who stops eating or eats less is a very strong indicator of gut stasis or digestive problems. You should take your rabbit to the vet immediately.

**Causes**
Rabbits need to consume high volumes of fibrous materials at pretty much all times to keep their gut moving as it should. Gut stasis usually develops from feeding a rabbit a low fibre, high-carbohydrate diet but can also be triggered by:
- Dental pain which reduces fibre intake
- Obesity, meaning they are unable to consume caecotrophs direct from their bottom (faeces that they need to re-ingest to absorb their fibre)
- Stress, such as a change in environment or the loss of a friend
- Lack of movement or no opportunity to exercise
- A sudden diet change

Rabbits can also develop gut stasis by swallowing something that obstructs their digestive system, i.e. matted fur.

**Prevention**
The best way to help prevent your rabbits from developing gut stasis is through the below:
- Feed your rabbits a high-fibre diet made up of 85-90% feeding hay/fresh grass
- Check your rabbits’ weight and teeth regularly
- If you change your rabbits’ diet, do it gradually over at least a two to four week period (the longer the better)
- Don’t feed muesli style diets as these are linked to a reduced faecal output

Ensure your rabbits have lots of space and gets plenty of exercise.

**Treatment**
If you notice any of the above symptoms you should take your rabbit immediately to the vet. Even a delay of a few hours may mean it is too late.
Depending on your rabbit’s condition, your vet may undertake several different methods of treatment which can include pain relief medication, medication that will increase gastric motility and fluid therapy to relieve dehydration. Your rabbit is likely to need syringe feeding with a recovery diet for a period of time to ensure that it gets the nutrients it needs.

**Prognosis**
Gut stasis can be fatal, so it’s important that if you notice that your rabbit has stopped eating or is eating/excreting less you take your rabbit to the vet immediately.
Dental Disease

About the condition
Rabbits in the wild eat huge amounts of fibrous material, spending 80% of their time foraging and eating a variety of grasses. The movement they need to perform to grind grass down also wears down the teeth. Rabbits teeth therefore continually grow. Without the right amount of coarse, fibrous materials in their diet their teeth can grow overlong: this is a form of dental disease.

Symptoms
You can check your rabbit’s dental health weekly, looking for any of the below symptoms:
• Watery eyes
• Abnormal looking teeth
• Weight loss
• Drool
• Partly-chewed food

If you spot any of these symptoms, then you should take your rabbit to the vet.

Causes
The main cause of dental disease is that your rabbit isn’t getting enough foods with ‘long length fibre’ and abrasive silicates (grass or hay), meaning that their teeth aren’t getting worn down.
Muesli style diets have been proven to reduce the amount of hay rabbits eat, increasing the likelihood of dental disease.
Certain rabbit breeds such as dwarf and lop eared are also prone to dental disease because their smaller skull shape often means overcrowded teeth which are likely to grow in the wrong direction.

Prevention
The best way to prevent dental disease is to ensure that your rabbits eat plenty of feeding hay/grass. Feeding hay and fresh grass should make up 85-90% of a rabbit’s diet.
Overfeeding fresh greens, treats or nuggets is likely to reduce a rabbit’s hay/grass consumption, so always follow the feeding guidelines on pack.
Never feed your rabbit muesli style diets.

Treatment
Your vet will first look to take steps to relieve pain, restore hydration and deliver nutritional support. Then it is likely that your rabbit will need either tooth trimming or extractions under anesthesia.
You may need to syringe feed your rabbit for a period of time after dental work, but your veterinary nurse will be able to support you with this.

Prognosis
If dental disease is treated quickly rabbits usually have a good chance of recovery.

Other Health Problems

Obesity
Just like humans, rabbits can easily become obese due to incorrect diet and lack of exercise. Obesity is very serious for rabbits, not only because it impacts their quality of life but because it is also linked to problems such as gut stasis and fly strike.
The best way to prevent obesity is by ensuring your rabbits are eating the correct diet (85-90% grass or feeding hay, a small supplement of nuggets and a handful of leafy fresh greens) and by following feeding guides on packaging.
It is also important that your rabbits have plenty of space to exercise and constant access to a large run.

Flystrike
Flystrike occurs when flies lay eggs on a rabbit, usually around the rear, which hatch into maggots and eat the flesh of the rabbit. Flystrike can often be a sign of an underlying health problem, such as obesity, resulting in wet fur or an accumulation of faeces around their back end.
If you think your rabbits have flystrike then you should seek veterinary assistance immediately. There are some fly repellents designed for rabbits, however the best way to prevent flystrike is to ensure your rabbit is at a healthy weight, in good health generally and by checking them every day in the winter and twice a day in warm weather.

Snuffles
Snuffles is a bacterial infection in rabbits. The condition can be caused by a few different bacteria with the most common is Pasteurella. The symptoms of snuffles look like a cold in humans:
• Mucus and pus from the nostrils
• Runny eyes
• Breathing problems with possibly some wheezing, coughing and sneezing
• Dirty front paws from wiping their nose and mouth are a tell-tale sign

Unlike with humans, these symptoms are of something very serious for rabbits and you should take your rabbit to the vet as soon as possible, who will likely prescribe antibiotics. The illness is highly contagious so you should keep an eye on your other rabbit(s), but do not take them away from each other.
You will need to treat the area your rabbit lives in with a rabbit friendly disinfectant and everything needs to be kept incredibly clean. Keep your rabbit warm, though if you are bringing them indoors raise the temperature slowly.
Untreated snuffles can lead to respiratory disease overleaf.
**E. cuniculi (Ec)**

Ec is a microscopic brain and kidney parasite. Rabbits are most likely to catch the infection from their mother but it can also be caught from another rabbit later in life. Symptoms of Ec can include head tilting, shuffling or weakness in a back leg, uncontrollable spinning or rolling and eyes that track to the side or up and down. There are several options for treatment so it’s best to speak to your vet about the different options.

**Ear Masses**

An ear mass is a cavity containing wax or pus (infective bacteria), that is walled off from the rest of the body by tissue. These masses can usually be identified as a soft yet firm spherical swelling. These can cause rabbits a lot of discomfort and can spread around the body if left. Once they spread the outlook isn’t great for the rabbits, so it’s important that you get any lumps and bumps checked straight away.

The best way to check for ear masses is through handling your rabbits daily, checking all over their body for lumps and bumps and looking in the ears for any changes. Lop eared rabbits are particularly prone to ear lesions like these.

**Parasites**

Rabbits are at risk from the following parasites:

- **Mites** feed on skin and fur cells and irritate the rabbit’s skin. If your rabbit looks like it may have dandruff this can be mites. Your vet will most likely treat the mites with injections or advise on an on-the-spot treatment suitable for rabbits. The best way to check for mites is through handling your rabbits daily, checking all over their body for lumps and bumps and looking at their ears for any changes. Lop eared rabbits are particularly prone to ear lesions like these.

- **Fleas** will jump on and off the rabbit’s body, biting to get some blood. When treating fleas you can use the same medication you would use for mites but you need to make sure that the environment is treated too.

- **Ticks** will stay on your rabbit until they have had a full meal of blood and will then hide until they need more. If you find a tick on a rabbit you should contact the vet so they can advise the correct way to remove them (do not just take it off yourself, as this can cause them to burrow in the skin further).

- **Mosquitos** are very hard to stop in the environment, but if you remove any standing water this can help remove their place to breed. Mosquitos are a major cause of the spread of myxomatosis so it’s incredibly important that your rabbits are vaccinated.

**Uterine Adenocarcinoma (Cancer of the Uterus)**

Up to 80% of un-neutered female rabbits can develop cancer of the uterus by 5 years of age*. The best way to prevent this illness is to have your female rabbits neutered. The cancerous tumours usually develop from the endometrial lining of the uterus or the inside layers of the uterus.

The symptoms for cancer of the uterus vary quite a lot, but things to look out for are:

- Vaginal discharge stained with blood
- Cloudy fluid which will come from the mammary glands
- Aggressiveness and other behavioural changes

If you have an unneutered female rabbit she is at risk from this illness. Take her to the vets regularly for check-ups and as soon as if you spot any of the signs above.

*https://www.pdsa.org.uk/taking-care-of-your-pet/looking-after-your-pet/all-pets/neutering-your-pet#contents-link-4
Vaccinate your rabbits against RVHD2

Protect your rabbits & Prevent the spread

#RAW2019

www.rabbitawarenessweek.co.uk