

Charities highlight brachycephaly in rabbits and cats

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Three animal welfare charities have united to highlight brachycephaly can affect cats and rabbits in addition to dogs.



When compared with "normal" rabbit breeds, it's clear to see how different a short-faced one looks. IMAGE: RWAF.

International Cat Care (ICC), the Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund (RWAF) and the RSPCA have come together to raise awareness that breeding cats and rabbits with exaggerated flat faces can cause health and welfare problems.

Short-faced cats like Persians can have all the same issues as dogs, said ICC, such as:

- breathing issues
- dental problems
- skin fold infections
- problems giving birth

Deliberate

ICC chief executive Claire Bessant said: “It is very depressing to see the life deliberately dealt to some breeds of cats because of a human desire to develop a certain look.

“I urge cat lovers to speak out and help others to understand this is not something we should be doing to cats, and not something we should be tolerating.”

She added: “We should not be encouraging people to breed these cats by calling them 'cute', by being amused at their facial characteristics, or by the fact they snore – we need to understand this is human intervention wholly detrimental to the welfare of the cats and is simply cruel.

“ICC takes an ethical view of all cat breeds and our [website](#) outlines the problems that exist for some breeds, including very flat-faced cats in the Persian and exotic breeds.

“Our stance is we should never deliberately breed cats for any feature or characteristic that impairs their welfare.”

Disastrous

Rabbits have also fallen foul of the human desire for shorter, “cuter” faces, according to RWAF.

RWAF head vet Richard Saunders says breeds like the Netherland dwarf and the popular Lionhead breed have become increasingly brachycephalic, which, in rabbits, is “disastrous”.

He said: “Rabbits’ teeth grow continuously throughout their lives and must line up exactly to wear down evenly.

“The short face means the bottom jaw is longer than the top one, just the same as in bulldogs and pugs, and the teeth do not line up.

“Teeth soon overgrow, causing chronic pain, lacerated mouths, abscesses and, in many cases, death.”



A Lionhead rabbit. IMAGE: Fotolia/jinzha Bloodrose.

The tear duct is also distorted, he said, similar to brachycephalic cats, with affected rabbits suffering from tears or pus overflowing onto their faces.

"Hand in hand with the short faces come the lop ears, rather than the wild, natural upright ears," he continued. "These rabbits have a high level of middle ear infections and can't communicate with other rabbits normally, leading to behavioural problems.

"We would like to see an end to selection for 'cute' faces and lop ears, and to preferentially breed rabbits with a more 'wild-type' face shape, which is associated with far fewer genetically-induced diseases."

Concern

RSPCA dog welfare expert Lisa Richards said: "We are very concerned these issues are now being seen in other species and would urge everyone concerned; from breeders to buyers, to do what they can to reduce the demand for such extremes."