

Dental disease is a common issue in companion rabbits

There are approximately 1.1 million pet rabbits in the UK. Rabbit teeth continue to grow throughout their lifetime, and dental problems are not uncommon. New research from the Royal Veterinary College has identified that one in seven companion rabbits are experiencing dental disease. There are various risk factors which can contribute to dental disease, but all companion rabbits should have regular dental check-ups to maintain good dental health.

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Gillian Davies, Editor of *Companion Animal*

Rabbits are popular companion animals, but they can experience a number of health problems, including dental issues (Mäkitaipale et al, 2015). Dental disease can result in pain (Johnson and Burn, 2019) and weight loss (Hamlin, 2013), so is a serious problem that must be addressed.

There have been multiple previous studies into dental disease in particular. All types of rabbit can experience dental disease, but Siriporn and Weerakhun (2014) found that brachycephalic rabbits and lop ear breeds had an increased risk of dental disease. However, it should be noted that this study had a small sample size and selection bias. Dwarf rabbits often experience malocclusion, where the teeth do not align when the mouth is closed (Roux, 2005). Other risk factors for dental disease include old age, low bodyweight and being male (Jackson et al, 2024).

Royal Veterinary College research highlights the issue

Researchers from the Royal Veterinary College showed that one in seven pet rabbits under primary veterinary care were experiencing some description of dental disease (Jackson et al, 2024). This confirms that dental disease is still a widespread issue in companion rabbits – the study found that, of the 161 979 rabbits under primary veterinary care in 2019, approximately 15% were experiencing dental disease.

The study also found that brachycephalic and lop ear rabbits did not have a significantly increased risk of dental disease, contradicting previous research. However, the risk of developing dental disease increased with age, and ani-

mals with a lower body condition were also more at risk. The cheek teeth and incisors were most commonly affected, with 13% of rabbits with diseased cheek teeth and 3% with diseased incisors.

The findings of this study shed new light on how prevalent dental disease in companion rabbits really is. The study also identifies risk factors for dental disease, which owners and veterinarians must be aware of to catch dental disease early. Particular attention should be paid to male, underweight or older rabbits to ensure that their welfare is not significantly affected by dental disease, and any problem can be treated early.

Dental disease in other companion animals

Rabbits are not the only companion animals that can experience dental disease. Periodontal disease was the most common health issue in a sample of Shih Tzus under veterinary care, affecting 9.5% of the dogs (Dale et al, 2024). Wallis et al (2023) found that a high proportion of Yorkshire Terriers retained at least a portion of their deciduous teeth, with the canine teeth being most commonly retained.

A commonly experienced dental problem in cats is tooth resorption. Almost 70% of cats presenting to veterinary care with dental problems were found to have tooth resorption in one study (Cohen-Mivtach, 2024). Gum problems are also fairly common in cats, with 33% of sample cats developing some degree of gum inflammation over a 6-month study (Villegas-Ferré et al, 2024).

Summary

Dental problems are found in many companion animal species, and should be treated

quickly in order to limit any effect on the animal's welfare and quality of life. Research such as the study by the Royal Veterinary College is vital in determining how widespread dental disease is, and identifying risk factors for veterinarians and owners to be aware of when presented with an animal which may be at risk of dental disease.

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