

## Rabbit Virus Targeted In United Kingdom

**Vaccination campaign helps prevent spread of pet diseases.**

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March 2008 wrapped up National Vaccination Month in the United Kingdom, but along with it, the myxomatosis virus has continued to affect rabbits.

"Every year we receive reports of [virus] explosions in various counties of the UK," said Anne Mitchell of the Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund.

During an unusually wet August 2007, a myxomatosis outbreak hit the United Kingdom. Although no governing body has calculated an exact number of infected rabbits, Mitchell said the number of cases reached the hundreds. In two months, the RWAFF received more calls to their help line in regard to the illness than they usually get in a year.

The fatal virus, characterized by the swelling of the eyelids, genitals and skin, is best prevented through vaccination, according to veterinarian Judith Brown. The RWAFF and veterinarians involved with National Vaccination Month recommended getting treatments for pet rabbits.

"Myxomatosis decimated the wild rabbit population when it arrived in Britain 50 years ago. It is still deadly today and causes a great deal of suffering for wild and domestic rabbit," Mitchell said. "All domestic rabbits should be vaccinated."

Rabbits as young as 6 months can receive the vaccination and should be treated one to two times a year, depending on the risk of contracting the disease, Brown said.

Myxomatosis is typically spread by insects, usually mosquitoes or rabbit fleas, but is an airborne virus and can be passed by rabbit-to-rabbit contact. Rabbits located outdoors, especially near standing water, are most at risk, Mitchell warned, but it should be kept in mind that all rabbits, from indoor pets to wild rabbits, can contract the disease.

Of 2 million domestic rabbits in the United Kingdom, 1.8 million are left unvaccinated each year, making them susceptible to fatal diseases, according to John Helps, veterinary manager of the Small Animal Business Unit at Intervet. Intervet, the world's third largest animal health company, launched National Vaccination Month to increase awareness among pet owners of the need to vaccinate their pets. More than 2,000 veterinarians participated in the amnesty program, providing free pet checkups and £30-vouchers for vaccinations.

To date, more than 50,000 people have downloaded vouchers to vaccinate their pet dogs, cats and rabbits, Helps said. The outcome of the premiere campaign will not be fully calculated until the end of April.

Helps claims that although myxomatosis usually arises in cycles, the problem is not going away. With the onset of more mild winters in the United Kingdom, the disease is emerging as a year-round problem.