



Rabbit Welfare
Association & Fund

Flystrike – don't get caught out.

Flystrike is a most distressing condition that can affect any animal, and unless caught quickly, it can be a very painful killer. Rabbits are very susceptible, especially if they have a problem that makes it hard for them to keep their rear-end clean and owners need to be vigilant constantly.

What is flystrike?

Flies, notably bluebottles and greenbottles, lay their eggs on dead animals and the hatched maggots eat the flesh. This actually does more in terms of ridding the environment of corpses than predators do. Flesh can be eaten from bones very quickly, especially in hot weather when the maggots are more active and develop more rapidly.

Unfortunately, the flies won't always wait for death, but are attracted to the smells of blood, faeces and urine, and will lay their eggs on an animal that is injured or dirty. When the maggots begin to feast on the flesh of that animal, the results can be catastrophic, and it can all happen surprisingly quickly.



Photo – A Mitcjell

Rabbits are particularly susceptible to flystrike if they are unable to keep themselves clean of urine and faeces. Urinary infection or bladder stones/sludge can cause urine dribbling, soaking the fur with urine and attracting flies. Obesity can make it impossible for a rabbit to clean urine or faeces from its fur, and so can arthritis, which is made even more problematic by obesity. In addition, obesity can make it very difficult for a rabbit to squat properly when it toilets and the fur can become soiled. Painful dental problems can make a rabbit reluctant or unable to clean itself properly and can also result in a soiled bottom.

Another problem is unsanitary living conditions. Soiled bedding and litter must be removed regularly, preferably daily. Left in the rabbit's home, it too will attract flies, and will itself soil fur.



Photo – R Saunders

The onus is entirely on the owner to keep a regular check on the rabbit. Even healthy, active rabbits get dirty bottoms from time to time and we can never assume, because our bunnies are usually clean, that they will always be clean. In the summer months especially, rabbits must be checked at least twice per day. It takes only a few hours from flies laying eggs to maggots hatching and eating into a rabbit's flesh and once they are established, huge damage can be done, from

which many rabbits don't recover. If the bottom is dirty, wash it with warm water and a shampoo for small pets. Rinse thoroughly and dry. The smell of damp fur has been known to attract flies too! Urine left on the fur and skin can cause scalding, where the skin becomes red, inflamed and very sore. Ask your vet for anti-inflammatory medicine and for a topical cream that will form a barrier and at the same time moisturise the skin. As well as treating the immediate symptoms, try to get to the bottom of why this is happening, prevention being far better than cure.

Please note that it is not always the bottom that can become soiled, for example, flystrike is surprisingly common just above the tail and in other areas of the rabbit's body.

It is possible to buy preparations to apply to your rabbit's fur that will prevent fly eggs from hatching. However, these alone are no substitute for ensuring that your rabbit is healthy enough not to become susceptible in the first place, and they cannot be relied upon to replace regular checks of the rabbit's bottom and dealing with any soiling immediately.

Environmentally, you can grow plants around your hutch that will repel flies, or hang them dried in your bunny shed or inside your house. These include dried leaves and flowers of Gilead (*Cedronella canariensis*), Lad's Love (*Artemisia abrotamum*), dried flowers of Pyrethrum (*Tanacetum cinerarifolium*), Pennyroyal (*Mentha pelugium*), Love in a Mist (*Nigella damascena*), Larkspur (*Delphinium*) – do be careful with this...it's toxic to rabbits so must only be grown where they cannot access it. Herbs including balm, chamomile, hemp, agrimooony, lavender, mugwort, Rosemary, Rue, Peppermint, Santalina (Cotton Lavender), basil, shofly and green oregano are also great at repelling flies. There are also essential oil impregnated sticks available that contain natural insect repellants. These can be kept in the house or rabbit shed. Hang up flypapers. Install insect 'zappers' – these use a light to attract insects which are then killed immediately they touch live wires that surround the bulb. These zappers are safe in that there is insulated protection to stop humans and pets from making contact with the live wires. They can be powered from the electric mains or by battery and there are some solar powered models.

What to do if your rabbit has flystrike

This is an emergency. Do not delay. You need to get your rabbit to a vet immediately. Its life is in danger and it is in severe pain, because it is being eaten alive.

If you are able to remove any visible maggots, then do so, using tweezers, but don't be tempted to dig around and cause more pain. The vet is really the person to carry out this job and you must get your rabbit to the surgery as quickly as possible, no matter what the time of day or night. Waiting for the next time the vet's normal surgery hours begin is not an option. It is important to keep the fur dry so that the the vet can clip it off easily to remove the maggots so don't try to wash your bunny.



Photo – R Saunders

Generally, maggots will need to be removed surgically. Your rabbit will need painkillers, anti-inflammatories, antibiotics and hospital inpatient care if caught in time.

Routines to prevent flystrike

Daily

- ⤴ Check your rabbit's bottom at least once per day in winter, at least twice per day in the summer
- ⤴ If there is any urine or faeces, wash and dry the area
- ⤴ Remove dirty bedding and litter

General

- ⤴ Apply Rearguard or a similar product as recommended by the manufacturer
- ⤴ If your rabbit is obese, it needs to lose weight so that there is less strain on joints, it is able to squat properly when toileting and it is able to clean itself properly
- ⤴ If you suspect your rabbit has a urinary problem then take it to the vet for diagnosis and treatment
- ⤴ If your rabbit is producing unusually wet faeces, take it to the vet for diagnosis and treatment, and be prepared to change diet accordingly
- ⤴ If you suspect your rabbit has arthritis, ask the vet for anti-inflammatory medicine to ease pain in joints and ensure it isn't overweight.

This article is brought to you by The Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund (RWF) Reg Charity 1085689

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