



PODODERMATITIS

What is it? In simple terms it is the development of pressure sores on the feet of the rabbit's and guinea pigs and most commonly occurs on the heels of the hind feet, although the front feet may also be affected.

What are the signs? Early signs of pododermatitis are the thinning or hair loss on the feet of rabbits and inflammation/redness of the exposed skin in guinea pigs. As the condition worsens, signs may include lameness, swelling, ulcers, bleeding and infection being present. In guinea pigs this can be seen on the foot pads themselves.

How does it happen? A combination of factors may cause this condition, these include:

- Husbandry problems:
 - Small cages
 - Hard floor surface such as carpet, wire or concrete
 - Dirty/damp bedding
 - Poor diet
 - Inactivity
- Conformation:
 - Short haired breeds such as Rex Rabbits
 - Overweight animals
 - Very thin body condition
 - Pregnancy
 - Giant breeds may be more prone
 - Deformity of the leg
- Physical:
 - Trauma causing inflammation or lameness
 - Repeated "thumping" behaviour (in rabbits)
 - Chronic joint (arthritis) or back pain resulting in inactivity or poor grooming
 - Scalding of the feet by urine or faeces

How is it treated? Pododermatitis can be very difficult to treat successfully because even the bearing of weight on the affected foot can slow healing and also it can be hard to place dressings on the lesions.

Firstly, the underlying cause should be addressed – the floor of the enclosure should be soft and yielding e.g. a thick layer of grass hay or straw that must be changed regularly, or towels, and must also be dry and non-abrasive as well as not being harmful to chew on it. Weight issues also need to be attended to – an appropriate diet of fresh grass, grass hay and fresh leafy vegetables should be fed – and exercise encouraged. Care should be taken with pregnant





animals as their weight gain may contribute to development of the pododermatitis. Radiographs (x-rays) to check for the presence of arthritis or other changes in the bones of the spine may also be indicated in diagnosing the cause of the problem.

Secondly the lesions have to be treated – this may require surgery on more than one occasion to remove any dead tissue and then appropriate dressings and bandages may need to be applied and changed regularly; sometimes this may be to be done for up to 6 months. Long term treatment may require your rabbit or guinea pig to wear a “bootee”. If there are ulcers or pus present this could lead to infections inside the bone of the foot itself which can be extremely difficult to resolve – suitable antibiotic medication will be necessary to help prevent or treat this situation and your rabbit may need to be on this medication for many weeks. Pain relief medication may also be indicated.

How do I prevent this from happening?

A correct diet to ensure general good health and optimal bodyweight is very important - not allowing your pet to become overweight can also be achieved by regular exercise. Good hygiene practices and bedding can go a long way in preventing the occurrence of pododermatitis and regular checks of the feet of at-risk breeds and animals can pick up early signs of the condition.

