

# Managing common skin disorders in small furries

Some skin ailments in rabbits and guinea pigs can be contagious to humans, and proper treatment is vital, explains **Bruce Waddell** of Willows Veterinary Group

## RABBITS

There are a number of skin disorders that can affect domestic rabbits. These can be caused by fungal infections or bacterial infections (pyoderma) and must be treated urgently as some infections can be passed on to humans. Some conditions can be prevented by managing the rabbit's environment.

The state of a rabbit's skin can be a guide to the overall health of the rabbit.

## Hutch burn

This is a condition generally caused by wet and dirty hutch floors but can also occur in rabbits with bladder problems. The area around the genitals becomes chapped and inflamed and susceptible to bacterial infection, which needs to be treated with an antibiotic ointment.

The condition is often confused with a bacterial infection called Treponematoses and only examination of skin cells under a microscope can differentiate between the two. Keeping the hutch clean with regular, fresh bedding will help to avoid hutch burn.

## Dewlap dermatitis

Female rabbits have a heavy fold of skin, called a dewlap, at the front of their neck, which can become wet when the rabbit drinks. This constant wetness may cause inflammation and infection. Using water bottles with valves rather than open water bowls can help reduce the chances of rabbits becoming affected.

## Ulcerative pododermatitis

This is a condition usually affecting the hindfoot of the rabbit and is often attributed



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to the rabbit's environment. Typically, if a rabbit is housed with a wire or hard floor surface, the rabbit's toenails can't sink in and extra pressure is put on the hindfoot, which then develops pressure sores. If the flooring is covered with urine and faeces these sores can soon become infected. Genetics can play a part, with heavy breed rabbits being more prone to the condition.

## Ringworm

Despite its name ringworm is not a parasitic worm but a fungal infection common in rabbits. It is characterised by red-dened, circular sores and is generally associated with poor

sanitation, nutrition and other environmental factors. Rabbits can be carriers of the infection without showing symptoms so owners should take care when grooming multiple rabbits using the same brush. Ringworm can be transmitted to humans so infected rabbits need to be isolated and treated. Owners must wear disposable gloves and thoroughly wash hands and arms when handling rabbits and cleaning hutches and equipment.

## Myxomatosis

Myxomatosis is a deadly disease caused by the myxoma virus. It is characterised by skin sores and transmitted by mos-

quito bites, fleas or by direct contact with another infected rabbit. The disease progresses quickly and many rabbits die within 48 hours.

There is no cure for the disease but there is a preventative vaccination available from veterinarians.

## Mites

Ear mites are a common parasite in rabbits and cause irritation to the ear lining, causing a discharge of a watery fluid and the build-up of a brown crust. Infected rabbits scratch their ears and shake their heads.

Fur mites are also common in rabbits but do not burrow into the skin. They resemble dandruff and can be controlled by regularly dusting the animals and bedding with permethrin powder.

Occasionally rabbits can be infected with mange mites, which burrow into the skin and lay eggs. This causes severe itching to the rabbit.

This condition is extremely contagious and can be passed to humans.

## Fleas

Rabbits can be affected by fleas

and will need treatment with rabbit specific products which must not contain fipronil.

## GUINEA PIGS

Guinea pigs have very sensitive skin and can suffer from both parasitic and fungal problems and often at the same time.

Because guinea pigs originate from countries with warm, dry climates they are very prone to fungal skin infections in the UK where there is always moisture in the air.

## Mites

Guinea pigs can be affected by mites. Burrowing mites are commonly referred to as mange and burrow into the skin. They are commonly identified as lumps just under the skin, often in a V shape in the middle of the back.

Skin mites live on the surface of the skin. There are two types. One is often present in hay bedding, which has given them the common name of hay mites. The other is called running lice and is passed from guinea pig to guinea pig, often through a medium such as grass.

## Ringworm

Ringworm can affect guinea pigs in the same way as rabbits and can be transferred to humans.

Skin problems are more likely if the guinea pig is stressed or its immune system is compromised.

Contact the Willows Veterinary Group on 01606 723202.



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## TIPS FOR SQPS

- Never use a fiprinol-based product to treat fleas in rabbits – studies have shown it to cause a number of adverse reactions, including seizures, anorexia, lethargy and hypothermia.
- Recommend hay for guinea pig bedding. Sawdust and shavings can remove natural oils from their skin and barley straw is too coarse, which may cause eye injuries.
- It is essential that bedding is kept clean and changed regularly. Pets should be regularly inspected and areas of dirty and/or wet fur cleaned and dried.
- Many of these dermatological conditions have the same symptoms so clients should be encouraged to see a veterinary surgeon to identify the specific cause.