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Livia Benato worked with rabbits and exotic animals in a referral clinic in Milan (Italy) for two years before moving to the UK.

She started her residency in Rabbit and Exotic Animal Medicine in 2008 at the University of Edinburgh and gained her RCVS Certificate in Zoological Medicine in 2010.

From September 2011 to August 2012 she worked at Chester Zoo as their veterinary officer. In 2013 she was awarded with an MSc for her research on probiotics in rabbits at the University of Edinburgh.

She is currently working as a University Veterinary Clinician at the University of Glasgow. Livia is recognised by the European College of Zoological Medicine as a Specialist in Small Mammal Medicine.



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Obesity in pet rabbits

Obesity is an emerging disease that affects not only cats and dogs but also other companion animals such as pet rabbits. Obesity is a complex multifactorial problem that involves the management of the animal and the education of the owner with regards to treatment and prevention.

Prevalence of obesity in the pet rabbit population has not been well established, with only few publications available to date. In the UK rabbit population, 7.6 % have been reported to be overweight (Courcier, 2012), in comparison to a prevalence of 25 % in dogs (Courcier, 2013), but it is possible that the problem in rabbits is underestimated and not yet well understood or adequately investigated.



Overweight and obese rabbits present a more rounded body shape.

Causes of obesity

Obesity in rabbits is caused primarily by poor diet and lack of exercise. Other risk factors associated with this problem are age, sex, neutering status and geographical region (Courcier 2012). Poor diet often includes food too rich in carbohydrates. Selective consumption of cereal mixes, and excessive snacks offered by keen owners can easily lead to weight gain. The same can be true for a more healthy diet consisting of pelleted food and treats such as carrots, apples and berries given in excessive amounts. Rabbits are fibrovores and their diet should consist of ad libitum good quality hay and grass, and small amounts of fresh greens and concentrated food. Healthy treats such as apples and carrots should be given in moderation and not more often than twice weekly.

Exercise is also an important aspect of the everyday life of a healthy rabbit. They are highly social and active animals that need plenty of space in order to express normal behaviour. A large number of pet rabbits are still housed in small inadequate hutches and do not have opportunity to exercise. Both indoor and outdoor rabbits should have a hutch where they can sleep and hide, and access to a large play area in which to perform activities such as digging, jumping and running.

Like cats and dogs, rabbits tend to gain weight once they have been neutered. However, neutering is very important for the health and welfare of the animal; neutered animals can be housed together for companionship and neutering prevents tumours of the genital tract and reduces aggression. Therefore, the body weight of a neutered animal should be closely monitored and a healthy lifestyle promoted.

Consequences of obesity

Overweight animals are prone to digestive upsets, as they are unable to consume their caecotrophs. An inability to groom the matted caecotrophs around the perineal area leads to an increased risk of myiasis (parasitic infestation by maggots), especially during the warmer months. Excessive weight predisposes the animal to



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