



Fleas on Rabbits

Provided by the Sacramento Chapter of the House Rabbit Society

Depending on conditions (where you live, whether your rabbits are allowed outside, whether you have other animals, and whether the effects El Nino and El Nina are truly history), you may be wondering if the impending flea season is going to affect your furry family.

Flea treatments are a common concern of rabbit owners – what's the best way to get rid of them, without risking harm to your bunny? We did some checking around – and consulted with our own Dr. Marianne Brick of the Madison Avenue Veterinary Clinic – to find out what's out there, what works and what doesn't.

Unfortunately, it's not as simple as it seems; when it comes to determining the "best" products on the market, it seems that the jury is still out among even the most educated veterinarians. ***Many non-rabbit-savvy vets will tell concerned rabbit owners that any product that is approved kittens can be used on a rabbit, and that this is the best way to go. STOP! This is not necessarily true.*** Following is a list of some of the most common ways of treating fleas, and the arguments for and against them.



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Flea powders

Dust your rabbit with 5% carbaryl insecticide (a common brand name is 5% Sevin Dust) working the dust down through Bunny's thick fur to the skin. Bunny might try to lick some of it off; assuming he doesn't go overboard, this is probably all right. Most of the powder is just a carrier agent, and there's very little of the active ingredient in the mix. Another important warning from the San Diego HRS: "There are "all natural" flea powders sold at many pet and health food stores and in catalogs. These powders mainly contain pennyroyal (very poisonous), peppermint, eucalyptus or other herbs. Do not assume that these are safe just because they are in a health food store or are herbal. Herbs and "natural" products contain chemicals, such as the chrysanthemum derivative pyrethrin, designed to kill insects or fungi; they can also have lethal effects on mammals. Some of these herbs may even be safe for humans to eat, but can kill rabbits."

Flea dips (baths)

Some grooming houses (and even vets) will do this upon request, but it is highly discouraged by the HRS. According to HRS founder and director Marinell Harriman, "We have never recommended a flea dip for rabbits, and recently we received a very alarming report of a death occurring after a flea shampoo, followed by a pyrethrin dip. We cannot be certain as to the specific cause of death – the stress of the bath or the ingredients in the shampoo or dip – so we recommend avoiding both."

Flea combs

This approach alone probably won't solve the problem, but it's definitely an important part of the equation. Be sure to check around the ears and legs for places where fleas might hide. Drown captured fleas in water or alcohol.

Flea collars

Don't even think about trying this approach. Not only do rabbits hate restraints around their necks, but remember that most flea collars are treated with a chemical dose that is measured for much heavier animals (dogs and cats). A potential quick fix isn't worth the risk of accidental overdose.

Room sprays

According to the HRS national office, this may be the best way to go. A good flea spray can kill fleas and eggs in a room for up to six months after treatment. These are available at grocery or hardware stores and are safe for animals, as long as the animals are removed from the room during treatment and kept out of the area for 24 hours following the spray. Be sure to read the specific directions on the back of the can.

Upkeep and housecleaning

It may seem like a silly point to make, but prevention really is the best approach. Regular vacuuming and occasional steam-cleaning will help keep down the risk of flea infestation and contribute substantially to your bunnies' comfort. Have your carpet annually treated with sodium polyborate (boric acid) or fenoxycarb (an insect growth regulator in the form of a synthetic hormone).

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Topical Products

What about topical products, such as Advantage or Frontline? Topical products are gel-like substances that come in little pre-measured tubes. You apply the solution to your pet's neck, and you don't have to treat the household or surrounding areas. But before you try this approach, make sure you know what you are buying! **Advantage, made by Bayer, is the ONLY topical product that is tried and tested safe for rabbits.** Dr. Brick says that Advantage is "a lot less hassle than the other stuff," and adds that she considers it a safe product for adult bunnies (she has seen only rare topical reactions from using Advantage, and even then, it was nothing serious). In general, a very small or dwarf rabbit should be treated with half of a pre-filled tube; bigger rabbits can be given a full dose. Because it takes a while for such topical flea treatments to disseminate through a dog or cat's coat, the HRS recommends that rabbits be kept apart from other animals that have been treated for at least 12 hours. Check with your veterinarian for specifics.

Whatever you do, don't try to save money by buying a cheap knock-off of Advantage. Similar-looking products, such as Bio-Spot by Hartz, can be purchased in the grocery store, but those products contain permethrin, which can make cats have seizures. "I wouldn't even chance it with a rabbit," says Dr. Brick. Frontline, by Rhone Merieux Inc., is also considered highly unsafe for bunnies. Even the manufacturer has admitted that this product can cause "adverse reactions" in rabbits.

Dr. Brick says you will likely never find a product that is marketed especially for rabbits, simply because it wouldn't be cost-effective for manufacturers to focus on such a small group of pet owners. However, she points out, many of these cat-and-dog products are first tested on rabbits, prior to being approved and mass-manufactured. If in doubt about any particular product or approach, of course, the safest and smartest thing to do is to consult your veterinarian to double-check.

If you have no choice but to use products not recommended here, there are often 800 phone numbers on the package of over-the-counter products. You should call these numbers to ensure that the product is safe for rabbits. This number should also provide antidote information should it become necessary. If the rabbit has an adverse reaction, you should wash the treatment from the skin with mild shampoo & soap, then take the rabbit to the vet. At the vet the rabbit will be given IV fluids to help rid the chemicals from their system.

Medical Alert: Problems Reported With New Topical Flea Products

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Our hospital has become aware of problems with one of the new topical flea products, Frontline, marketed through veterinarians by Rhone Merieux Inc. To date, we have consulted with veterinarians who have prescribed Frontline resulting in the death of three rabbits; another rabbit has been successfully treated for severe seizures it developed after Frontline was applied.

The active ingredient in Frontline is not supposed to cross into the central nervous system of mammals, and has proven to be safe for dogs and cats. It kills both fleas and ticks, and is difficult to wash off.

However, it is important to note that use of this product on rabbits is an "off label use" and has never been recommended or approved by the manufacturer. (This is the case with most pharmaceuticals used in rabbits.)

Representatives of Rhone Merieux Inc. admit they have received other reports of "adverse reactions" to Frontline when used on rabbits, but would not go so far as to say that they knew if other rabbits had died. They went on to say that they strongly recommend Frontline NOT be used on rabbits or other exotic species.

In addition we have heard an anecdotal report (someone had a friend whose neighbor told them...) of a rabbit that developed gastrointestinal upset after licking a large volume of Advantage off another rabbit just after it was applied. Before recommending Advantage for our clients' rabbits, our hospital did an in-depth literature search, consulted with the manufacturer (Bayer) and tested the product on many unowned rabbits to make certain that the product was safe. Gastrointestinal upset has been reported in cats who lick a large volume of the product off another animal.

We recommend that multiple pet households separate rabbits or rabbits and cats for 12 hours after Advantage has been applied so the product can disperse on the animal's coat before another animal has the opportunity to groom the treated rabbit.

The reason that these products are sold by prescription only is that there is some risk involved with their use. It is important for the veterinarian prescribing the product to understand those risks-and in this case, those risks specific to rabbits-and be able to explain those risks.

Should you have questions about the use of a prescription product or should you experience a problem during the time your rabbit is taking a prescription medication, it is important for you to contact your veterinarian immediately.