Fly-strike in rabbits
What is ‘fly-strike’?
Fly-strike or myiasis occurs when flies lay their eggs on susceptible animals. The eggs hatch out to maggots which start to feed on the animal. Usually you can see the maggots around the bottom area of your rabbit. They often cause nasty open wounds or they may be hiding in the folds around the genitals. The rabbit may either be frantically grooming at this area in attempt to get rid of the maggots or it may be feeling so poorly that it just sits very quietly not moving much. If you find maggots on your rabbit, this is an emergency and you should contact Willows or our out-of-hours colleagues immediately. Without prompt treatment affected rabbits will die.

Why does it happen?
Any animal can be attacked in this way but sadly, rabbits are the most regular victims of this terrible condition. Usually there is an underlying cause for the infestation such as a dirty bottom (due to various causes - see below) or a dirty environment.

How is fly-strike treated?
All the maggots must be removed and the wounds clean and debrided. This may be done in the conscious rabbit but sometimes the lesions are so severe that a general anaesthetic is required. The pain, dehydration and infection resulting from this condition may cause shock. For this reason, pain killers, antibiotics and intravenous fluids are often used. When the rabbit is stable we then need to investigate and treat whatever has caused the fly-strike to occur. Unfortunately, sometimes fly-strike can be so devastating that the only humane option is euthanasia (‘put to sleep’).

What can I do to prevent fly-strike?
Firstly, make sure the rabbit’s environment is clean. Hutches should be regularly cleaned out. If you have trained your rabbit to use a litter tray this is ideal as it can easily be cleaned out daily. Fly netting and flypaper can be very useful if flies seem to be an issue despite good hygiene (however, please take care to make sure that your rabbit can’t get caught in netting around its cage).

Secondly, regular checking of your rabbit’s bottom is very important. We recommend that you inspect your rabbit’s bottom for cleanliness and signs of fly eggs at least once daily and twice daily in warm weather. Fly eggs can hatch out in less than 24 hours in optimal conditions. If your rabbit’s bottom is dirty it needs cleaning and drying immediately. You should also seek veterinary advice. Soiling in this area increases the likelihood of fly-strike occurring but it may also be a sign of underlying disease or management problems. Dirty bottoms may occur secondary to inappropriate diet, dental disease, diarrhoea, urinary and genital problems, obesity or spinal problems such as arthritis and old age.

There are some veterinary products on the market which can be used to prevent or slow the progression of fly-strike. If you are concerned that your rabbit is at risk you should discuss their use with your veterinary surgeon.

If you have any queries or concerns about fly-strike and your rabbit, please do not hesitate to contact us.