



Dental disease in rabbits

One of the most common problems we see with pet rabbits is dental disease. This can be a debilitating condition which ultimately can lead to euthanasia. Dental disease can stem from genetics, but diet often has the largest impact and careful husbandry is vital to reduce the risk for your rabbit.

Rabbit's teeth

Rabbits have 4 incisors (2 on the top and 2 on the bottom) at the front of their mouth used for slicing food. These are the teeth that you can see as an owner. Behind the top incisors, there are also two peg incisors which are a lot smaller.

At the back of the mouth, there are twenty-two premolars and molars, often called cheek teeth when referred to as a group. These are used to grind down fibrous plant material such as hay via deep grooves rubbing together.

On average, rabbit teeth grow continuously at a rate of 2mm per week. It is the action of grinding down fibrous foods that keeps the teeth worn down appropriately. If the teeth are abnormally aligned, or an incorrect diet is fed, these teeth may not wear down as they should which cause a multitude of problems.

What causes dental disease in rabbits?

Dental disease in rabbits can be complex and is often due to a combination of issues.

Wild rabbits would not survive with dental issues and hence evolved to have well aligned teeth and good quality bone. Our pet rabbits are often bred for appearance and temperament rather than dentistry and this means they are predisposed to problems such as misalignment of teeth. Breeds most at risk include miniature breeds and lion heads. If the teeth are not perfectly aligned, some areas of the tooth will not wear down, allowing a sharp point (spur) to develop. These can slice the tongue and cheeks causing very painful ulcers. This will often cause the rabbit to favour one side of the mouth and alter chewing patterns and this in turn can lead to far more serious issues.

Inappropriate diet is also a major contributing factor. In the wild, rabbits eat low quality forage such as grass nearly constantly throughout the day, and this will wear down the teeth as they grow. Many pet rabbits are fed too much concentrate food (pellets/muesli) and not enough fibrous food such as hay. Concentrate foods are easy calories and make bunnies feel full very quickly meaning they often favour them to hay. The problem is that pellets and muesli require very little chewing so your rabbit will not be chewing enough fibrous food to wear down the teeth, which then overgrow either as spurs or back up into the jaw itself via the root.

There is also evidence to show that inappropriate calcium balances in the diet can also contribute to dental problems as the bone is softer and allows the teeth to move and become out of alignment with each other.

Complications from dental issues?

Dental problems in rabbits can cause structural changes and health issues from which it can be very hard to recover. For example, overgrowth of cheek teeth can be directed inwards leading to obstruction of nasal passages, or blockage of the lacrimal duct that drains tears from the eye out of the nose with a risk of infection and abscesses. This may result in irreversible damage affecting quality of life and ultimately may result in euthanasia.



Signs of dental disease in rabbits

Rabbits are a prey species and as such will hide any signs of pain very effectively. At the point of noticing the following, the dental disease could already be advanced. We recommend a dental check up with the vet every 6-12 months to monitor for problems before they become too severe.

Early signs:

- Pickiness about food or sudden change in food preferences
- Dropping food
- Drooling
- Wet fur or matting on face and forelimbs
- Eating or drinking less
- Fewer or smaller poos
- Change in weight
- Bad breath
- Reduced activity
- Reduced grooming behaviour
- Poor coat condition and loss of fur
- Accumulation of caecotropes around the anus

Very severe signs:

- Discharge from the eye
- Pain (e.g., hunched posture, grinding the teeth, lethargy)
- Refusal to drink/eat
- Weight loss
- Swelling on the face

Prevention

Diet is the main way to reduce the chance of dental disease in your rabbit. Hay should be the main food source with pellets and fresh veg as a garnish on the side to provide minerals and vitamins. We do not recommend muesli type feeds as your bunny may pick out the tasty bits and leave the boring bits resulting in an imbalanced diet.

Treatment

Problems with the incisors can sometimes be corrected consciously using a burr, but problems with the cheek teeth generally require a general anaesthetic during which the teeth are returned to their correct shape. If the underlying cause cannot be corrected, rabbits may need repeat dental procedures during their life. In certain circumstances, it may be necessary to extract teeth under general anaesthetic and if any abscesses have developed, these may need to be surgically removed. During a dental, the lacrimal ducts may need to be flushed if blocked, however these may be structurally damaged from root impaction. Overall, prevention is better than cure!