

Dental care for your rabbit

Over the last few years it has become increasingly common for us to see rabbits with dental problems of varying seriousness. In most cases things can often be improved by simply considering the basic dietary needs of the rabbit.

In the wild, rabbits spend much of the day eating grass. This is often fibrous and of poor quality and so the rabbit has evolved a system of double digestion to extract maximum nutrition. Fibrous foods are broken down and excreted as soft, pale droppings that are then eaten again by the rabbit. The waste products of this second digestion are the hard dark pellets that we are used to seeing. The rabbit's teeth grow continuously to cope with the wear and tear of daily chewing, and by eating grass all the year round, the rabbit obtains sufficient supplies of calcium to develop sound bones and teeth. Exposure to sunlight promotes the production of Vitamin D, necessary for the effective absorption of calcium into the body.

Contrast this way of life with that of the typical pet rabbit, housed in a hutch or indoors, with limited access to sunlight, especially in the winter, and fed mainly on 'convenience' rabbit food which allows the rabbit to pick out tasty morsels and discard the healthy part. In addition, even if the rabbit is allowed access to sufficient quantities of fresh grass or hay, many are reluctant to eat it because they have already overindulged in other foods.

The overall result is:

- disruption of normal digestion
- minimal exercise of the jaws and teeth
- osteoporosis or bone softening, causing loosening and shifting of teeth in the jaw
- dental problems in the front teeth including failure to oppose properly, overgrowth, spiralling or fractures
- problems with the back teeth - uneven wear, spikes digging into tongue or cheeks, and eventual loss of teeth
- protrusion of tooth roots, causing abscesses
- pressure on the bone structures around the eyes, resulting in weeping, or around the nose, leading to chronic snuffles.

Discomfort leads to dribbling, inability to eat or groom and difficulty in eating the soft droppings necessary for proper digestion. These then accumulate, resulting in a dirty bottom and in the summer, the attraction of flies and subsequent fly strike.

This downward cycle of dental problems and bad health can be reversed with some simple changes:

- Provide plenty of fresh grass or hay, making up at least 90% of the diet
- Continue offering small amounts of fresh fruit, vegetables, herbs, well washed dandelion or blackberry leaves to provide variety
- If your rabbit is difficult to persuade back onto a natural diet, please persevere. Supplement with a jam jar lid full of a balanced pelleted ration at the end of the day as a special treat
- Ensure access to fresh air and sunshine throughout the year

Following these simple steps will help your rabbit live a healthy and happy life and reduce the risk of developing dental problems.

For more information or advice, please talk to any of our team on 01435 864422

