

## Health and welfare information about your rabbit from Vetlexicon Lapis.



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### Faecal testing

Faecal testing is the recommended method for diagnosing parasitic infections of the gastrointestinal tract. Your vet will recommend treatments, a schedule for check-ups and faecal testing that will help protect your rabbit.

### What are gastrointestinal parasites?

A variety of gastrointestinal parasites affect exotic pets such as rabbits, rats, mice, gerbils, hamsters, and guinea pigs. The most common parasites in these pets are pinworms, tapeworms, *Giardia* and coccidia:

- **Pinworms:** adult pinworms are sometimes visible in the faeces of infected pets. These parasites may not cause any clinical signs but can cause poor body condition. Pinworm infestation is extremely common in both wild and captive rabbit populations. Deaths have been reported in some rabbits.
- **Tapeworms:** heavy tapeworm infections can cause diarrhoea and weight loss, but some infected animals show no clinical signs. Tapeworm infection is rare in rabbits.
- ***Giardia*:** a single-celled parasite. In rats and mice, it can cause abdominal distention (swelling) and diarrhoea. Rarely reported in the rabbit.

- **Coccidia:** coccidia are microscopic parasites. One type of coccidia parasite can cause liver damage and death in rabbits. Coccidia can remain in the environment for months, so cleaning a contaminated area will help prevent disease spread and re-infection.

## How do rabbits become infected?

In most cases, eggs or infective stages of parasites are shed in faeces. Once parasites are in the environment, other rabbits can be exposed through direct contact with faeces or exposure to faecal-contaminated food, water or bedding.

Some parasites can live in the environment for a long time, so keeping your rabbit's environment clean using a disinfectant can help reduce the risk of infection, and the spread of disease.

Pinworm eggs are light and can be carried in the air.

Tapeworms are slightly different; they can be transmitted indirectly when a rabbit consumes a flea or other insect that is infected with the parasite. If your pet eats an infected insect, the tapeworm will continue its lifecycle inside your rabbit. Keeping fleas and other insects away from your rabbits living area will help reduce the risk of exposure. Tapeworm infection is rare in rabbits.

## What are the clinical signs of infection?

Signs include, mucous in the faeces, impaction, stasis, severe pain and gas formation; diarrhoea, poor coat quality, tiredness and weight loss are also common.

If you are worried that your rabbit has a parasitic infection, take it to see your vet who will be able to test for different types of parasites.

## How is faecal testing performed?

First of all, your vet will examine the appearance of your rabbits faeces. If the faeces are softer than normal or discoloured, this can indicate a problem. Your vet may recommend performing more than one type of test. The most common types of faecal tests:

- **Direct faecal smear:** a small amount of faeces is placed on a microscope slide, mixed with a very small amount of water or saline, and then examined under a microscope. Parasite eggs and single-celled parasites can sometimes be identified using this method.
- **Faecal flotation:** a sample of faeces is placed in a small tubular container and mixed with a small amount of special solution. Mixing causes the parasite eggs to float to the top of the solution. The eggs are then placed on a microscope slide which your vet will examine under the microscope.

In many cases, faecal testing alone can detect parasites, but your vet may need to perform additional tests to help confirm a diagnosis. Even if testing doesn't confirm parasites, your vet may recommend treatment as a precaution.

### **Why is faecal testing important for my rabbit?**

Infected rabbits often don't exhibit any obvious clinical signs; this means the only way to tell if your rabbit is infected, is to perform faecal testing periodically to check for parasites.

Your vet can recommend a programme of check-ups and faecal testing that can help protect your rabbit from these dangerous parasites. Faecal testing is also important because some parasites can be transmitted to humans (zoonotic). Eliminating these parasites helps protect your rabbit and your family.