

RABBITS- DENTAL DISEASE

Anatomy of rabbits' teeth

Rabbits have four incisors (the teeth at the front), two peg teeth and 22 molar teeth (back teeth). The incisor teeth are easy to see, just part the upper lips. In order to examine the molar teeth the vet will need to use a scope. However, it is still not possible to examine all the molar teeth in a conscious rabbit. In order to examine the last few molar teeth properly a general anaesthetic is required. X-rays may also be recommended.

Rabbits teeth grow continuously throughout their lives and are usually worn down by eating fibrous food. This means that dental problems are very common in rabbits and that dental problems are often lifelong.

Causes of dental disease in rabbits

Genetics (breeding) and diet are the two most common causes of dental disease. Trauma, infections and calcium metabolism also play a role in the development of dental disease. It is very important when choosing a rabbit that you go to a reputable and responsible breeder who will not breed from rabbits with dental disease. Once you have chosen your rabbit it is very important to feed him correctly. From weaning at approximately 5 weeks of age, rabbits should be eating mainly grass or meadow hay with a little rabbit pellet food and a little fresh greens.

Signs of dental disease

- Ⓢ Selective eating or not eating as much as normal
- Ⓢ Watery eyes
- Ⓢ Wet chin (from salivating more than normal)
- Ⓢ Nasal discharge
- Ⓢ Bulging eyes
- Ⓢ Dirty bottom
- Ⓢ Tooth grinding
- Ⓢ Lumpy feeling jaw

Incisor malocclusion

This is commonly an inherited disease and often first occurs in rabbits less than 6 months of age. The incisors don't meet up properly so as they begin to grow they are not worn down evenly. As the teeth continue to grow they become long and start to curl. The upper incisors tend to curl sideways and stick out of the mouth although sometimes they curl back into the mouth and penetrate the hard palate. The lower incisors tend not to get too long but sometimes curl back into the mouth as well.

Owners often either notice the teeth sticking out or sometimes the rabbit not eating properly, especially dropping bits of food. Commonly the eyes will be watery.

Treatment is either by regular burring of the teeth, conscious, using a diamond tipped bur on the dental machine (not clipping as this can cause the teeth to break unevenly) or the teeth can be extracted permanently. Usually the best long term treatment for a rabbit with incisor malocclusion is removal of the teeth. This is because as the teeth start to curl, the roots of the upper incisors damage the tissues in the face especially the tear ducts which can become permanently occluded.

Incisor removal is performed under general anaesthetic. The rabbit will usually stay in hospital for the day, overnight if the rabbit isn't eating and passing normal faeces with 6 hours.

Molar problems

Molar problems are often secondary to untreated incisor malocclusion or related to poor diet. We tend to see molar disease in adult rabbits.

As the lower teeth become overgrown, the insides of the teeth start to form spurs or spikes. These spurs stick into the tongue and cause lacerations to the sides of the tongue as the rabbit eats causing a lot of pain. As the upper teeth become long, the outsides of the teeth form spurs which grow into the cheeks.

Owners often notice the rabbit becoming fussy with the food, perhaps only eating a certain type of food, or only fresh greens and not the pellets. As the problem gets worse the rabbits starts to salivate more causing the chin to get wet, the eyes become weepy and the rabbit starts to lose weight. If not treated soon enough, the rabbit can get gut stasis. which is a very serious and potentially life-threatening complication.

To treat molar disease the rabbit will need a general anaesthetic to have the spurs filled down, sometimes wobbly and diseased teeth need to be removed and often the tear ducts need to be flushed. Once a rabbit has molar disease this will be a life long problem. Some rabbits will require dentistry under general anaesthetic every 1-3 months, if caught early a change of diet can be enough to rectify the problem

Dental abscesses

A common consequence of dental disease (both molar and incisor problems) is abscessation. This is when bacteria track up around the teeth into the bones of the jaw and set up infection. X-rays may be required to assess the extent of the abscess.

Dental abscesses are usually found on the lower jaw and feel like hard lumps on the chin. Treatment involves antibiotics (either oral Baytril, oral Septrim or injectable penicillin) and general anaesthetic to surgically open the abscess so that the pus can drain and it can be cleaned easily.

Abscesses often recur but with good care it is possible to successfully treat a rabbit with a dental abscess. Be careful when cleaning a rabbit's abscess, always wash your hands afterwards or wear gloves. It might be best to stop small children from handling a rabbit with an open abscess due to the possibility of transfer of infection.

Correct Diet

In order to prevent and correct dental disease it is important to feed your rabbit correctly. We recommend you feed your rabbit mainly on grass. If not available feed good quality meadow hay (not alfalfa) as this is dried grass.

As a supplement feed your rabbit maximum 45g of rabbit pellets per kilo bodyweight per day (roughly 2-3 tablespoons per kilo bodyweight). Choose a pellet food made from compressed grass, all the bits should look like short brown sticks. Feed only a small amount of green leafy vegetables daily and steer clear from fruit as they are too sugary for rabbits.