



CATARACTS IN RABBITS

What is a cataract?

A cataract appears as a slightly hazy to white opacity within the pupil of the eye. This is caused by a change in the nature of the lens of the eye. The lens can often appear 'crystallized' on close inspection. As they progress cataracts cause a loss of vision, which may be gradual or sudden in onset. It can occur at any age and one or both eyes can be affected simultaneously.

What can cause cataracts in rabbits?

The main cause of cataracts in rabbits is in-utero (prior to birth) infection of *Encephalitozoon cuniculi* (EC), this is usually transmitted from the mother to baby. This is a single cell organism that affects a report 70-80% of rabbits in Australia. Serology testing for the presence of EC antibodies in a rabbit with cataracts can tell us if they have ever been exposed to this parasite.

In other animals diabetes is a major cause of cataracts. Diabetes in rabbits is rare, however it can be diagnosed with blood tests.

How do we treat cataracts?

Currently no real medical cure for cataracts. Cataract surgery, which is performed by a veterinary eye specialist, is the best treatment. The specialists will, under anesthetic remove the changed lens and allow sight to return to the affected eye. More importantly it prevents glaucoma and uveitis (other problems that can affect the eye).

If the rabbit has been exposed to, or tests positive to EC then there is an oral medication that will be started to treat this.

What else could the lens changes be?

The main alternative diagnosis to cataracts is nuclear sclerosis. This is an old age change that occurs slowly and is a mild grey/blue coloration to the lens. Nuclear sclerosis does not generally cause a very white pupil. A veterinary eye specialist can confirm changes to the lens are nuclear sclerosis or mild immature cataract.

What can happen if I do not treat the cataracts?





There are two major problems which can occur in untreated cataracts, on average these occur in 60% of rabbits diagnosed with cataracts.

Lens luxation - As the lens is not as flexible after forming a cataract it can break the fine attachments that hold it in place. This lens can then float free and block the drainage of the eyeball. The eyeball itself then increases in size. This condition is called glaucoma and is often untreatable in rabbits. It is an extremely painful condition and in some cases requires removal of the eye.

Uveitis - The changed lens can rupture leaking lens tissue into the eye. This causes a severe reaction and the entire eye becomes inflamed. This condition is also very painful and uncomfortable for your rabbit and often requires eye removal.

Can I prevent my rabbit from getting cataracts? Can I prevent the other eye from forming a cataract?

There is nothing we can do to prevent cataracts in rabbits. Infection with EC in rabbits is very common but not all rabbits develop cataracts from it. Once one eye is affected there is a strong possibility that the other eye will also be affected.

How quickly do cataracts develop?

There is no average progression of cataracts. They can stay mild and immature (grey to hazy pupil) for years or they can suddenly progress to severe mature cataracts (white) in a matter of days.

Will cataracts reoccur after surgery?

No, cataracts are a change in the lens and during surgery the lens is removed allowing vision to return.

What else can EC cause? And can this affect surgery?

EC has also been associated with head tilts (vestibular disease) and renal (kidney) disease. These conditions do not occur in every rabbit infected with EC. It is reported that up to 80% of rabbits in Australia can be infected with EC. If surgery is being considered it may be worthwhile to rule out renal disease with blood tests. If renal disease is present it can affect the anesthetic required for the surgery.

If you have any questions or are at all worried about your rabbit please don't hesitate to get in touch with us.

