
**Avian & Exotic Clinic
Of the Monterey Peninsula**

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Myxomatosis

Myxomatosis is a devastating viral disease of the domestic rabbit here in Central California. The disease is found in the wild rabbit species, particularly the brush bunny, in which it causes no clinical disease. The virus may then be transmitted from the wild rabbits to our domesticated pets via the bite of blood sucking external parasites, such as mosquitoes, ticks and fleas.

Affected rabbits develop a severe, overwhelming disease, which begins with lethargy, reddened eyes, swollen eyelids, watery ocular discharge, fever and swollen genitalia. Most rabbits die within hours of the development of this stage of the disease. Those that survive may develop a more generalized facial redness and swelling. Unfortunately, there is no effective treatment for myxomatosis. Pets may be made more comfortable with a variety of medications, but most are truly ineffective in treating the disease.

While there is a vaccine available in Europe, it is neither available nor effective in North America. It appears that the California strain of the virus is unique and causes the most severe forms of the disease. Prevention of infection is based upon elimination of the arthropod vectors, particularly mosquitoes.

Mosquito netting and screens appear to be most effective in the control of the insects. Rabbit owners should avoid allowing outdoor “playtime” for their rabbits during the highest mosquito activity time periods, dusk and dawn. While use of “mosquito zapper lights” may initially seem attractive, their use may not be appropriate in the area of rabbit housing, because they attract mosquitoes before they “zap” them. Rabbit owners should refrain from providing environmental and food sources, which may attract wild rabbits to the pet area, as they may be asymptomatic carriers of the virus.

Despite the devastating effects of the myxomatosis virus on the pet rabbit, the disease can be prevented by practicing a conscientious mosquito and flea control program. Unfortunately, this method of prevention is the only means possible; because once the rabbit is infected, it is too late.