



Rabbit Dental Disease

Rabbits are extraordinarily well adapted for what is a very tough lifestyle in the wild. Our pet rabbits shape and size may have been altered, which in itself can predispose to dental disease, but their basic physiology has not been changed.

Rabbits are designed to eat large amounts of poor quality, highly abrasive foods for a long period during a day. This is first cropped by the sharp incisors and then passed back for grinding by the back teeth. The food is then passed through the gut, passed, then re-swallowed at night for a second journey through to ensure the maximum nutrients are collected.

Incisors are relatively easy to examine conscious but the back teeth can only be examined to a very limited extent conscious and full examination is only possible with sedation combined with X-rays. We regularly utilise our CT scanner to provide 3-dimensional X-rays of the jaw and teeth, improving diagnosis and treatment accuracy.

The incisors must meet precisely like 2 chisels to cut the foraged food. The back teeth move primarily sideways in a figure of 8 motion with very little up and down chewing motion to finely grind the food. Because the food is very abrasive rabbit's teeth grow continuously throughout life to stop them being worn away. The growth rate is 2 to 2.5mm per week, up to a centimeter per month!

Any reduction in the amount of chewing or method of chewing will rapidly result in inappropriate overgrowth of the rabbit's teeth. Because the bottom teeth are slightly narrower than the upper back teeth this predisposes rabbits to asymmetric elongation of the crowns due to differential wearing with points and spurs being formed. These can readily traumatise the soft tissues of the mouth and cause severe pain. Symmetrical elongation of the crowns can also occur; this will progressively hold the mouth open like a car jack. This then results in the incisors at the front not meeting normally and then overgrowing. Once this occurs it can be very challenging to resolve. Rabbits with abnormal incisor teeth require regular crown shortening or extraction of the teeth.

We know that pelleted food encourages vertical chewing not grinding and that due to its high energy levels reduces the amount rabbits need to eat. The most normal chewing action is seen with fresh grass; weeds etc and long stem high quality hay. The majority of a rabbit's diet should come from these sources; smaller breed rabbits may have no little or need for any pelleted food if a wide varied diet of forage is available. We recommend only an egg cup full daily of pelleted food for an average sized bunny.

Illness, of just a few days, with reduced appetite will also result in overgrowth of the teeth. If that illness resolves the teeth will be ground to normal but if it persists or is intermittent this can generate dental disease as a secondary but serious problem.

Once abnormal growth and wear develops it can be difficult to reverse and many rabbits require repeat therapy and long term monitoring if they suffer from dental disease.

Rabbits can develop periodontitis, gum disease, broken teeth, tooth root abscess and a host of other conditions also seen in other mammal species. These can all result in discomfort, salivation reduced appetite and weight loss.

Rabbits often mask the symptoms of disease until the very latter stages. Early diagnosis and intervention has a marked effect on both risk, especially from anaesthesia, and prognosis. Regular professional dental

assessments, at least yearly, are strongly recommended. Weekly weight checks, at home, can be an excellent method of early identification of illness in rabbits.

Overgrown teeth in rabbits





Resource
Centre



©Copyright Eastcott Veterinary Clinic & Hospital