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**Avian & Exotic Clinic  
Of the Monterey Peninsula**

20 Lower Ragsdale Drive  
Suite 150  
Monterey CA 93940

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## Myxomatosis

Myxomatosis is a devastating viral disease of the domestic rabbit. This virus is found in wild cottontail rabbit populations in California, which are largely immune to its effects. The virus may be transmitted from wild rabbits to our domesticated pets via the bite of blood-sucking external parasites or through direct contact. The result is a severe disease that is almost always fatal.

Affected domestic rabbits become very ill and may show symptoms of lethargy, reddened eyes, swollen eyelids, ocular discharge, fever, and swollen genitalia. Most rabbits die within hours of the development of this stage of the disease. Those that survive the initial stage may develop a more generalized facial redness and swelling. Unfortunately, there is no effective treatment for myxomatosis, and the mortality rate is over 99%. Pets may be made more comfortable with a variety of medications, but these drugs are unable to combat the virus directly.

While there is a vaccine available in Europe, the vaccine is neither available nor effective in North America. It appears that the California strain of the myxomatosis virus is unique and causes the most severe form of the disease. Prevention of infection is largely based upon elimination of biting insects, particularly mosquitoes and fleas. Keeping your rabbit indoors and on an appropriate flea control product is the best way to prevent infection. For those rabbits that live outdoors, mosquito netting and screens are important for mosquito control. Rabbit owners should avoid allowing outdoor “playtime” for their rabbits during dawn or dusk, when mosquitoes are most active. Owners should also refrain from providing food sources that might attract wild rabbits to the pet area, as the brush bunny can be an asymptomatic carrier of the virus. Unfortunately for rabbit owners in California and Oregon, myxomatosis presents a significant danger to our pets. The disease can be prevented by practicing a conscientious mosquito and flea control program, and by preventing contact with wild bunnies. These methods of prevention are the only ones possible; once the rabbit is infected, it is too late.