

RABBITS- E.CUNICULI

What is E.cuniculi?

E.cuniculi is a parasite that lives inside cells and attacks the central nervous system and internal organs eg. kidney, heart, liver and lung. It is a very common parasite; approximately 50% of pet rabbits in the UK either have the parasite lying dormant (not causing disease) or have had the infection and cleared it.

How does my rabbit get E.cuniculi?

The spores of the parasite are shed in urine from all rabbits and rodents once infected. The spores are then spread in food and water that have been contaminated. Commonly the infection is passed from mother to young. As the infection does not always cause symptoms of disease then infection can spread without the owner knowing it.

What are the symptoms of disease and how can we test for it?

The most common symptom of E.cuniculi that we see in pet rabbits is a head tilt and falling over. Sometimes the symptoms are severe and the rabbit can be fitting, but usually the symptoms can be managed. Some rabbits get cataracts (white discolouration of the eye), kidney disease and urinary incontinence.

A blood test can be taken to look for antibodies against the parasite. However lots of rabbits that do not have symptoms of disease have antibodies against E.cuniculi so the test is not very accurate although it can be helpful in confirming a diagnosis. A test on the urine can also be taken to look for the parasite but by the time symptoms of the disease appear, the rabbit has usually stopped shedding the spores, so again it is not very accurate.

How is E.cuniculi treated?

Treatment is relatively simple, a drug called fenbendazole is given once a day for 28 days, by mouth. It comes in an easy to dose syringe called Panacur for Rabbits.

Some rabbits may require steroids if the nerve damage is severe. Antibiotics may also be used.

Can I prevent E.cuniculi in my pet rabbit?

At the moment there is not very much research into the disease. The best preventative measure we can currently recommend is a 9 day course of Panacur Paste for Rabbits every 6 months. If your rabbit has had E.cuniculi diagnosed previously, then treat every 3 months. If you are going to be moving house or getting a new rabbit then we recommend that you treat for 9 days again.

We started recommending this course of preventative treatment a few years ago and whilst it cannot guarantee your rabbit is safe, we certainly have seen a reduction in the number of cases of disease.