



# Exotic Animal Hospital of Philadelphia

## **DENTAL (TOOTH) DISEASE IN RABBITS, CHINCHILLAS AND GUINEA PIGS**

### **RABBIT/CHINCHILLA/GUINEA PIG TEETH**

In the wild, chinchillas and rabbits eat dry grasses and brush. This is very tough on their teeth, so they have adapted the ability to have their teeth grow throughout their life. This is called “open-rooted” teeth which are very different from the teeth of humans, dogs and cats. Because rabbits, guinea pigs and chinchillas should be eating this tough/high fiber food all of the time, their teeth grow very rapidly. A chinchilla’s tooth usually grows at a rate of 3mm/week! Therefore, if your chinchilla or rabbit is not eating the proper tough/high fiber food (such as hay), their teeth will not be worn down and will grow too long.

When teeth grow abnormally they can grow too long inside their mouth – this leads to cuts on the tongue and cheeks which can be very painful. Additionally, the roots (base of the teeth) can grow too long into the jaw bone. When this happens, you can feel the long tooth (long roots) along the jaw bone. This is very painful to them. Not only can long teeth cause pain, they are also more likely to get infected. When this happens, abscesses (pockets of infection) can form in the tooth and jawbone. This is very serious and needs to be treated with surgery.

### **SIGNS OF TOOTH PROBLEMS**

When their teeth become too long, infected or loose this is very painful and irritating to your pet’s mouth. They may drool a lot (wetness around the mouth and/or front feet), paw at their mouth, stop eating, decrease their eating, drop food from their mouths, have decreased feces, smaller feces, stomach pain, bleeding from the mouth, swellings around the mouth or bad breath.

Because the tooth roots can grow too long, dental disease can affect other parts of the face as well. The long roots can cause compression of the tube that takes tears from the corner of the eye to the nose (naso-lacrimal duct). This will cause tears to flow down the side of the face. If there is an abscess associated with teeth in the upper jaw, this can cause the eye to poke out of the face. If you notice any of these signs, it is important to contact your veterinarian right away.

### **DIAGNOSING DENTAL DISEASE**

Many times dental disease can be diagnosed during a physical examination. Sometimes animals need to be sedated to have their mouths looked at more closely. Once dental disease has been suspected, your veterinarian may recommend skull radiographs to look at the tooth

roots and jaw bone. If your veterinarian thinks your animal will need general anesthesia, they may recommend pre-anesthetic blood work to look at the liver, kidneys, protein values, red and white blood cells. They also may recommend radiographs of the abdomen (belly) if they have not been eating well or defecating normally.

### **TREATING DENTAL DISEASE**

Once your rabbit or chinchilla has dental disease, it is very difficult to cure them. They will usually need some sort of treatment for the rest of their lives. Some need treatment once a week, some need treatment once a month and some only need it a couple of times a year. Each animal is different and it is impossible to know how often your animal will require treatment. When the teeth are too long inside the mouth, the only way to treat this is to perform general anesthesia and use a special drill to remove the long teeth. Your veterinarian may recommend pre-anesthetic blood work and/or an IV catheter placement to give fluids throughout the procedure. After the dental trimming, your veterinarian may recommend antibiotics, pain medications or syringe feeding a special diet called Herbivore Critical Care. If there is an abscess associated with the teeth, your veterinarian may recommend surgery to remove the infected tooth and bone or they may recommend surgical removal of the abscess with placement of a special cloth (gauze) that has antibiotics in it. Your animal will go home on pain medication and antibiotics after the surgery. It is much more serious when a tooth has an abscess – it takes a long time for this to heal and will require many visits to the veterinarian. Even if an abscess is successfully treated, it is common that your rabbit/chinchilla will develop another abscess in another part of the jaw/mouth.

### **GETTING YOUR PET READY FOR TREATMENT**

Sometimes animals are too sick to have general anesthesia to treat their dental disease. If this is the case with your pet, your veterinarian may recommend that your pet be hospitalized for fluid therapy (if they are dehydrated), syringe feeding (if they have not been eating), antibiotics and pain medications. It is important that patients feel better before they have their teeth trimmed or have surgery for abscesses. Your veterinarian may also want you to do some of these treatments at home.

