

Coccidiosis In Rabbits

Coccidiosis is a contagious and common condition in rabbits and can be a very aggressive and lethal disease.

Young rabbits are most often affected, usually by eating faeces from an infected older rabbit. Adult rabbits can be carriers without symptoms, contaminating water food and the environment. When a baby is introduced it will then fall ill with the disease, usually resulting in incorrect blame on the breeder or pet shop.

Stress, transport, overcrowding or immune stress can also trigger symptoms, since coccidia as a normal inhabitant of the intestine in most bunnies.

Coccidiosis is caused by a single celled protozoa of the Eimeria species. It has a complex life cycle. There are nine different species of Coccidia in rabbits, one affects the liver and the rest the intestines. Each intestinal species tends to favour a different part of the intestine.



Symptoms vary with the species of coccidia, but can include severe diarrhoea (which may include blood or mucus), abdominal pain, weakness, weight loss, loss of appetite and death. If weight loss is greater than 20%, death usually follows within 24 hours. A subtle form can also be seen with weakness and lethargy without diarrhoea, with rapid death.



Rabbit intestine showing coccidiosis

Liver coccidia (*Eimeria stiedae*) causes bile ducts to thicken causing stunting and a pot bellied appearance, but is less often fatal.

Treatment is with sulphaquinoxaline, trimethoprim/sulphonamide or toltrazuril from a veterinarian, usually after demonstrating coccidia from faeces under the microscope. Faecal samples should always be tested in wasting/diarrhoea, but also in constipation cases. Even if treatment is successful diarrhoea can continue for up to a week, and the rabbit can relapse after about 2 weeks.



Rabbit liver showing coccidiosis

Prevention is important. Thorough hygiene is critical (bleach is OK but no organic matter can be present) and many rabbit pellets routinely include

coccidiostat in the formulation.



TAKE CARE! Many of these products are toxic to Guinea Pigs, so cross-species feeding is not recommended. Use dry rather than moist pellets and if you have several rabbits in a cage they should not be fed directly off the ground. Quarantine is also important for new arrivals, particularly youngsters.

References: http://www.medirabbit.com/EN/GI_diseases/Protozoal_diseases/coccidiosis_general.PDF

<http://www.rabbit-information.co.uk/coccidiosis.php>

<http://www.animalpetsandfriends.com/Article/Coccidiosis-in-rabbits/10391>

<http://www.birdvet.com.au/exotics%20care/COCCIDIOSIS%20IN%20RABBITS.htm>