Fur Mites in Rabbits

Basics

OVERVIEW

• A highly contagious parasitic skin disease of rabbits, dogs, and cats caused by infestation with Cheyletiella spp. mites
• Cheyletiella mites live on the surface of the skin. They lay eggs on the skin and hair surface, which hatch in approximately 35 days.
• Many rabbits have low numbers of mites living on the skin, but the skin appears normal. Symptoms usually are seen in young animals, debilitated animals, or those with underlying diseases that prohibit adequate grooming.
• Often referred to as “walking dandruff,” because of the large mite size and large amount of white flaky, dandruff
• Similar symptoms are less commonly caused by the fur mite Leporacarus gibbus.
• Cheyletiella mites may cause a rash on humans in areas in which the rabbit has had close contact. This rash is self-limiting with removal of the mite from pets and the environment.

SIGNALMENT

• Seen in any age rabbit
• Most common in young animals, debilitated animals, or those with underlying diseases that prohibit adequate grooming to remove dandruff and mites
• May be more common in long-haired rabbits

SIGNS

• Scaling is the most obvious symptom. Copious amounts of large, white flakes of scale are seen. Most scaling and hair loss begin in the area between the shoulder blades or at the tail base and may spread over entire body with time. Symptoms are most severe in long-standing infestations and debilitated animals.
• Scale is often found between the shoulder blades or at the tail base because some rabbits are unable to adequately groom these regions, especially obese animals or those with dental or musculoskeletal disease; lack of grooming allows proliferation of mites.
• Some but not all affected rabbits appear to be itchy.

CAUSES

• Cheyletiella spp. mites
• Leporacarus gibbus mites less often

RISK FACTORS

• Healthy rabbits with normal grooming habits usually have few or no symptoms.
• Disease is seen in young animals and those with underlying diseases that prohibit adequate grooming.
• Inability to adequately reach the intrascapular or tail base regions for grooming contribute to the formation of lesions in these areas.
• Common sources of initial infestation—pet stores, animal shelters, breeders

**TREATMENT**

**APPROPRIATE HEALTH CARE**
• Identification and correction of any underlying disease that may prohibit normal grooming behavior is essential to ensure complete resolution.
• Treat all animals in the household, including cats and dogs.
• Comb daily with a fine-toothed comb to remove scale.
• Bathing is also effective in removing scale but often difficult to perform on rabbits. Bathing can be dangerous in nervous rabbits and inexperienced owners, and can result in spinal fractures and excessive chilling.
• Thorough cleaning of the environment is extremely important for eliminating infestation; adult mites can live up to 10 days in the environment. Remove and discard all organic material from cage (wood or paper products, bedding); replace bedding with shredded paper bedding that can be discarded and the cage thoroughly cleaned every day during the treatment period.
• Combs, brushes, and grooming utensils—discard or thoroughly disinfect before reuse

**MEDICATIONS**
Medications presented in this section are intended to provide general information about possible treatment. The treatment for a particular condition may evolve as medical advances are made; therefore, the medications should not be considered all-inclusive.
• Common treatments include injections of ivermectin, or topical spot-on products such as selamectin (Revolution) or imidocloprid/moxidectin (Advantage-Multi). Several treatments are usually needed to eliminate infestation. Cleaning of the environment and treating all in-contact pets is critical for treatment success.

**FOLLOW-UP**

**PATIENT MONITORING**
• A decrease in flaking and itchiness indicates the infestation is being controlled.
• Reinfestation may indicate contact with a carrier rabbit or other pet, or the presence of an unidentified source of mites (e.g., untreated bedding).

**PREVENTION/AVOIDANCE**
Avoid contact with infected pets and bedding.

**POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS**
• Recurrent infestation
• A rash may develop on humans in areas of contact with the pet. This rash is self-limiting with removal of the mite from pets and the environment.

**EXPECTED COURSE AND PROGNOSIS**
Prognosis is good if the rabbit, the environment, and all in-contact pets are treated.

**KEY POINTS**
• Cheyletiella mites cause symptoms when present in large numbers on the rabbit. The population of mites increases when rabbits cannot groom properly due to obesity, underlying disease, or dental problems.
• Eliminating mites can be challenging and requires treating the rabbit, the environment, and all in-contact pets (including cats and dogs). Treatment failures are common if just the rabbit is treated.
• A rash may develop on humans in areas of contact with the pet. This rash is self-limiting with removal of the mite from pets and the environment.