



CHEST MASSES IN RABBITS

The thymus in rabbits sits in front of the heart in the chest cavity. This is often the cause of masses in the chest. There are two main types of cancers we see in this organ in rabbits. These are known as thymoma and thymomic lymphoma.

What do I see in my rabbit?

Initially you may not see anything in your rabbit. Under stress we may see both eyes appear to bulge. This is because the cancer indirectly increases the blood pressure in the head area and pushes out the eyes slightly. As the cancer increases in size we may see an increased in breathing rate and effort.

What does the thymus do in a healthy rabbit?

The thymus is a site of white blood cell production. These white blood cells help with protecting the body from infection.

What is a Thymoma?

This is a benign tumour of the thymus gland. Although this can be locally invasive, adhering closely to the heart, lungs and major vessels, it is not generally seen to spread to other organs.

What is a Thymic Lymphoma?

This is a metastatic tumour of the thymus gland. This type of cancer can spread to other organs in the body. If the main cancer is removed other small cancers in other organs may affect your rabbit.

How can we tell if there is a mass in the thymus?

X-rays or a CT of the chest are the first step. These are taken when we suspect any breathing problems. Usually we can see the heart pushed backwards in the chest cavity and the windpipe pushed up towards the spine.

What do I do now?

To make sure the mass in front of the heart is abnormal we can undertake an ultrasound. At this time it may be possible to take a small biopsy or sample. This can be sent to the laboratory and they may be able to tell us what is causing the growth. This may help us to decide if the growth is a thymoma or a thymic lymphoma. Unfortunately this is not always helpful and it is not until after surgery that we are able to confirm either of these growths when a sample of the actual growth can be sent to the laboratory.

How do we treat a thymoma?





The treatment of choice at present is considered to be surgical removal of the mass. This surgery is a very challenging surgery and comes with many risks. It is ideal to undertake a CT scan prior to such surgery to ensure the mass is not too entwined around the heart and large vessels.

Other treatment options are radiotherapy and chemotherapy which are commonly used in humans with similar cancers.

What is the success of this surgery?

Chest surgeries are very complicated in all species and especially in rabbits, the chances of success depends on the size and severity of the tumour.

Is there an alternative if I do not want to do surgery?

Yes, some bunnies, especially in the early stages of the disease continue to have a happy life for many months. At the later stages when breathing becomes laboured we can give them pain relief and anti inflammatories. This helps to decrease the effect of the chest mass and can give them good quality of life.

When your bunnies breathing becomes too laboured it is often considerate to consider euthanasia, this is a personal choice and if you feel that time has come please do not hesitate to talk to us.

