

Common Mites (Arachnids) of Rabbits and Their Treatment

(abstract from <http://www.mybunny.org/info/mites.pdf>)

Rabbits can be infested with ear mites, fur mites (cheyletiellosis), or burrowing mites (mange). Visual examination is not always sufficient to confirm the presence of mites. One can use the tape method, skin scraping (shallow if fur mites are suspected, deep if burrowing mites are suspected), or the vacuum aspiration method on a filter paper. Samples from scraping or aspiration should be spread on a microscope glass, dissolved in KOH, and examined under a microscope. The chance is great that one will discover at least one mite or a larva or eggs. Hair can also be sampled, dissolved in KOH, and examined under the microscope for the presence of eggs. If no mite is found in the first sample, one should check other places on the body. If the presence of burrowing mites is suspected, but not found after a deep skin scraping, it is best to do a biopsy on the area suspected of mite infestation.

Both fur mites (live on the surface of the skin) and burrowing mites (live on/in the skin) can fall off and contaminate the environment. While treating for mites, careful cleaning of the cage and environment is recommended.

If any mite problem is not solved, consider the presence of dogs and cats (both can be asymptomatic carriers) or of parasites that survived the treatment.

Ear Mite: *Psoroptes cuniculi*

The ear mite is the universal parasite *Psoroptes cuniculi*. It has different life stages: egg, larva, protonymph, adult mite. The cycle lasts about 21 days, depending on environmental conditions, with eggs hatching after 4 days.

Psoroptes cuniculi is mainly found inside the rabbit ear pinnae, and it is not uncommon to discover that only one ear is affected. In older or sick animals, or if not treated properly, the parasite may spread and infest the head, neck, legs, ventral abdomen, and perianal region. The mucus and fecal material of the parasite induce an inflammatory reaction that leads the rabbit to scratch its ear. The blood that comes out of the scratched lesions serves as a source of nutrition for the parasite.



Rabbit Ear mite

Symptoms and clinical signs

Itching ears, frequent shaking of the head, and scratching up to the stage of automutilation. In the beginning, small, tightly adherent skin scales appear deep in the ear canal and the earlobes and are surrounded by alopecic (balding) regions. Those yellow-gray scales can be rather thick; they carry large numbers of the parasite, mite feces, skin cells, and blood. If no treatment is started at this stage, the scales will grow to crust and may reach a thickness of

2 cm in extreme cases. The ear is no longer able to stand up, and falls. The scales/crust should absolutely not be removed; if removed, they leave bloody eroded skin. Pain of the external ear canal and broader areas is often observed.

The wounds caused by ear mites can become infected, although such infection is not inevitable. If not treated, the bacteria will spread and cause hyperkeratotic (abnormal thickening of the skin) otitis externa (outer ear infection). If left untreated, the infection can spread inward, causing rupture of the tympanic membrane and subsequent inner ear infection.

Treatment

Ear mites are eliminated by avermectins. The avermectin compounds are non-ovicidal (will not kill the eggs), but the drug remains in the tissue long enough to kill the larvae that emerge from the eggs. The crust will resolve itself without the need to clean the ears, generally falling off within 10 days after the first administration of oral or injected ivermectin. Ivermectin diluted in mineral oil, applied directly on the ear, is less effective than injected or oral ivermectin.

Extracts of *Artemisia verlotorum* have been shown to be effective against *Psoroptes cuniculi*. If the rabbit is in pain, an analgesic (pain relief medication, e.g., carprofen, ketoprofen, meloxicam) *should* be administered.

Secondary bacterial infection, if present, should be treated with antibiotic ear drops if the infection is small and the eardrum not ruptured (drops given if the eardrum is ruptured can have a fatal outcome). Outer ear infection does not cause head tilt.

For a more severe case of middle ear infection, eardrops and oral antibiotics are recommended. If pus is seen, a bacterial culture is strongly recommended, followed by a sensitivity test to determine the most efficacious antibiotics.

For inner ear infection, appropriate oral antibiotics should be administered.

Fur Mites: *Cheyletiella parasitovorax* and *Listrophorus gibbus*

Very common non-burrowing skin parasites, *Cheyletiella parasitovorax* and *Listrophorus gibbus* are encountered around the world and affect mainly rabbits but also cats and dogs. *Cheyletiella parasitovorax* has a zoonotic potential, causing a transient itching dermatosis in humans. The *Cheyletiella parasitovorax* parasite lives in close association with the keratin layer of the skin but does not burrow itself into the skin. It is suspected that mites may be present asymptotically on some healthy rabbits.

The development from egg to adult mite takes place on one rabbit host. The females lay eggs and sticks them to the hair about 3 to 4 mm above the skin. The life cycle takes about 5 weeks.



Symptoms of fur mites

Symptoms and clinical signs

Fur mites seem associated with spring when weather becomes milder, with a lack of vitamin C in the diet, or with the presence of an underlying disease, which weakens the immune system. The presence of fur mites is not always easy to determine. When present, *Cheyletiella parasitovorax* is most likely to be found on the dorsum and neck of the rabbit, where it causes dandruff, seborrheic lesions (lesions from abnormally increased secretion of fatty matter).

Treatment

Fur mites are eliminated by ivermectin. Besides treating the rabbit, treatment of the environment is important. When treating a carpet, vacuum first in order to further penetration of the spray or powder. Shampooing and steam cleaning are not ideal; their residual humidity can increase the mite problem. During treatment of the environment, rabbits should be kept in another part of the home to avoid the danger of contact with the products.

Less Common Fur Mites:

Trombicula autumnalis and *Dermanyssus gallinae*

Both parasites specifically infest other species but can be hosted by rabbits. *Trombicula autumnalis*, or harvest mite, in the same genus as the "chigger," is found in rabbits that have free access to a yard. The female mite lays eggs in the soil. The hatching larvae, barely visible with the naked eye, move into the grass and wait till a suitable host is found. Only larvae will attack a rabbit, cat, dog, or human; further developing stadia proceed in the soil. The parasite will suck body fluids up to 3 times its body size, after which it will fall down on the soil to complete its life cycle.

Dermanyssus gallinae, also called red mite, may accidentally be hosted by rabbits living in the presence of birds.

Symptoms and clinical signs

The larvae are commonly found on the head of rabbits (ears, inner and outer corners of the eyes, chin), the neck and shoulder regions, under the front legs and between the toes, and in the perianal region. Both lead to intense pruritis and the formation of macules and pustules. Scratching will lead to self-mutilation, wounds, and secondary bacterial infection.

Treatment

Treatment of *Trombicula autumnalis* is difficult and sometimes it is sufficient to remove the affected animal from the source of infestation. While fipronil, permethrins, and organophosphates are used on other animals to treat these mites, all can cause serious adverse effects in rabbits and should be avoided.

Dermanyssus gallinae is best treated with carbamates, but care should be taken. This type of insecticide can trigger toxic reactions in rabbits. It is best to use a powdered product, to avoid absorption through the skin. Treatment of the environment is important. When treating a carpet, vacuum first in order to further penetration of the spray or powder. Shampooing and steam cleaning are not ideal; their residual humidity can increase the mite problem. During treatment of the environment, rabbits should be kept in another part of the home to avoid the danger of contact with the products.

Burrowing Mites: *Sarcoptes scabiei* and *Notoedres cati*

Sarcoptes spp. is encountered all over the world, though not with equal frequency. Rabbits in northern Europe and England are barely affected by burrowing mites; in Israel and subtropical regions, they are the number one cause of skin disease in rabbits. In the US it varies from region to region. Burrowing mites present a zoonotic danger; they can affect dogs, cats, and humans, causing a transient itching dermatosis. The burrowing mange *Notoedres cati* is observed in rare cases.

These parasites spread rapidly from one rabbit to another, through nymphs and larvae that lie on the surface of the skin. Only the adult female will dig into the skin and make tunnels where it lays up to 5 eggs, with a maximum of 5 for its whole life. The larvae that hatch from those eggs live the first stages of their life in those tunnels. Only the male adults and older larvae live on the surface of the skin. The complete life cycle from egg to adult lasts about 2 to 3 weeks. This should be taken into account when treating a rabbit.

Symptoms and clinical signs

Wounds appear first on the lips and nose, later around the head, neck, and sometimes around the genitalia. Burrowing mites (mange) will lead to heavy scratching by the rabbit, which will also lick the affected areas. This leads to alopecia (loss of fur). Often one can observe the secretion of a watery stuff that forms crusts upon drying. Self-mutilation will lead to wounds and secondary bacterial infection.

Severe infestation leads to anemia and leucopenia (decrease of white cells in the blood). The rabbit becomes lethargic and can die within a few weeks.

Treatment

Mange is treated with 3 injections of ivermectin, one every 14 days. The environment should be thoroughly cleaned, as the mite can survive for weeks without the presence of the rabbit host. *Sarcoptes scabiei* can infest dogs, cats, and humans.

Treatment of the environment is important. When treating a carpet, vacuum first in order to further penetration of the spray or powder. Shampooing and steam cleaning are not ideal; their residual humidity can increase the mite problem. During treatment of the environment, rabbits should be kept in another part of the home to avoid the danger of contact with the products.