

Fact Sheet **R01**



# Vaccination for your rabbit



### **Vaccination and Immunity**

#### **Why have your rabbit vaccinated?**

Unless properly vaccinated, your rabbit runs the risk of contracting one of two possibly fatal infectious diseases: myxomatosis and viral haemorrhagic disease (VHD). While it is possible for your rabbit to survive these diseases, they invariably lead to dreadful suffering and in most cases death.

### **Immunity**

#### **What is immunity?**

If an animal (or person) is immune to a particular disease it means that there is little or no risk of falling ill to that disease. This immunity is brought about by regular vaccination in adult rabbits.

#### **What about immunity in kittens (baby rabbits)?**

Provided that the mother is immune, kittens are usually protected for the first few weeks of life by the immunity passed to them in their mother's colostrum (first milk). This immunity decreases with time, leaving the kittens susceptible to infectious diseases. Vaccinations at this point simply take over the mother's role in providing protection.

### **Vaccines**

Modern vaccines are products of extensive research and are manufactured to standards which are no less exacting than those demanded for the production of vaccines for human use. With such safe and effective vaccines readily available, it makes sense to protect your rabbit at the earliest opportunity.

### **Myxomatosis**

This disease is caused by a type of pox virus which grows best in the skin of rabbits. The disease was



originally introduced to the United Kingdom accidentally from France, where the disease had been imported to control the rabbit population.

Myxomatosis is spread by blood sucking insects. A major insect parasite which transmits the disease in this country is the rabbit flea. There is also strong circumstantial evidence to suggest that mosquitoes transmit myxomatosis in the United Kingdom. Myxomatosis is not easily spread by simple contact between rabbits.

The incubation period varies slightly, but can be as short as 5 days and as long as 14 days. Affected rabbits develop a high fever, swelling around the eyes and go off their food and water.

The commonest cause of death is pneumonia which often occurs around day 8 of the disease. Some animals may survive for weeks or months after infection but, in general, if an infection is severe in a susceptible rabbit, death occurs within 12 days.

Although vaccination is the mainstay in the prevention of myxomatosis, flea and other biting insect control is important. This will involve not only keeping wild rabbits away from pet animals, but also the use of sprays and insect repellents.

## **Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD)**

This disease, caused by a virus of the calicivirus group, only affects adult rabbits and hares. It was first identified in wild rabbits in China in 1984 and rapidly spread to Europe and the United Kingdom.

The virus is spread in saliva and nasal secretions with transmission resulting from either direct rabbit to rabbit contact or indirectly by the transport of the virus on people, clothing, other objects or animals.

Only rabbits over the age of 6 weeks are seriously affected, though many of these will die. The incubation period is 16 hours to 3 days and the symptoms vary from sudden death through suffocation, convulsions and nose bleeds, to a mild malaise and spontaneous recovery.



## **When should your rabbit be vaccinated?**

The myxomatosis and VHD vaccines are two separate vaccines and need to be given on separate occasions.

### **Primary vaccination**

A kitten (baby rabbit) can be vaccinated against myxomatosis from 6 weeks of age and the VHD vaccine can be given from 10 weeks of age. An adult rabbit can start its primary vaccination at any stage provided the two vaccines are given 2 weeks apart. Generally it takes about 2 weeks for the immunity to develop and the rabbit to be protected.

### **Booster vaccination**

Immunity to these diseases does not last indefinitely and will gradually fall leaving your rabbit at risk. Boosters are vital to maintain the immunity which will protect your rabbit from these infections and provide an opportunity for a regular health check. VHD and myxomatosis boosters are required annually, though it is sometimes necessary to boost the immunity to myxomatosis every 6 months in high risk areas.

### **Record of vaccination**

On completion of your rabbit's primary course of vaccinations, you will be given a record card providing a record of vaccination and advising when the next booster is due. Remember to bring this record card to the surgery every time that your rabbit has vaccinations so that it can be updated.

*For further information please ask at reception.*