

Myxomatosis

Malcolm's Diary – sharing Malcolm's experiences.

I was unfortunate enough in 2002 to have three of my bunnies suffer from Myxomatosis. Like me, I'm sure you have all heard of 'myxi' but hopefully few of you have experienced it first hand. Thankfully, all of my bunnies pulled through and hope you will find their story interesting, and that you never need to make use of any of the advice contained within it!

I have five bunnies in all: Malcolm, Annie & Eddie who live in a large shed with a safe outdoor enclosure attached, and Jango and Eleni who live in another shed. Malcolm is a three-year-old Sussex, who has a reputation for being a bully, and a love of ear biting. My first thought therefore one Saturday morning in September when I discovered Eddie with a small round scab on her nose was that he'd bitten her. She seemed totally fit otherwise, and was still hopping about and eating normally. The next day she had what looked like a scratch on her eyelid and I began to get suspicious. As she seemed happy and all of the other bunnies were fine I didn't worry, but took her to the vets' the following day. Sure enough, by the Monday her eye was quite swollen, although she was still behaving normally, and none of the other bunnies gave me cause for concern.

Week one

My vet Judith confirmed that she suspected Myxi, and gave Eddie an antibiotic injection and eye cream for me to apply to ease any discomfort she may have been feeling. As my husband Gary is a nurse and able to give injections, I was given five days' of antibiotics to take home to administer. I was surprised that Eddie could have contracted myxi as she is regularly vaccinated, and I thought that it was most likely to occur in summer when there are more biting insects around. However, Judith advised that the Myxoma virus which causes Myxomatosis thrives in the cold and can occasionally cause myxi in vaccinated rabbits, which is usually less severe than the full blown form. This is known as Atypical Myxomatosis., and rabbits have a much better chance of surviving this than the full blown form, which is nearly always fatal. Judith also said that we now know that it can also be spread by direct contact with an infected bunny (ie if Eddie sneezed onto Malcolm or Annie) and through secretions from the lesion, not just by biting insects. In a wet warm summer the populations of biting insects can be very high even into the Autumn, making that a risky time too. Another possibility is that she could have been infected by my dogs (carrying an insect) or through the hay. We later found out that there was an outbreak in the surrounding area.

Uncharacteristically, Malcolm had been licking Eddie's eye for the last day or so. Sure enough on Tuesday morning he did not charge up to me and snatch the cabbage from my hand as normal. Instead he was sitting in his dog basket looking very sorry for himself and his eyelids were ever so slightly inflamed. Annie and Eddie were happily munching their cabbage, and then I noticed that Annie's nose was swollen because of a large pox.

So, Annie and Malcolm had succumbed four days after Eddie. Given Judith's earlier advice I knew they needed warmth, so I moved their beds, toys and litter trays into the utility room, and plugged in the heated pet mat. We were given five more days of Baytril, this time for all three, and prepared ourselves for a long stretch of TLC.

You can do a lot to help bunnies suffering from myxi. Your vet can provide antibiotics (to prevent secondary infection) and painkillers (Steroids should never be given). But really the onus is on the owner's nursing. Fluids and nutrition can be administered by syringe feeding if the bunny won't eat on their own. (Supreme Recovery, or Oxbow Critical Care are very good, and worth having in stock in case of emergency). Lastly, the bunny should always be kept warm, but not overheated. This last factor has been shown to significantly improve survival in infected rabbits.

By Wednesday it was obvious that Malcolm would suffer a lot more than the girls. Other than their dry scabs they were normal. Malcolm, however, had very swollen inflamed eyes and nostrils, and lumps appeared all over his body, with particularly large, nasty lumps at the base of his ears and above his nose. By the end of week one he was a very sorry sight. Thankfully he was still making an effort to eat, but to help him I was grating his carrot and offering all of his favourite things like fresh herbs and apricots. He was in this state for another week.

Week three

By week three the inflammation was drying up, presenting a new problem. Malcolm's eyes and nostrils were scabbing up and his breathing becoming laboured. I returned Annie and Eddie outside as Malcolm needed a lot of attention and they were 100%. He was too poorly to miss them anyway, and they were eating more than their fair share of the food!

I had read that burning essential oil in a burner could help with his breathing so we did this when we were able to supervise, and put a few drops on to the heated pet mat at other times. It seemed to help.

I was very worried about his breathing and feared a secondary infection so we went back to Judith. She prescribed more antibiotics and painkillers, but was pleased that there was not actually any secondary infection. However, Malcolm was the worst case of Atypical myxi that she had seen and we weren't sure that he would make it. I was amazed at how poorly he was compared to the girls, especially as they had all been vaccinated together.

Week four

By week four his eyes were very dry and cream was applied three times daily. One nostril had scabbed over completely so he could only breathe through the other one. By now he was fed up and stopped eating. I started syringe feeding him, little and often, managing to get a whole packet of Supreme Recovery a day into him. This continued for four days and I confess that I began to get despondent. He eventually nibbled some fresh herbs and I managed to tempt him with some fruit loaf. This was his main diet for the next few days, not very healthy, but desperate times call for desperate measures!

Week five

Just as things began to look up his other nostril scabbed over. Obviously that was not good news, so we went back to Judith, who had no option but to pull a scab off one nostril. I had to then continue to remove scabs and clean the pus from his nose twice a day. Eugh!

He remained this way for another week, but gradually his interest in food returned and he was eating well.

Week seven

By the end of this week he was on the road to recovery. We had warm weather during the day so I let him spend the day with the girls in the nice, warm shed. He still came in at night, for warmth and to ensure that he still ate well.

Finally...

Eventually, after nine weeks he was almost back to his old self, so I left him out overnight. The next day he charged at me and snatched the food out of my hand. All in all, after ten weeks he was through it.

I'm very pleased to say that three months later they were all fit and well. Miraculously they have been left with no visible scars, but if you look at Malcolm's nose closely you can see some signs. Some rabbits may need surgery later to close scarred holes in their eyelids or over their nose.

Fortunately Jango and Eleni didn't become infected. I was very careful when feeding and cleaning them. Eleni suffers from E cuniculi and I'm sure that she would not have been strong enough to fight off myxi.

Vaccination

Rabbits can be vaccinated against Myxi from six weeks old, and this should be repeated every six months, especially in high risk areas (ask your vet if you are unsure). This vaccination is different to others in that part of the vaccine must be injected into and not only underneath the skin for it to be fully effective.

Symptoms

The typical signs are pussy secretions from the nose and eyes, swellings under the skin (especially on the head), and swollen genitals.

If your rabbit has problems with his teeth, having an illness like Myxomatosis may have complications. If the bunny is off his food, then the teeth won't get the action they need to keep trim. This can sometimes lead to spurs developing which can cause problems later. Be safe, and have your bunny checked by your vet, especially if you later see weepy eyes or slobbers around the mouth.



A rabbit with myxi.

Aromatherapy may help to ease discomfort

Helpful hints on caring for rabbits diagnosed with myxomatosis can be found at the Myxomatosis Helpline website, set up Robin Guppy, who with his wife has nursed rabbits suffering from the distressing disease. The site contains lots of information including useful suggestions made by their own vet and veterinary nurses.

Things you can do to help ease your bunny's discomfort

- Keep your rabbit warm at all times.
- Use a small aromatherapy oil burner in the room with your rabbit and burn a mix of two drops each of Eucalyptus, Tea Tree, and Elemi oil. (Always ensure that the burner is in a safe place and never leave it unattended). At night place two drops of each of the oils on a cotton wool ball and place it near the cage.
- Smear vapour rub (Vicks or similar) onto a piece of card and place on top of a covered hot water bottle, helping breathing.
- Offer drinking water in a saucer - sometimes swelling around the mouth makes it difficult for the rabbit to use its usual water bottle.
- Try to keep their eyes free from discharge by using lukewarm black tea, sterile contact lens saline or lukewarm water and cotton buds to very gently wipe away the discharge with a rolling action. If the eyes are very swollen and sore then wrap your bunny in a towel and place another on your lap then gently hold his or her eye open while someone else gently squeezes the cotton wool ball soaked in the black tea or water so that the liquid floods the eye, washing out the discharge. Use a new cotton wool ball for each eye.
- If your rabbit stops eating, you can try to feed him with a recovery diet or a liquidised mixture of:
 - 1 part rabbit pellet (Excel/ Selective) or similar. Try to get a pellet with a good fibre content
 - 1 part pumpkin flesh
 - 1 part unsweetened pineapple juice

The mixture should be smooth enough to feed via a large gauge syringe available from your vet or chemist.

* If your vet gives you medicine to be taken by mouth, try putting it on a cut up seedless grape.

For more information, visit the website: <http://www.rguppy.freeserve.co.uk/>

This article was written for Rabbiting On Magazine in 2003, and has been updated for the website Summer 2011. It is brought to you by The Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund (RWAF) Reg Charity 1085689

If you love rabbits, you'll love the RWAF, join us!

Over 10,000 rabbit lovers have already joined the UK's largest organisation dedicated to pet rabbits. Join us so you can treat yourself to our fabulous magazine Rabbiting On which is packed full of information and advice that no rabbit lover should be without.

Just as importantly, you will be supporting the work we do to improve the lives of pet rabbits such as our 'A Hutch is Not Enough' campaign, the help line we run 365 days a year, and keeping our website up to date making sure we keep everyone informed.

So, if you love bunnies, join us, help us, and treat yourself. Because together we can make a difference.

To join call 0844 324 6090 or log onto www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk.



Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund

