

# Common health problems of pet rabbits in the UK: Does body shape matter much?



Rabbits are the UK's third most common mammalian pet (after dogs and cats). During domestication, humans have changed the body shapes of pet rabbits substantially away from the natural body shape of wild rabbits. However, there is still limited knowledge on the overall health in rabbits kept as pets - and whether their health varies by body shape. This study aimed to fill this knowledge gap by documenting common disorders and mortality among pet rabbits in the UK and exploring what role body shape plays in these outcomes.

The study included 162,017 rabbits under primary care at 1,224 veterinary clinics in the UK during 2019.

## Rabbit Demography

50.72% of rabbits were recorded as a **single breed** (or type) with the remaining **49.72%** recorded as either an **unspecified cross** between various types of rabbit or **just as a 'rabbit'**.

**2.26kg**  
The average pet rabbit bodyweight

**46.20%** were female & **53.80%** male.  
Overall, **24.08%** were neutered.

**5 years**  
The average longevity of pet rabbits

### Short-headed\*



70,676 (79.69%)

### Long-headed\*\*\*



3,113 (3.51%)

### Wild rabbit skull shape



(as comparison)

### Medium-headed\*\*

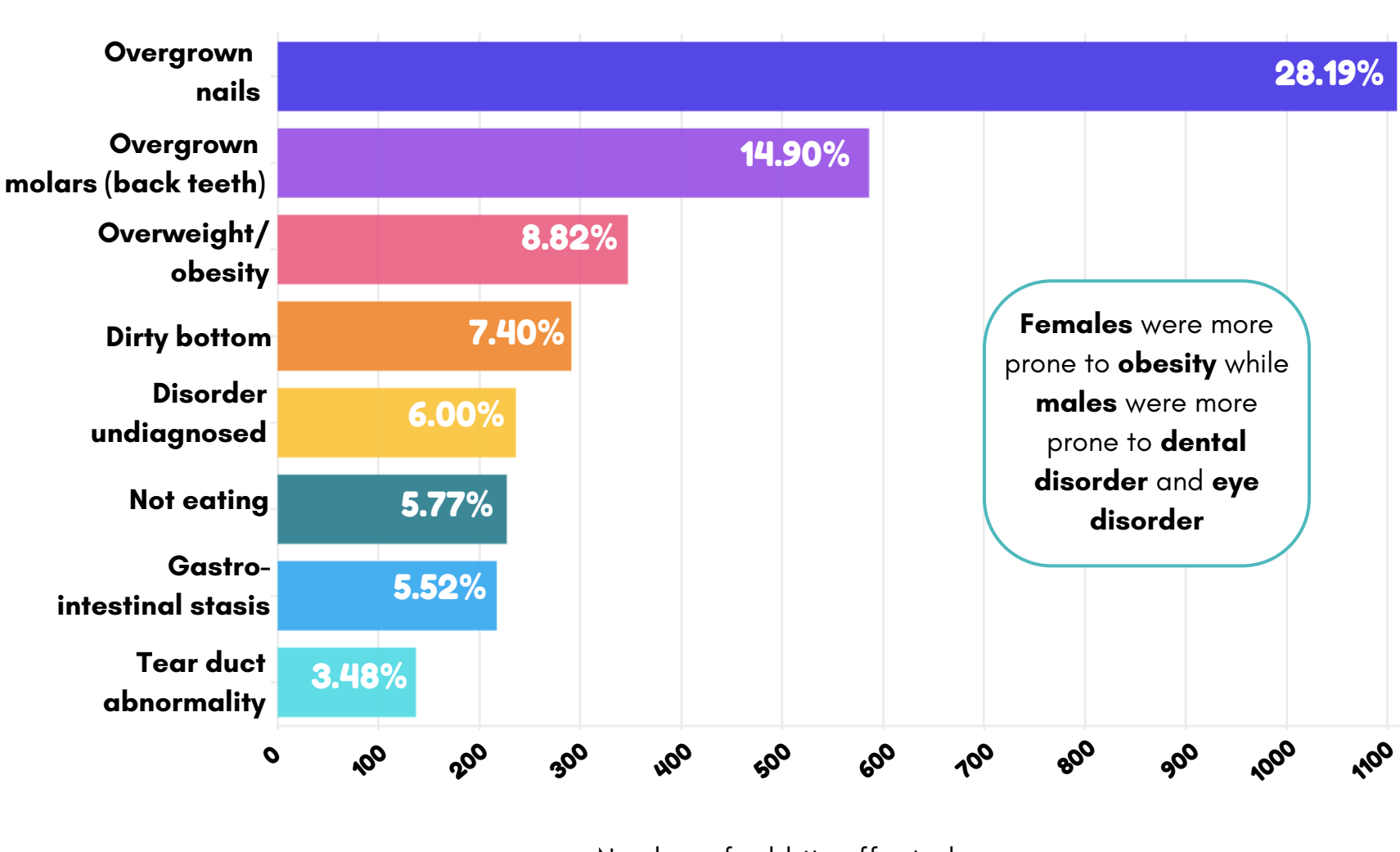


14,904 (16.80%)

Overall 57.05% were classified as lop-eared and 42.95% as erect-eared.

\*brachycephalic. \*\*mesaticephalic. \*\*\*dolichocephalic.

## Common disorders in Rabbits



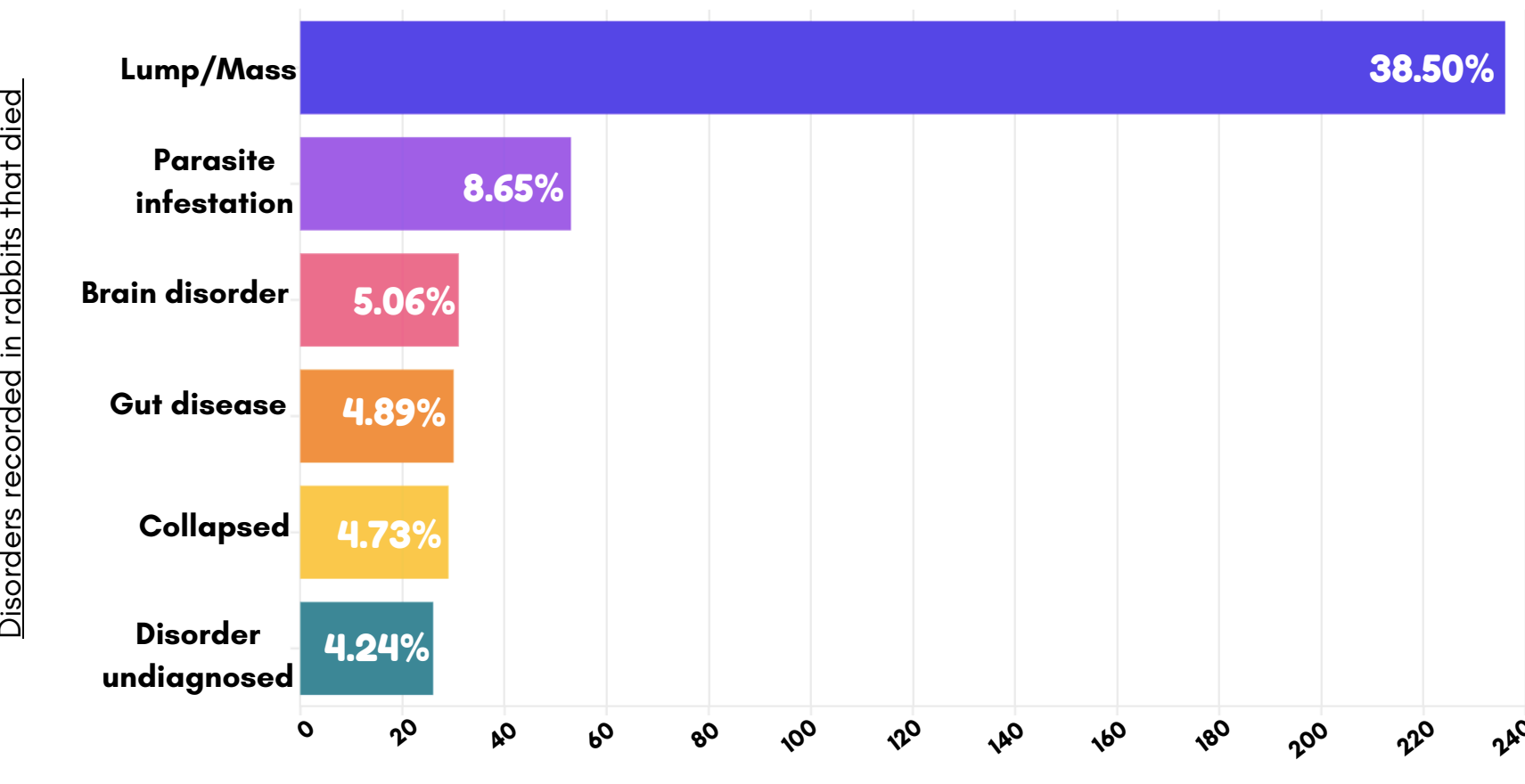
Females were more prone to **obesity** while males were more prone to **dental disorder** and **eye disorder**

**In general**, short-headed rabbits had lower risk of gut disease, obesity and appetite disorder but had higher risk of skin disorder and eye disorder.  
**Specifically**, short headed rabbits had 2.6 times higher risk of dirty bottom and 3.5 times higher risk of tear duct disease compared with medium headed rabbits.

**In general**, rabbits with lop ear carriage had higher risk of skin disorder and parasite infestation compared to erect-eared rabbits.  
**Specifically**, lop eared rabbits had 2.4 times higher risk of dirty bottom and 2.0 times higher risk of tear duct disease compared with erect-eared rabbits.



## Mortality in Rabbits



Many of the common disorders highlighted in the current study can be linked to the limited exercise and unnatural diets often offered to rabbits kept as pets.

Increased risk of dirty bottom and tear duct problems in short-headed and lop-eared rabbits raises some serious welfare concerns for these animals kept as pets.

The study's findings suggest husbandry (or just even living life as a domesticated species) are significant factors contributing to the common health issues observed in rabbits in the UK.

[CLICK TO READ THE FULL STUDY](#)

O'Neill DG, Williams A, Brodbelt DC, Church DB & Hedley J. Conformation-associated health in pet rabbits in the UK: A VetCompass cohort study. Veterinary Record. 2024.

RVC VetCompass <https://www.rvc.ac.uk/vetcompass> carries out welfare research based on anonymised clinical information shared from over 30% of UK veterinary practices. We are very grateful to the owners and veterinary professionals who contribute to VetCompass research.