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Rabbit Aggression

Rabbit-to-human aggression can be seen at any age or in either males or females, although it is more prevalent in entire rabbits. It may also be due to learned behavior from an early age. Territorial issues motivate most rabbit to attack humans. This is especially seen in rabbits that are confined to a smaller area such as a cage or a hutch. For example, when an owner tries to move the rabbit, clean the hutch/cage or replenish the food bowl, the rabbit may attack. The hand is the likely target when placed into the cage/hutch. However, aggression can also occur in larger areas where the rabbit has free range. For example, some rabbits may attack humans that enter their territory. Charging of the feet is usual in these scenarios. The natural defense of rabbits when danger is impending is to run away (i.e., flight). When confined or caged and unable to run away, a rabbit is more likely to defend itself (i.e., fight) by either lunging at a person to bite or by standing up on its hind legs and attacking with its front limbs. This is a classical 'flight-or-fight' response. Anger and aggression may also be exhibited by shredding substrate with front paws and teeth, head butting objects, picking up objects, and flinging them.

Food aggression is a form of territorial aggression. It is defending a resource in an established territory. Food aggression may be displayed with concentrates such as mixes and pelleted feed.

Rabbits may exhibit aggression linked to inappropriate handling or other negative experiences. For example, traumatic encounters due to poor handling technique may cause a rabbit to avoid contact with humans. In such cases, some rabbits may display aggression if "backed into a corner," similar to the aggression seen in the flight-or-fight response. Rabbits have different personalities – they exhibit different levels of tolerance to handling and restraint. If a rabbit is nervous or scared it will flatten against the ground with ears pinned against its head, eyes bulging and muscles tight. Interestingly, rabbit kits that are handled at the time of nursing (in the period 15 minutes before and 30 minutes after nursing) show a reduced fear of humans later in their lives.

Underlying painful medical issues (dental disease as you describe, spondylosis, arthritis, urine scalding) can be associated with aggression. In a British survey of husbandry and health of 102 pet rabbits, 30 rabbits had dental disease and only 6 of their owners were aware of the problem. This highlights the fact that owners of pet rabbits are often unaware of common diseases and signs of pain in their rabbits. Typically, owners will report a sudden change in the behavior of a previously sociable rabbit.

I always obtain a thorough history of the abnormal behavior and the context in which it occurs. In addition, I perform a thorough clinical examination of the rabbit to check for underlying disease as the possible cause of the abnormal behavior. Early socialization when the rabbit is young, and gentle handling, are important. Socialization includes gentle handling of kit rabbits, and patience to gain the rabbit's trust.

Certain types of aggression may become reinforced by learned behavior. This occurs when aggressive behavior in a rabbit is unchallenged by its owner. For example in a simple context, a rabbit bites its owner who then stops handling it and the rabbit learns that biting keeps humans away.

Addressing biting behavior requires gradual desensitization. Owners should plan to spend several sessions desensitizing the rabbit over a few weeks or months.

- 1 Use a quiet place that is neutral territory to the rabbit. In some cases, this may not be possible and behavior modification occurs when the rabbit is in its hutch or territory – in this situation, owners should initially wear gloves and protective clothing
- 2 Ignore the rabbit even if it charges or bites - teach the rabbit that biting has no effect
- 3 Initiate patting the rabbit's head during hand feeding a treat. If biting still occurs, initiate patting with a long-handled brush
- 4 Have the rabbit associate the owner's hand with the giving of pleasant food items rather than something that deposits food and retreats or, picks up the rabbit in an unpleasant way
- 5 Owners should end each session on a positive note and when possible begin to pet the rabbit and to pick it up