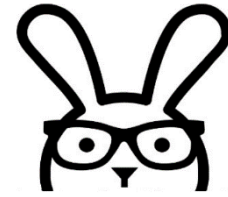


Dental Disease in Rabbits

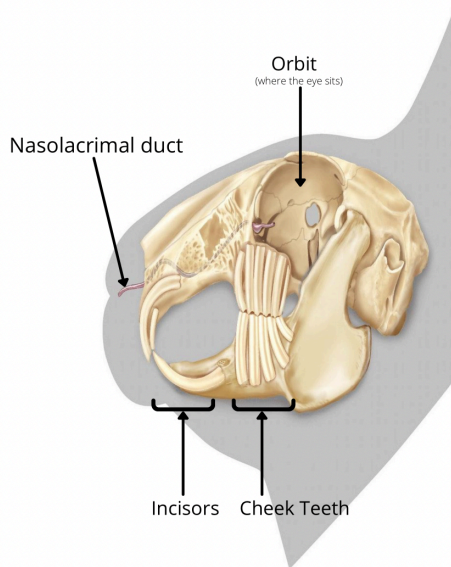
Dental disease in rabbits is unfortunately common, but preventable in many cases. In order to understand dental disease in rabbits, it is important to discuss how rabbit teeth differ from many other animals.



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Unlike cats, dogs, and humans, rabbits are not born with a set of baby teeth that fall out and are replaced with a set of adult teeth. Instead, rabbits are born

with one set of teeth that grow continuously for their entire lifetime (elodont). The teeth do not have obvious roots, and are mainly made up of crowns (hypsodont). Rabbit's teeth can grow up to 2mm per week - that's nearly 1cm per month!



A healthy rabbit mouth has a total of 28 teeth. This includes 6 incisors (4 upper and 2 lower) - these are the teeth at the front of their mouth that the rabbit uses to bite things off. The other teeth consist of premolars and molars which are collectively referred to as the cheek teeth. These teeth are used to grind down the food, to enable it to be digested.

This means that rabbits rely on an appropriate diet of high fibre foods (hay and/or grass) in order to maintain healthy dentition. Their teeth move in a horizontal grinding motion when they chew their food, which wears down their continuously growing teeth.

How can dental disease occur?

Dental disease most often occurs as a result of inappropriate diet, leading to improper wear of the teeth, particularly the cheek teeth.

Other ways dental disease can occur, include:

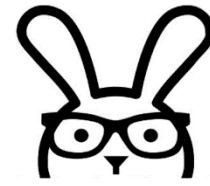
- Trauma to the skull or teeth
- An overbite or underbite (common in smaller breeds)
- Pain or neurological disease causing improper chewing

What are the signs of rabbit dental disease?

As rabbits are a prey species, they are very good at hiding clinical signs of pain or illness until the degree of illness is severe. This means that rabbits with mild dental disease may not show any signs of illness. However, if any level of dental disease is left untreated, it will gradually advance and result in an increasingly serious health problem.

Signs associated with dental disease in rabbits include:

- Reduced appetite, difficulty eating or selective eating (particularly with foods they would normally eat)
- Tooth grinding
- Weight loss
- Excessive drooling or wetness underneath the chin
- Nasal discharge
- Eye discharge
- Poopy bottom
- Change in faecal output, appearance or size
- Gastrointestinal stasis
- Not liking their head touched
- Facial swelling



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How is dental disease diagnosed?

During your rabbit's routine examination, the veterinarian will check the incisors and the cheek teeth using an otoscope. A conscious examination provides a basic idea of the rabbit's dental health, however is usually limited due to:

- The rabbit chewing and the tongue obstructing the examination
- Only the crowns above the gum can be assessed

If dental disease is suspected, your veterinarian will likely recommend a sedation for an oral examination and imaging, such as X-rays or a CT scan. A sedation allows the vet to get a thorough assessment of your pet's mouth, without the difficulties of a conscious exam.

Imaging is a valuable diagnostic tool that allows the vet to assess the crowns *below the gumline*. It is important that this part of your rabbit's dentition is checked as some dental disease can occur below the gumline, such as retrograde growth or dental abscesses.

Retrograde growth occurs when the teeth are no longer able to grow upwards, so they start being pushed backwards into the jaw, or towards the eyes and nose. This is the reason that symptoms associated with the eyes or nose can be present in rabbits with dental disease.

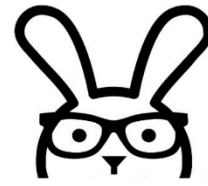
How is dental disease treated?

Treatment will depend on the cause of the dental disease, and the symptoms present.

In the case of primary incisor overgrowth (secondary to an improper bite), extraction of these teeth are recommended. While regular burring (trimming of the tooth) will maintain the bite, problems may still arise when the teeth grow too long and the cheek teeth are pushed apart. This results in an overgrowth of the cheek teeth, leading to more severe dental disease.

The majority of dental disease will be seen as spurs on the cheek teeth (jagged, pointy tips that rub against the cheek). Spurs are essentially a form of overgrown teeth as a result of improper tooth grinding. In this case, the rabbit will require a general anaesthetic to have the

spurs burred down, to alleviate pain and allow the rabbit to properly grind their teeth again. Unfortunately, depending on the degree of dental disease, this is a procedure that may be necessary to be repeated for the rest of the rabbit's life. A check-up every 4-6 weeks is recommended to stay on top of any potential overgrowth.



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Treating dental abscesses in rabbits

In the case of a dental abscess, extraction of the offending tooth is recommended. The abscess will likely require *marsupialisation* - this is where as much of the abscess is surgically removed and the skin is stitched to the edge of the abscess, leaving the crater of the wound open. This allows for regular, ongoing cleaning of the abscess in hope that the infection can be eliminated before the skin heals over.

How can I help to prevent dental disease?

The best prevention of dental disease is feeding a high fibre diet. Rabbits require a diet that consists of 80-90% grass or good quality hay, to encourage the teeth to move in a proper grinding motion that adequately wears down their teeth. A high fibre diet not only promotes oral health, it is equally vital for digestive health!

A diet high in fruit or pellets is often a major contributor to dental disease. These foods encourage an up-and-down chewing motion, resulting in improper wear and formation of dental spurs.

As with any kind of disease or illness, early detection helps in providing the best outcome for your rabbit. Rabbits are very good at masking pain and disease, so if you notice any slight changes, it may be time for a check-up!