

Rabbit Papillomas



- Rabbit papillomas are growths on the skin caused by a virus. The growths have no significant effects on wild rabbits unless they interfere with eating/drinking.

Species Affected in Colorado

- Cottontail rabbits

What to Look For

- Black nodules on the skin, usually the head
- Growths can sometimes become elongated, taking on a horn-like appearance



Cottontail rabbit with papillomas. Note the black waxy growths on the chin. Photo credit: Leah Colton, CDPHE

Cause and Transmission

Rabbits papillomas are caused by the cottontail rabbit papillomavirus, also called the “Shope” papillomavirus. Like other papillomaviruses, this virus is specific to rabbits and does not cause disease in other species. Affected rabbits grow waxy black tumors (see photo) that are made up mostly of keratin. Sometimes the growths can get quite long and resemble horns, in fact some believe this may be the origin of the mythical “jackalope”. Most infected cottontails can survive the viral infection, after which the growths will go away. For this reason, CPW does not recommend euthanizing rabbits with papillomas unless they are interfering with the rabbit’s ability to eat and drink. The virus is spread through direct contact and possibly through biting insect vectors such as ticks. Cases are most commonly observed at times of high rabbit densities and high insect activity. Both jack rabbits and snowshoe hares can develop tumors under experimental conditions, but natural cases have not been reported in these species.

Public Health Considerations

Although there is no risk for transmission of this virus to humans or most domestic animals, there is a risk of transmission to domestic rabbits, especially if rabbits are housed outdoors where they may contact wild rabbits or biting insects. In domestic rabbits, the disease is more severe than in wild rabbits and should be treated by a veterinarian. Please consult your veterinarian for more information regarding this disease in domestic rabbits.

Additional Information/References

Papillomavirus Infections, in *Infectious Diseases of Wild Mammals* (Authors: John P. Sundberg, Marc Van Ranst, and Bennett Jenson)

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