An Overview of Rabbit Husbandry, Nutrition and Preventative Health Care

This lecture gives an overview of the care and health of rabbits, looking at how they should be kept, their dietary needs and their overall health care, looking at both preventative health care, such as vaccinations, and in treatment and nursing involved of common health problems, such as dental problems and flystrike.

Learning Outcomes

- Knowledge and understanding of rabbit husbandry, nutritional needs and health care.
- The ability to advise clients on correct care of rabbits and to nurse hospitalised rabbits

Course Notes:

Diet

- Rabbits are designed to spend a large proportion of each day grazing. Therefore it’s vital for hay and grass to form around 80% of their diet. Without enough hay serious health problems will occur, so they must have a limitless supply. Timothy hay is the most suitable variety for rabbits. They should eat their own body size in hay every day.

- Concentrate feeds should be kept to a minimum (feed a 2.5kg rabbit no more than an egg-cupful daily) and muesli style feeds in particular should be avoided since they allow selective feeding and will encourage obesity. Concentrate feeds for rabbits were introduced when rabbits were reared for meat. In this situation a fast growth rate and high body condition were desirable, and dental disease was not a concern since the rabbits would not be long-lived.

- A high fibre pellet concentrate such as one of the Excel™ feeds by Burgess or a Science Selective diet by Supreme petfoods is most appropriate.

- A small amount of dark leafy greens such as kale, savoy cabbage and spinach can be fed daily. Other suitable vegetables and herbs include broccoli, cauliflower leaves, sprouts, celery, parsley, basil and carrot tops. Carrots themselves are too high in sugar to be fed on a regular basis, but can be used as treats.

- Fruit, particularly sweeter varieties such as grapes should be altogether avoided since they contain a lot of sugar which encourages an overgrowth of ‘bad’ microbes which can result in diarrhoea.

- Occasional high fibre rabbit treats are fine, but sugary or high-carbohydrate human food such as bread or biscuits should be avoided – these can make rabbits quite ill.

Vaccination

- All pet rabbits should be vaccinated against myxomatosis and VHD (Viral Haemorrhagic Disease). Even house rabbits without access to outdoors are at risk.

- Sadly, myxomatosis is widespread and common in the UK. It is spread by fleas which are rife in the wild rabbit population and could reach pet rabbits by direct contact, from the garden or from other pets. It is also transmittable via mosquito bites.

- Viral Haemorrhagic Disease can be spread by direct and indirect contact. It causes collapse, fever, internal bleeding and rapidly results in death.

- Vaccinations for myxomatosis should be done 6-monthly and VHD once a year.