General Practice Service
Willows Information Sheets

Zoonoses in rabbits
Human health risks from pet rabbits (or can I catch anything from my rabbit?)

From the human perspective, rabbits are very healthy companion pets and are extremely unlikely to pass on any diseases to their owners.

The most common human health complaint involving rabbits is allergy either to their fur or their food and bedding.

Rabbits have very long claws so scratches are common, especially when the rabbit is young and not yet socialised. It is important to take time to let your rabbit get to know you. Rabbits are naturally prey animals so initially they may find human contact alarming. Let the rabbit come to you rather than forcing him or her into close contact straight away. In this way your rabbit can build up confidence and hopefully come to enjoy human contact. Neutering plays a very important role in improving the bond with your pet, although it is not a substitute for patience and calm handling. (See Neutering in rabbits information sheet). Any scratches and bites should be bathed with an antibacterial solution and covered. Medical advice should be sought if scratches become very red or inflamed.

Rabbits are hosts to a few external parasites which can cause skin reactions in humans. Most commonly rabbits will get cat or dog fleas although rabbit fleas also occur. The bites to humans are self-limiting but the rabbit, home and any in-contact animals will need treatment. It is important that only licensed flea products are used for this and only in the species for which they are designed. (See Parasites in rabbits information sheet). Another external parasite is Cheyletiella parasitivorax or ‘walking dandruff’. Affected rabbits will have hair loss, lots of scurf (dandruff) and possibly be itchy. It is rare for this to pass to humans but if you develop a rash and itching you should mention to your doctor that you own a rabbit.

Worms are not a problem for rabbit owners. There are some tapeworms which affect both rabbits and humans but they can not be passed on through the faeces (as can occur in some cat and dog worms) but only through the consumption of undercooked rabbit meat, which is unlikely to be the fate of most pet bunnies! The same is true for a so-called ‘intracellular’ parasite called Toxoplasmosis gondii which is a potential health risk for humans from cats but not from rabbits.

Basic hygiene should always be maintained and people should always wash their hands after handling any pet animals. However, there are only few parasites and bacteria which have a potential to be passed to humans from rabbits and these are only an extremely small risk to most people. The exceptions to this are humans who are immuno-compromised. This means their immune system is unable to respond effectively to a challenge. This group of people includes the very young or very old, those with HIV/AIDS or who are on medication which reduces their immune system e.g. cancer patients. The diseases we would be concerned about under these circumstances are Pasteurella multocida and Bordetella bronchisept - these bacteria are seen in ‘rabbit snuffles’ a chronic upper respiratory disease. A parasite called Encephalitozoon cuniculi, which affects the nervous system and urinary tract of rabbits, can also only be passed on to susceptible people.