

Mycotoxins

The possibility of mycotoxins in commercial rabbit foods (pellets and hay) is a controversial topic in the rabbit community. Mycotoxins are invisible, highly toxic poisons produced when mold (which may not be visible) in the food is shocked by sudden temperature changes. Mycotoxins can be introduced into rabbit food from contaminated raw materials (hay), through the manufacturing process, or by improper storage in the warehouse or in your home. While all reputable manufacturers periodically test food samples for mycotoxins, there is some question as to whether the “acceptable” levels are set too high to be safe for rabbits. In addition, the toxins are often found in “clusters” and are not visible, so the results of sample testing may not always reflect the safety of the entire batch.

While some bunny parents believe that eliminating commercial food from their rabbit’s diet is the only way to protect him from the risk of mycotoxin poisoning, there are things you can do to minimize your rabbit’s risk:

- Purchase commercial food only from manufacturers with a proven track record. Beware of unknown “bargain brands.”
- Whenever possible, purchase pellets in the original, unopened manufacturer’s packaging.
- Don’t purchase more than the amount of food you will use in a three month period.
- Check the bag’s manufacture and/or expiration date. Don’t buy a bag that is near its expiration date and throw away any expired food.
- Never buy a bag of food that is damaged, has been wet, or has been stored in a humid environment.
- At home, store pellets in a cool, dry place away from direct sunlight. **Storage containers should not be completely air-tight.**
- Throw away any commercial food that gets wet, shows any visible sign of mold, or simply doesn’t look or smell “right” to you.
- If your rabbit suddenly rejects his pellets, consider that there may be something wrong with them. Discard the bag (or return to retailer if it is a new bag) and replace it with another bag with a different expiration date or lot number.

Mycotoxin poisoning can cause a wide variety of medical problems including GI slowdowns and bleeding, a depressed immune system, and sudden failure **or** gradual deterioration of major organs (liver, kidneys, or heart). If several rabbits in your household develop similar vague symptoms at the same time, consider the **possibility** that you may be dealing with mycotoxins.

If you suspect mycotoxin poisoning, contact your veterinarian immediately and ask her to recommend a lab that can test your food. Have blood work done on **all** your rabbits, minimally kidney and liver values. Ask your veterinarian about prescribing an ulcer medication such as sucralfate or Prilosec® to help sooth the GI tract. Finally, change your rabbit’s food **immediately**, preferably to a different brand.