

Health


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Richard was the RWF's last Rabbit Resident at the University of Bristol, and is now the RWF Veterinary Adviser, as well as continuing to see rabbits and other animals in small and zoo animal practice.

Behaviour


Carol Valvona

MSc (CABC)

Carol (Bonafido Pet Behaviour And Training) is a member of the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors and has a Masters degree in companion animal behaviour counselling. She has rescued giant breeds for a number of years.

Houserabbit Advice


Leo Staggs

Experienced rabbit owner Leo Staggs lives in Kent with his wife, son and house rabbits.

We regret that our experts are only able to answer a few questions in the magazine. If you think that your rabbit may be ill, please seek veterinary advice immediately.

ASK THE EXPERTS

A toothy problem

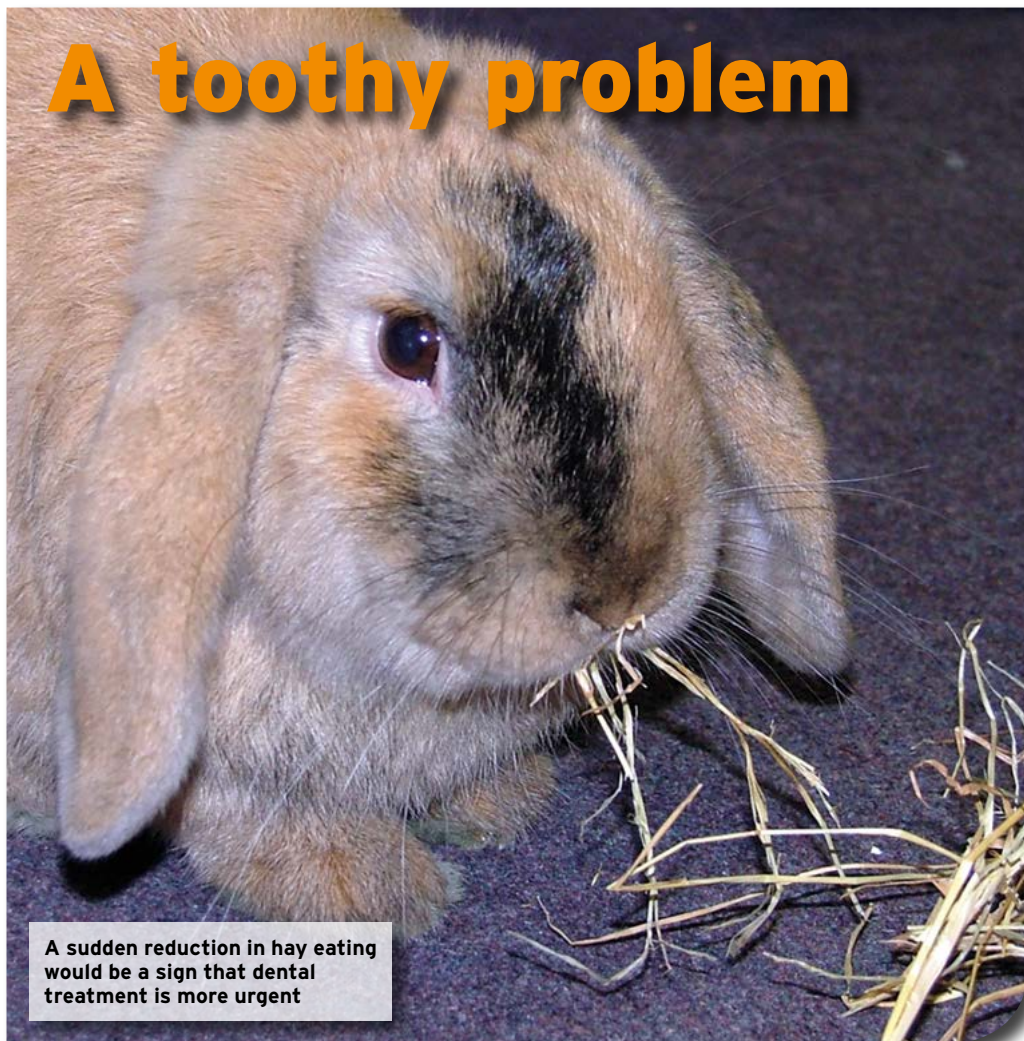


Photo: N. Allen

A sudden reduction in hay eating would be a sign that dental treatment is more urgent

Q I took all my bunnies to the vet a few days ago for health checks. I was told that my Lionhead Lop has a small, sharp spur in her mouth and her teeth are not meeting correctly. I am at a bit of a loss as to why as she is a great hay eater. The vet said to keep an eye on her, as the spur is only small, but will only need filing in few months. Would it not make sense for her to have treatment now so it does not get worse?

A I'm sorry to hear that, as dental problems are never far from our minds with rabbits, and are always a worry. Firstly, it is excellent news that she eats hay well, and any change in this would be a vital early warning sign to watch out for. A sudden reduction in hay eating would be a sign that treatment was more urgently necessary. The treatment of overlong teeth is a really difficult question to answer, as it is very much along the lines of "how long is a piece of string", and depends very much on the individual rabbit. Different vets have different opinions on this, and one of the most controversial topics in rabbit medicine is in fact when and how much to trim off teeth: anything from just the spur, to the whole tooth being suggested. One way to help arrive at a decision is to take X-rays of the skull. As well as being a more objective method of deciding how long a tooth or spur is, it also helps to assess the full extent of the way in which the teeth are potentially not meeting correctly, which can then be addressed at the time of treatment. Another option is to obtain as accurate an idea of the tooth shape and length now, if possible noted down or photographed, and then repeat this (assuming there are no problems in the meantime) in two to four weeks, in order to assess progress.

Richard Saunders

It is important to handle our rabbits so we can examine them for any health problems



He hates being handled

Q I was always told to try and handle my rabbit as much as possible so they get used to being handled. This I have done since I got my rabbit at eight weeks of age. He is now six months old and hates being handled. He scrabbles around, digging and trying to bite me so that I will put him down. I am worried that he may hurt himself (or me), but don't want him getting worse if I don't handle him. Is handling really necessary, and if so, what can I do to make the experience better for him?

A It is important that we handle our rabbits so we can examine them for any health problems without causing them too much stress. Also, it may help make visits to the vets less traumatic.

Studies have shown that a rabbit's early environment impacts on its future behaviour. It is thought that the sensitive period for social development may be from 10 days to six weeks old, and if they are handled from 10 days onwards they are more willing to approach people in later life. During this time rabbits will be in the care of the breeder or rescue centre, so

their input is extremely important, but new owners must continue with this as the positive effects of early handling can wane. Unfortunately there is no second bite of the cherry when it comes to effective socialisation, but this doesn't mean that you can't teach your rabbit a more appropriate way to behave. It is also important to remember that even well socialised rabbits are going to remain reactive in certain situations because they are still a prey animal.

It is unclear from your letter whether your rabbit has always bitten. If his behaviour has changed you should ask your vet to check for any possible underlying medical problems. Furthermore, is he castrated? If not his behaviour may be influenced by his hormones as the onset of puberty is at approximately four to six months. Fear is also a common reason for a rabbit to bite. This can be due to a lack of handling but equally it can stem from inappropriate interactions. A rabbit may use aggression as a way of preventing an owner from picking it up, and then quickly learn from its behaviour. If this behaviour is hormonal, castration may help, but if it is fear based, it will not and could increase the problem.

Once any hormonal influence has been addressed I would suggest that you start the handling process again. Go down to his level and offer him a tasty treat if he approaches you, but do not attempt to pick him up or touch him for a couple of weeks. Scent is very important to rabbits so make yourself more attractive to him by rubbing your hands in his bedding. Next, gradually introduce short stroking sessions. Start with the areas where rabbits normally socially groom, i.e. around the cheeks, forehead, inside the ears and along the back. Areas such as the nose, feet, belly, tail and rump are more likely to cause fear so only move on to these once your rabbit is more relaxed. Slowly increase your contact time while he is munching on some food. Keep something tasty for this process and don't let him have it at other times. Make sure that he is always calm and therefore doesn't feel the need to bite. A good sign of this is he is still eating! He will not be able to learn the right association with your handling if he becomes aroused and fearful. Therefore you have to work at a rate that he is comfortable with, which will require patience. Move on from short gentle strokes to longer strokes, then to placing your hands on his body before gently raising him on to your lap and finally lifting him. Remembering to reward him all the way, make sure that he always feels secure and don't rush.

Carol Valvona

Q My rabbits seem bored in their enclosure. I offer them the inner cardboard rolls from toilet rolls and those toys suitable for rabbits, but they don't touch them. They aren't interested in their tunnel either. What can I give them to entertain them, that isn't going to be too expensive?

A Different rabbits will have different ideas about what constitutes fun, and you may well have bunnies that simply don't care for what you provide. It doesn't mean you are doing anything wrong. Perhaps some of these ideas will help engage them; they are all cheap or free.

Try finding a medium to large sized cardboard box (your local supermarket will probably have a suitable one) and cut out one or two holes wide enough for your rabbits to pass through. Put some hay inside together with a scattering of treats. To your bunnies this will look like the entrance to a warren, and may appeal to their natural inquisitiveness. If it works, then attach their tunnel to one of the entrances to make it even more appealing.

Rather than just giving them small cardboard tubes, try standing the tubes on the end with a treat inside. When your rabbits accidentally or deliberately move the tubes they will be rewarded, which may encourage them to play with them.

Some rabbits will take delight at ripping up old newspapers, magazines, or phone books. Just leave one lying around their area to see what happens. Old towels can also



Photo: D. Baber

encourage play. Spread one out on the floor, and if it attracts your rabbits' interest, they will soon be 'burrowing' under it, scrabbling at it, and tearing it to shreds. It is important to ensure that your rabbit never eats these objects.

If you have a little cash to spare, then toys made of willow are a favourite with many rabbits, and apple twigs are also great for encouraging the right sort of gnawing, chewing, and eating.

Leo Staggs

Worried about travelling

Q My husband and I are moving house shortly and are concerned about the journey for our two house bunnies. Both seem to travel to and from the vets without too much undue stress, but the thought of them being in their carriers on a long car journey does worry me a bit.

Would a three to four hour car journey be too stressful for them? If not, what sort of carrier is best, how frequently should we stop and how can we best prepare them for a long journey?

A Most rabbits will have to travel short distances at some stage, and most will tolerate it. Nevertheless, even if your bunnies seem to cope with those shorter trips, it's a good idea to take them for a health check before embarking on a longer one.

When planning longer journeys, to help your rabbits become less stressed you need to make the carrier a part of their environment, so the rabbits become used to it prior to travelling in it.

You also need to make the journey as comfortable as possible for your rabbits. Don't be tempted to transport them in a cardboard box! The carrier needs to be strong, secure, well-ventilated, and large enough to accommodate both rabbits. Allow your bunnies to travel together in the same carrier, as being together will help reduce the stress of a longer journey. Strap the carrier securely into the car just as you would a child seat. However, take care not to place the carrier in direct sunlight or in the boot.

Avoid travelling during the hottest parts of the day as cars can quickly heat up; if you have it, use the air conditioning to maintain an even temperature.

Make the carrier as homely as possible. Line it with newspaper, add some litter, plenty of hay (including some from their usual home so that there are some familiar scents around) and other food, and affix a bottle of water. Your rabbits probably won't eat or drink whilst moving, so take regular breaks to allow them the opportunity to catch up. If at all possible, give them the chance to stretch their legs, even if it's only in the boot of your car.

For more information take a look at <http://www.rabbitawarenessweek.co.uk/health/stress-free-travelling-for-rabbits/>

Leo Staggs

The rabbit photos on these pages are for illustrative purposes only, and posed by 'models'. They are not the rabbits in the questions.