

Nutrition Notes

Rabbit Respiratory Diseases: *Pasteurella multocida*

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Disease is always a threat when animals are kept in close confinement. This is especially true with rabbitries – whether housing commercial or show rabbits. Thorough sanitation and careful management are extremely important because rabbit diseases can be triggered by a variety of stressors. Rabbits can easily become sick from fecal contamination of feed, water, and housing.

Environmental challenges like temperature, humidity, and ammonia level can quickly lead to illness. An outbreak can also be set off by the stresses of shipping, kindling, parasites, or another ailment.

Respiratory infections caused by the bacterial species *Pasteurella multocida* are a prime example of rabbit diseases triggered by a stressor. *P. multocida* resides normally in the nasal cavity of many rabbits without causing a problem until activated by some distress, generally associated with air quality or a suppressed immune system. Exposure to ammonia in the rabbitry significantly increases the susceptibility of rabbits to *P. multocida* infection. Other irritants may include cigarette smoke, dust, mold, bleach, and cleaning solutions. High humidity is also a factor in the transmission and development of respiratory infections.

The most common respiratory infection associated with *P. multocida* is rhinitis or snuffles. Signs of snuffles include sneezing, coughing, runny nose with white-to-yellow nasal discharge, and matting of the fur on the inside of the front feet (a rabbit uses its front feet to wipe its nose). The disease can then travel to the eyes causing conjunctivitis or it may move to the ears resulting in ear infections. When the illness is more prolonged, it can even lead to lower respiratory infections such as pneumonia. Pneumonia can be very serious, often fatal in rabbits, and unfortunately, sometimes the only symptom is abnormal breathing. In addition, once the *P. multocida* organism enters the bloodstream, it can lead to abortions, reproductive problems, abscesses, or other infections.

Respiratory diseases associated with *P. multocida* can be extremely contagious and difficult to treat. Any rabbit showing symptoms should be immediately quarantined and diagnosed by a qualified veterinarian. If the infection goes on for days or weeks without treatment, it will likely become chronic. While acute signs of the disease may disappear, the bacteria remain present in smaller numbers just waiting for the right stressor to set off another round of infection.

Respiratory diseases associated with *Pasteurella multocida* can be controlled or prevented through strict **SANITATION** and proper **VENTILATION**. Be sure comprehensive management is in place and maintained in the rabbitry for the best outcome.