While tumors can occasionally creep up subcutaneously in the skin of domestic rabbits, the most common differential for a sudden swelling under the skin should always be a subcutaneous abscess. Treating an abscess in rabbits can vary from easy to frustrating depending on the size, location, and causative agent.

Even though an abscess can be found anywhere on the body, the head and limbs are two very common locations for them to form. The presence of an abscess can cause a large range of clinical signs in rabbits. Small abscesses that are not painful can remain unnoticed for a long period of time. Large, advanced abscesses often time invade surrounding muscle and/or bone and can cause systemic wide signs including lethargy, inappetance, and lameness.

Diagnosis of an abscess is usually made via palpation of the firm swelling. Fine needle aspiration with a 22-gauge needle will help with identification of the causative agent and whether or not there is a thick, caseous exudate present (pus). The most common culprits include Staphylococcus aureus, Pasteurella multocida, Pseudomonas aeruginosa, Proteus species, and Bacteroides species. For those with access to more advanced diagnostics, consider performing a few more ancillary tests. They include radiographs to see if there is corresponding bone loss especially in the mouth region and limbs, ultrasound to determine the margins of more invasive masses, and culture & sensitivity of the abscess.

Treatment of the abscess varies. Ideal circumstances involve complete surgical excision of the mass along with a minimum of 2 weeks post-operative antibiotics. Culture & sensitivity of the mass will aid in the selection of the antibiotic. There are times when complete surgical excision is simply not possible. For situations such as these, the tissue left behind must be cleaned daily and allowed to heal by second intention. Flushing with sterile saline along with the assistance of a drain can help with this.

A small, innocuous abscess in a relatively isolated area of the body (i.e. the skin over the nape of the neck) can be treated by aseptically draining the mass. Shave the fur over the abscess (CAREFUL - rabbit skin is very delicate!) and steriley prep the site with an antiseptic such as betadine or other iodine based antiseptics. Medical care often consists of making a small (0.5 - 1 cm) incision with a #10 or #15 blade and expressing the contents of the abscess completely. Following evacuation of the mass, the voided space is flushed with a sterile saline as described above. Abscesses are often under high pressure so the procedure is generally painful. A topical anesthetic or pre-medication of a non steroidal anti-inflammatory like Meloxicam will minimize pain.

Various areas of the body can present a challenge in terms of treatment. Masses along the maxilla or mandible (jaw) are commonly associated with tooth root abscesses and can have various fistulas and communications with other aspects of the mouth. Because of this, en bloc removal of the entire abscess can sometimes be virtually impossible without resection of the mandible or maxilla. Techniques practiced at institutions such as my alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine, show promise for these clinically challenging cases.

Abscesses along the maxilla are commonly associated with tooth rot. Abscesses are often under high pressure so the condition can be painful to treat. A local or anaesthesia is often recommended.
After a year of planning, the Hall of Fame Library committee is excited about presenting another Silent Auction during the Dallas Convention. As you may recall, a few years ago we were honored to be the recipient of many rabbit prints and collectibles from the estate of the highly esteemed breeder and art collector Bob Whitman. After much deliberation and evaluation, we selected about half of the items for inclusion and display inside the Hall of Fame Library in Bloomington. Rather than put the rest in storage, we decided to share these amazing items with you. We held our first silent auction at the ARBA Convention in Pennsylvania, which was a huge success.

This year, our silent auction will be even more special, as it will be held in Bob’s home state of Texas. We have selected 15 framed pieces and a number of small items which will be in the silent auction. Others of the small pieces will be sold outright during the week. The highlight of the framed works in the auction is an original of Bob Whitman, that he commissioned himself and graced his fireplace mantle.

Everyone is busy at convention with meetings and obligations. Questions arise as to how to bid on a desired piece, if the individual cannot be present at the time of cutoff for the auction, if the buyer cannot be present, we invite you to locate someone who will be able to bid on your item for you. We will take payment by cash or credit. I will be happy to answer any questions that may arise before the show begins, e-mail me at ellieandrc@aol.com.

The money raised from the first silent auction has been used to purchase highly sophisticated scanning devices for the Library. We have recently hired someone who has begun the arduous task of scanning all the publications in the Library. We are hopeful that by next summer, we will be able to share some of those documents with you in an easily accessible manner, no matter where you are in the world. We are also aware that even if we scan documents for ten years, we will not have completed the task, which is why we will continually need to fund this effort.

Ellie Bonde, Chair, Hall of Fame Library Committee

Antibiotic-impregnated polymethylmethacrylate beads [AIPMMA beads] are small spheres with a potent antibiotic fused into them such as amikacin. These beads are packed into the dead space created when a large abscess is not removed entirely. The small beads slowly release antibiotics in high concentrations locally for weeks to months without side effects of the commonly used systemic antibiotics.

Despite rigorous surgery and antibiotic use, many abscesses will recur and may require antibiotics for life. Small, well circumscribed masses often have a good prognosis once removed. Frequent evaluation of your rabbits with particular attention paid to the head and limb region will assist in early detection and subsequent treatment.

References available upon request

Jay E. Hreiz, VMD.
Chairman of the ARBA Rabbit & Cavy Healthy Committee, Dr. Hreiz is a graduate of Penn’s Veterinary School and currently owns a small animal / exotics practice in the Charlotte, NC area. He is also an ARBA judge # 789.