

Viking Vets

NEWSLETTER

SPRING 2020



LATEST GOSSIP All the news from the Viking team

IN THE NEWS How to win your cat's love

RABBITS How you can give your bunny the best life

Welcome

Welcome to the Spring issue of the Viking Vets newsletter.

In this issue, we look at the best ways to keep your pet rabbit happy and healthy (p4). And in the news we bring you information about a study by the University of Bristol for new dog owners, and the best ways to show your cat some love (p8).

During the Spring months we always see an influx of dogs that have ingested foods they shouldn't. Remember that chocolate and raisins are very toxic to dogs, so make sure that they don't have access to any Easter eggs or hot-cross buns. If your dog does eat something that it shouldn't ring the surgery straight away and we can advise you.

If you have any feedback or there is anything you would like to see in the newsletter please contact us:

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Facebook page
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We also now have Instagram,
[@vikingveterinary](https://www.instagram.com/vikingveterinary)
surgeons

A message about tetanus

We had a request recently for a tetanus vaccine for a dog. One of our clients had heard about a dog that contracted tetanus and she wanted to prevent it. Fortunately, tetanus is relatively rare in dogs. Horses and humans are more susceptible, while cats are highly resistant. Dogs fall somewhere in the middle of this spectrum – but it does happen.

The disease arises from the bacteria *Clostridium tetani*, which is introduced into the body via wounds. *C. tetani* is naturally present in some soils. Despite what many people think, the bacteria is not a particular hazard of rusty metal; it's the dirt on rusty metal – as well as metal that isn't rusty – that carries *C. tetani* into a wound.

Another surprise is that the bacteria itself is not the problem. Rather, the tetanus malady is caused by a neurotoxin (tetanospasmin) that is produced by the bacteria after it is introduced into an oxygen-deprived setting (as in puncture wounds) and it begins to reproduce. The toxin binds to tissue in the nervous system and causes the classic signs of tetanus. In dogs, these signs include painful muscle contractions and stiffness or

rigidity of the limb nearest the site of infection. This can progress to generalised signs that include rigidity in all four limbs known as the "sawhorse stance". The more classic presentation of tetanus is a dog with rictus sardonius (sardonic grin). The ears are pulled tightly back, as are the lips. It can progress to "lockjaw", meaning the dog can't open its mouth.

During my 25 years as a vet, I have seen two cases of tetanus in dogs, and while at Bristol University I remember we had a case in a cat. Both dogs survived, but one needed weeks of intensive care. The cat made a full recovery too. One case was in a puppy, which had been play biting its owners and me. This resulted in all family members and me having to have anti-toxin treatment at Southmead Hospital. Anti-toxins are given when you have been exposed to tetanus.

There are no vaccinations available for prevention of tetanus in dogs. In humans we will get lifelong protection if we have had five vaccinations. The main prevention is to clean out puncture wounds, or seek veterinary advice if concerned.
Maria Lowe

Puppy training packs now available

Our vet nurses have been working to create a training pack for dogs to ensure that you get the best behaviour from your pet. The manual offers advice on body language and aggression, basic commands, whistle training, adolescence, and keeping your dog calm. There is also suggestions to make sure that you and your dog enjoy visits to the vet.

We also recommend that you look for local dog-training



classes to ensure that your puppy develops into a happy, well socialised dog.

Vikings get their craft on



We had a lot of fun getting crafty in December. In our own take on the Crafternoon fundraiser we built and decorated gingerbread houses, made Christmas crackers and drank mulled wine! This was all in aid of the charity

Mind – raising awareness of mental health and wellbeing. In February a group of us had fun making pottery bowls. We are looking forward to going back to paint them and see how they turn out!

Celebrating 20 years of Viking Vets

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the opening of Viking Vets. The practice opened on 1 August 2000 and is still going strong.

Throughout 2020 we will be marking the anniversary with some special events and offers, so watch this space for more details.

Spring campaigns and promotions

We have several campaigns coming up over the next few months, so keep an eye on the noticeboards in reception.

March is the ever-popular dental month. We will be offering 50% off scale and polishes (remember that if you are on the Health Plan you get 50% off scale and polishes all year

round). Arrange an appointment with our dental nurse Katy for more information and to get advice on dental hygiene.

In April we will be focusing on senior pets and increasing awareness of the need for blood pressure monitoring.

May is bunny month. See p4 of this issue to find out the best ways to keep your rabbit happy and healthy. During May we will also be looking at advice for dealing with wildlife.

Staff news

Two new vets have joined us at the start of 2020. They have already settled into the team so if you see them make sure you say hi. Our team of Veterinary Surgeons has now increased to six.



Kezia started in January. She is originally from New Zealand and has been living

in the UK for four years with her partner and pet bunny. She loves to travel and has a special interest in rabbits. In her spare time she enjoys practicing yoga and loves indoor bouldering. She also spends time with her bunny Pabu.



Federica is originally from Italy and qualified as a Vet in 2011. She has a particular interest

in surgery, in which she has gained the Advanced Practitioner status. In her free time she enjoys going on camping adventures with her husband and her little dachshund Eolo, playing volleyball and painting.



Vet nurse Jeri welcomed her new baby girl Leah on 1st January.

She made a surprise arrival three weeks early. Mum and baby are doing well and older brother Finley is loving having a little sister. We wish all the family the very best.

Focus on rabbits: Keeping a spring in your bunny's step

It's nearly Easter and Spring is in the air. Rabbits have long been associated with this time of year, so in this issue we look at how to keep your bunnies healthy and happy.

Housing

Rabbits can make excellent house pets and can be easily litter trained. However, they do love to chew everything and can be destructive! It is advisable to supervise your rabbit when they are out and have a secure pen for when you aren't there. It is important that measures are taken to "rabbit-proof" your house, especially with regard to electrical cables and house plants. Litter trays, hiding places and lots of enrichment should be provided to keep your rabbit entertained. They should also be given the opportunity to exercise in larger areas on a regular basis, ideally this should be outside to give them the opportunity to graze.

Outdoor bunnies can be housed in a hutch, but should always have access to a grassed run. The hutch should ideally be as big as possible, allow the rabbit to stand up fully and perform at least three consecutive hops.

If you have more than one rabbit then this should be taken into account. It is important to remember that a hutch should only be seen as a shelter. Rabbits are extremely active animals so attaching a run to their hutch allows them to come and go as they please. The run should allow the rabbit to stretch up to their full height and have a secure cover to protect them from predators. Be aware that foxes can also dig underneath. It must be escape proof and hiding areas should be provided, as well as a shaded area.



Left: A hutch with a run is perfect. Above: Toilet roll tubes filled with hay make a great toy.

Rabbits can easily become bored so it's important to provide enrichment such as tunnels, willow balls and digging pots to encourage their natural behaviour. You can also get creative and make toys, such as stuffing a toilet roll with hay and chopped up apple, filling plastic bottles with dry pasta to create a rattle to throw around and building platforms using shoe boxes. The best enrichment for your rabbit is a companion.

To ensure good hygiene, you need to remove soiled hay and

bedding daily, and replace it with fresh stuff. The hutch should be thoroughly cleaned at least twice a week with disinfectant but make sure you have a separate area to keep your bunny in while it is drying.

Rabbits are quite hardy animals but do not tolerate damp, draughty or hot conditions very well. Plastic sheeting or a blanket can be used to cover the exposed front of the hutch and plenty of bedding should be provided to help keep them warm.

Bunny companions

The best thing you can do for your rabbit is ensure that they are not kept alone. The British Veterinary Association (BVA) has revealed that 42% of the pet rabbits seen by vets spend their life alone, despite evidence showing they are “healthier and happier” when housed with a companion.

The current advice is that potential owners should always consider taking on more than one pet rabbit due to the importance of companionship for their physical and emotional health. As an animal that lives in colonies in the wild, research shows that they actively seek out the company of other rabbits in preference to food.

Daniella Dos Santos, president of BVA, said: “Whether they are outside or inside, pet rabbits are highly sociable animals and benefit from buddying up with a suitable companion, so it’s a big concern that so many in the UK still live alone. It’s important to acknowledge the significance of companionship and adequate housing space to keep rabbits happy and healthy. We aim to create better awareness of both the physical and emotional health and welfare benefits to rabbits of keeping them in compatible pairs and want to spread the word that #ItTakesTwo.”

If you are thinking of getting rabbits a neutered pair is ideal but if you already have a lone rabbit and you’re wondering whether you should get a companion, ask a vet what your options are, what companion would be best suited to your rabbit’s health and welfare needs and the safest way to introduce them.

Diet

Rabbit nutrition is extremely important and the incorrect diet could result in medical problems such as dental disease



SAFE FRESH FOODS TO FEED YOUR RABBIT

- Basil
- Broccoli
- Brussel sprouts
- Cauliflower
- Celery
- Courgette
- Curly kale
- Dandelions
- Green beans
- Peppers
- Parsley
- Rocket
- Radish tops
- Spinach
- Spring greens
- Watercress



Fruit can be offered but in moderation as it is high in sugar. Apples, bananas, carrots, grapes, pears and strawberries are all safe.

and obesity.

The best diet is a mixed one that includes: 80% hay and grass; 15% fresh vegetables and plants (a handful morning and evening); and 5% commercial dry rabbit pellets - just 1 tablespoon is enough.

Hay and grass are the key elements of the diet as they ensure good dental and digestive health. It’s important to get a good-quality hay and store it somewhere dry and pest-free. As hay is also used as bedding it can quickly become soiled so we recommend providing a hay rack to keep bedding and food

separate. Lawn clippings should never be fed to rabbits as they ferment quickly and can be extremely harmful.

It is also a good idea to offer different vegetables each day to your bunny. See the box for our guide to safe foods to offer.

Dry muesli diets should be avoided as these can result in selective feeding, and the bits they leave are usually the bits they need to eat. These “complete” diets also fail to provide the correct dental exercise for your pet, which leads to dental disease. You should aim for a high fibre content in

a pellet food instead. However, you should never change your rabbit's food suddenly as this can trigger fatal stomach upsets. It is advisable to take at least two weeks to change gradually over to a new food.

Water should be changed daily. Water bottles are ideal but always check they are working by lightly squeezing. They should also be padded during winter to prevent freezing. It is ideal to also provide a water bowl as they are easier to drink from and will not get blocked, but they must be cleaned daily.

Teeth

Rabbit's teeth are amazing! The front teeth are only a small part of the story. It's the molars, hidden away at the back of the mouth that do most of the hard work - and cause the most problems.

Rabbit teeth are similar to horse teeth. They have evolved over time to break down tough, fibrous vegetation such as grasses, weeds, twigs and leaves, which is the natural forage of wild rabbits. To compensate for this constant wear, rabbit teeth are open-rooted, which means they grow continuously throughout their lives to ensure there is always a fresh new tooth surface to grind food efficiently.

Watch a rabbit chewing hay and you'll see the jaw moving from side to side. It's this crucial chewing action, together with the correct diet, that keeps the back teeth the correct length.

A rabbit whose diet is insufficient in fibre, such as a pellet-only diet or lacking in sufficient quantities of hay, will be unable to properly wear down its teeth. As a result the teeth crowns grow higher and meet the opposing teeth abnormally, leading to uneven wear and the eventual development of sharp edges or points called spurs. These sharp edges are painful and can cut the tongue or the

DENTAL CHECKS TO DO AT HOME



- Make sure your rabbit eats their daily pellet and veggie portions eagerly, and that they munch on hay frequently throughout the day.
- Note any changes in your rabbits eating habits i.e. no longer eating veggies, producing pellets or appearing to have trouble eating them, eating less hay than usual or having abnormal faeces.
- Feel the sides of your rabbit's head, below the eyes, the cheekbones and the jawbone.

- If you feel a lump on one side and not the other book an appointment with the vet.
- Check the incisor teeth by gently clamping your bunny between your knees on the floor, facing forward, lean over him and gently pull his lips back into a smile. You'll see the incisors - do they meet evenly? Ensure you check these weekly.
- Back teeth are virtually impossible to check at home. Your job is to look out for signs that might indicate a back tooth problem - lumps on the jaw, drooling or changes in food preferences.
- Eye or nasal discharge and excessive drooling or wetness under the chin can also be a sign that something is wrong with your rabbit's teeth, and a vet check is needed.

cheeks, causing soft tissue ulcers and abscesses. When teeth don't meet they create abnormal pressure against one another, which causes the tooth roots to become impacted, elongated and inflamed. This is extremely painful and will eventually lead to an infection in the bone or the jaw. A rabbit is likely to then never have normal teeth and will require frequent visits to the vets for regular trims and possible abscess surgery. If a rabbit stops eating due to dental pain it can also lead to gut stasis, which can be fatal.

With tooth trims and increased dietary fibre we can keep rabbits comfortable and provide them with a good quality of life. Tooth problems cannot and must not be ignored; they will not get better on their own. The best chance for your bunny is early diagnosis and monitoring.

Hay is the most important part of your rabbit's diet, not only because of the fibre content that keeps the gut functioning

properly, but also because it requires a great deal of chewing. Limiting the amount of pellets you feed your rabbit is important, because it will encourage them to eat more hay. The general guide is approximately 1tbsp per 1kg bodyweight. It is also helpful to offer your rabbit tough, fibrous apple and pear tree branches, leaves and twigs.

We recommend six-monthly, or at the very least yearly, dental checks with the vet, and feeding a healthy, high-fibre diet. These recommendations are the two most important factors in keeping your rabbit's teeth in good shape. Rabbits are prey animals and do not show signs of illness until they are very ill.

Diseases

There are two fatal diseases in rabbits that we recommend vaccinating against. These are myxomatosis and Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease (RHD), also known as Viral Haemorrhagic Disease.

Myxomatosis

Myxomatosis is a severe viral disease spread by biting insects such as fleas and mosquitoes. Symptoms include weepy, puffy eyes leading to blindness, thick discharge from the nose, puffy fluid filled swellings around the head, face and genitals. Rabbits also become anorexic and depressed, and death usually results within 12 days.

The main route of infection is via insects such as fleas and mosquitoes that have previously bitten an infected rabbit. Direct contact with infected rabbits can also spread the disease. ALL pet rabbits (indoors and outdoors) are at risk.

Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease

Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD) is a fatal virus spread by direct contact between infected rabbits (wild and domesticated) as well as indirect contact by fleas, people and even on your clothing. It causes internal bleeding and their internal organs shut down. Death usually follows 1-2 days later. It affects both indoor and outdoor rabbits.

Symptoms include fever, anorexia, paralysis and seizures. Some rabbits may not show any outward signs of the disease. There is also a new strain called VHD-2, which came to the UK in 2013. This has a longer incubation period so the disease is spread more widely and is very often fatal. We have recently had several suspected cases of VHD-2 in the area, even in indoor rabbits.

Vaccination can prevent both myxomatosis and VHD. We offer a combined vaccine that can be given from five weeks of age. Yearly boosters are necessary to provide ongoing protection. There is also a separate vaccination available for VHD-2, which is given from 10 weeks of age and again boosters given annually. The combined myxomatosis/VHD vaccine does not protect



against VHD-2, so they must have both vaccines to cover all three diseases. Protection against VHD-2 starts a week after vaccination. If your rabbit is not vaccinated or if you do not know if your rabbit has had the appropriate vaccination, we recommend that you contact the practice.

Flystrike

Flystrike in domestic rabbits is sadly all too common a problem throughout the summer months. Not only is flystrike extremely distressing for all concerned, but it is also potentially fatal.

Flystrike is the infestation of an animal with maggots. Whereas blue-bottle flies only lay eggs on dead or rotting flesh, green-bottle flies lay eggs in warm, damp places such as wet fur on animals. The eggs

hatch a day later and the larvae (maggots) eat into the flesh, i.e. your rabbit. As the maggots grow, they eat further into the rabbit and, generally, if it is not found in time, the rabbit will have suffered so much soft-tissue damage that it has to be euthanised.

Regular checking of your rabbit's bottom is very important. We recommend that you inspect your rabbit's bottom for cleanliness and signs of fly eggs at least once a day and twice daily in warm weather. Fly eggs can hatch out in less than 24 hours in optimal conditions. If your rabbit's bottom is dirty it needs cleaning and drying immediately. You should also seek veterinary advice. Soiling in this area increases the likelihood of fly-strike occurring but it may also be a sign of underlying disease or management problems. Dirty bottoms may occur secondary to inappropriate diet, dental disease, diarrhoea, urinary and genital problems such as arthritis and old age. There are products available that can be used, such as a spot-on to help prevent flystrike.

If you would like any further information please make an appointment with our rabbit nurse Charlotte or our dental nurse Katy to discuss.

“We have recently had several suspected cases of VHD-2 in the area. Vaccination can prevent it”

Can you win a cat's affection?

Most of us will have been confused about a cat's reaction to our affection at some point. The super-friendly cat who is seemingly enjoying being stroked, only to bite or swipe a moment later. But maybe we just aren't stroking them right!

Cats went from being used as pest control by humans, to being regarded as valued companions about 4000 years ago. Although this might seem like a long enough time for a species to fully adjust to increased social demands, this is unlikely to be the case for our feline friends. Domestic cats have had barely any genetic divergence from their ancestors, so their brains are still wired to think like a wildcat's. Wildcats live solitary lives and communicate indirectly. So it's unlikely that domestic cats inherited many complex social skills from their ancestors.

However, humans are a very social species, drawn to infantile-looking features — large eyes and forehead, a small nose and round face — which is why we find cats' faces so cute. So our first reaction when we see a cat or kitten is often to want to stroke them. But many cats can find this type of interaction a little overwhelming.

Although a lot of cats do like being stroked, human interaction is something they have to learn to enjoy during their short sensitive period — between two and seven weeks old. And while some cats may react aggressively to unwanted physical attention, others may just be tolerating our physical affection in return for food and somewhere to live. However, a tolerant cat is not necessarily a happy cat. Higher stress levels are reported in cats that are described by their owners as tolerating rather than actively disliking petting.

The key to success is to focus



SIGNS OF CAT ENJOYMENT

- Tail held upright and choosing to initiate contact.
- Purring and kneading you with their front paws.
- Gently waving their tail from side to side while held in the air.
- A relaxed posture and facial expression, ears pricked and pointed forwards.
- Giving you a gentle nudge if you pause while you're stroking them.

on providing the cat with as much choice and control during interactions as possible. For example, they should be allowed to indicate whether they want to be petted or not, and have control over where we touch them and how long for.

Due to our tactile nature this approach will probably require a bit of self-restraint. But it could pay off, as research shows that interactions with cats are likely to last longer when the cat, rather than the human, initiates them.

It's also really important to pay close attention to the cat's behaviour and posture during

SIGNS OF CAT TENSION

- Shifting, moving or turning their head away from you.
- Remaining passive.
- Exaggerated blinking, shaking or licking their nose.
- Rapid bursts of grooming.
- Rippling or twitching skin, usually along their back.
- Swishing their tail.
- Ears flattening to the sides.
- Biting, swiping or batting your hand away with their paw.

interactions, to ensure they are comfortable. As a general guide, most friendly cats will enjoy being touched around the regions where their facial glands are located, including the base of their ears, under their chin and around their cheeks. These places are usually preferred over areas such as their tummy, back and base of their tail.

Lots of cats do like being touched, but lots probably don't — and many just tolerate it. Ultimately though it's important to respect their boundaries, even if that means admiring them from a distance.

More to measuring food than meets the eye

New research has found that even when dog owners are measuring out their pet's food, they are often getting it wrong.

The study by researchers at the University of Guelph in Canada was designed to test dog owners' measuring skills when feeding their dog dry food using a measuring cup. It found that owners were often inaccurate, ranging from a 48% underestimation to a 152% overestimation, depending on the measuring device used and the amount they tried to portion out.

The occasional measurement mistake may not seem like much, but errors made on a daily basis could lead to under-nourishment, weight gain or obesity, said lead author Prof. Jason Coe from the Ontario Veterinary College.

"We found it particularly concerning to see how often participants over-measured the assigned portions, particularly given that there is an ongoing problem with pet obesity. Dog owners can easily overfeed their animals if they don't measure out portions correctly, putting their animals at risk of several obesity-related diseases," he said.

The solution, Coe said, is for dog owners to change their approach to measuring their dog's dry food. The ideal method would be to use kitchen scales to weigh out the exact amount. Scales are precise and leave little room for error.

The study, published in the BMJ journal *Veterinary Record* and funded by Royal Canin, recruited 100 dog owners and asked them to use one of three measuring devices to measure out kibble: a standard two-cup scoop with graduated markings, sold at a local pet store; a two-cup liquid measuring cup; and a one-cup plastic dry-food measuring cup.

Each participant was asked to take their measuring device and measure out three volumes



of dry dog food: $\frac{1}{4}$ cup, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup and one cup. The volume of dog food measured by participants was then compared to the correct weight that should have been measured.

There was a lot of variation in the participants' portions, especially when they were asked to portion out the smallest volume, which participants often got significantly wrong. "That finding has important implications for small dogs, since they typically receive smaller volumes of food. Even a small amount of over-measuring for a small dog can be a considerable increase in their daily caloric intake putting them at risk of weight gain from too much food," said Coe.

Those using the two-cup liquid measuring cup were most likely to inaccurately measure all three portions. "The problem with trying to eyeball one cup or $\frac{1}{2}$ cup in a two-cup device is that there is lots of room for error in deciding where the measurement line is, depending on how you're holding the cup," said Coe.

Study participants were most accurate when they used a one-cup dry-food measuring device to portion out one cup of kibble. Another option for improving

accuracy is to use a dry-food measuring device matched to the amount needed, said Coe.

"The closer the measuring cup is to the portion you want to measure, the more accurate you'll be," said Coe. But the most accurate method is to use the kitchen scales, which ensures each portion size is precise.

When the participants were shown how far off their usual measurement methods were, most said there was a high likelihood that they would start using a kitchen scale for measuring their dog's food.

"I now use a scale in my own home for accurately measuring my own dog's kibble. I first found it strange to use. But now that I'm in the routine of using it, it seems weird not to use a scale," Coe said.

Coe says that this is important even for dog owners with pets that are at a healthy weight, as ensuring correct food portions is key to preventing weight gain and weight-related problems in the future. "Most people want their pets to be happy and healthy, and this is a way to keep their pets' weights in control, improving their chances of living long and full lives."

University launches dog and owner study

The University of Bristol's Veterinary School has launched a "first-of-its-kind" study into the lives of dogs and their owners.

The UK Dog Project will examine UK dog ownership, and will be undertaken by academics in the Animal Behaviour and Welfare Group at Bristol Veterinary School as part of a PhD project.

This study is going to examine owners who are "first thinking of bringing a canine companion into their home, right through to being well-seasoned dog owners". Prospective dog owners who are looking to get a dog before the end of August 2020, are being asked to participate in the upcoming study.

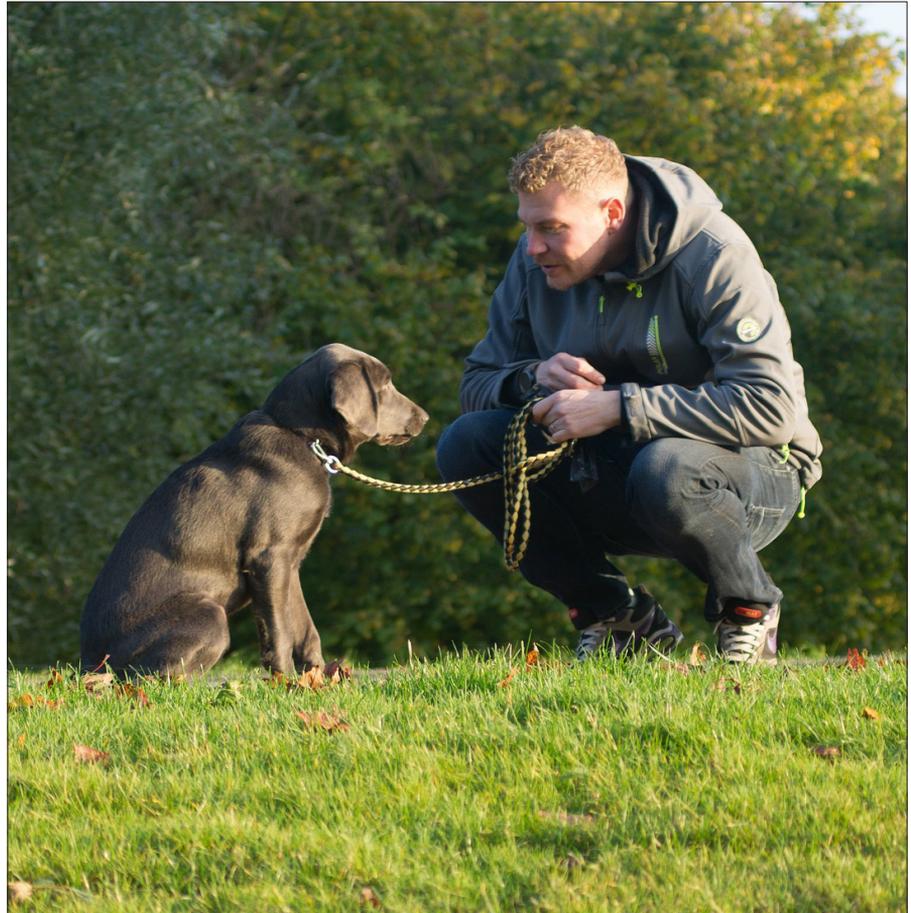
Researchers will then follow the owners and their pets for several years to gain a "deeper understanding" into the relationship between them, and the factors that affect this relationship.

The study also hopes to discover what affects people's decisions to get a dog in the first place, and how the dog-owner relationship develops over the first few years of ownership.

Before owners acquire their new dog they will be asked to complete an online questionnaire, which should take no more than 20 minutes.

Once owners have their dog there will be three more questionnaires; one soon after they have their new dog, one six months later and another 18 months after that. They will all be completed online.

As a thank you for being part of the research project, a small gift for the new dog will be provided after participants have completed the fourth and final questionnaire. There will also be the chance to enter into prize draws at various stages with the chances of winning up to £100



of Amazon vouchers.

If participants don't end up getting a dog, or they don't keep their dog during the research project period, they will still be

“The study hopes to discover how the dog-owner relationship develops over the first few years of ownership”

able to make a very valuable contribution to the research. They will help researchers to understand what people think and do when considering getting a dog and their subsequent dog ownership practices.

Dr Nicola Rooney, lecturer and research group supervisor, said: “This is an exciting new study that promises to tell us much more about the lives of dogs and their new owners.

“We are extremely keen to get as many people involved as possible, so if you, or anyone you know, have any thoughts of getting a new dog, please do fill in the questionnaire.”

More details and a link to the initial online questionnaire can be found on the University of Bristol website at www.bristol.ac.uk/vet-school/research/projects/ukdogproject/.

Easter dot-to-dot

