

Prevention of Dental Disease in Rabbits

Dental disease in rabbits is multi-factorial, and cannot be attributed to one specific cause. Factors which influence the development of dental disease include genetic predisposition (dwarf rabbits seem more predisposed), lack of dental wear (poor diet), metabolic bone disease (usually from calcium and vitamin D deficiency).

So what can we do to reduce dental disease? Once we have a rabbit with dental problems it is impossible to change the genetics of that rabbit. The main thing we can alter is the diet, to ensure sufficient dental wear (fibre) and ensure there is sufficient calcium and vitamin D in the diet. It is possible to over supplement calcium in rabbits causing urinary problems, so a calcium tablet or powder to go on the food is not advisable (unless prescribed).

Try to follow the following guidelines:

- Provide ad-lib fibrous food. Grass and hay are ideal to provide dental wear.
- Choose good quality hay. The calcium content of poor quality hay can be as low as 0.25% - lower than the requirement for bone mineralization.
- If possible feed a variety of weeds, wild plants and herbs – they are generally a balanced source of calcium and are good sources of indigestible fibre.
- Feed at least 3 types of fruit or veg each day including one type of fibrous vegetable such as broccoli, cabbage, spinach or cauliflower. Root veg and fruit such as carrots and apples are poor sources of calcium.
- If possible allow exercise outside each day – this provides the opportunity to graze and enables the rabbit to bask in the sun to prevent vitamin D deficiency. Exercise also encourages gut motility.
- Feed a well balanced concentrate food to reduce any deficiencies in the diet.
- No more than 1-2 tablespoons of a good quality pellet food such as excel should be fed daily (these prevent selective feeding, where the rabbit chooses low calcium cereals and legumes from the “muesli” type diets).
- If your rabbit is overweight, try using a “light” diet and only small amounts (one tablespoon maximum) along with the rest of the hay/grass etc. Regular weight checks with the nurse (which are free of charge) are recommended for overweight bunnies.