



Rabbit Diet and Care

By Susan Brown, DVM / Date Reviewed/Revised: 02/05/2014

Rabbits make intelligent, friendly and quiet house pets. The following information on how to best meet their home and dietary needs is provided to help your rabbit enjoy a happy, healthy life.

Grass Hay (made from timothy, meadow, oat, rye, barley or bermuda) is the most important part of a rabbit's diet and should be available at all times, as it is required for healthy motility and to promote proper wear of the teeth. Provide free access in a hay rack, box, basket, or litter box. Rabbits often pass stools while eating, so this can help with litter box training. You can also stuff hay into toilet paper rolls and other hiding areas as fun enrichment. Grass hay can be purchased online from high-quality companies like Oxbow. Legume hays (made from alfalfa, clover, peas, beans or peanuts) can be given as a treat, but should not be used routinely as they are loaded with more calories, calcium, and protein than a rabbit needs.

Green Foods are the next most important part of the rabbit's diet, because they contain a variety of micronutrients and a higher water content which helps promote healthy GI function. However, greens should never be the total diet. Approximately 1 packed cup of mixed green foods per 2 pounds of body weight daily is ideal. If your rabbit has never eaten green foods before, start on hay for at least one month prior to aid in GI transition. Introduce greens a little at a time, and watch the stools for any change.

In general, the darker green a food is, the higher the nutritional value (this is why iceberg lettuce is discouraged.) Some good options include broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage, carrot tops, baby greens, green or red bell peppers, basil, squash, as well as edible flowers (if grown organically and not from a florist) like roses, day lilies, pansies, and snap dragons. Fresh fruits like kiwi, mango, peach, pear, melons, pineapple, or raspberry can also be given. Limit the amount of dried fruit, bananas and grapes, as they can avoid healthier options in lieu of these addictive snacks, and don't promote normal tooth wear.

Commercial treats sold for rabbits often contain high levels of starch and fat. Examples of other high fat and/or starch foods to AVOID include beans, breads, cereals, chocolate, corn, nuts, oats, peas, sugar, seeds, or wheat. A diet of grass hay and green foods with small amounts of fruits and vegetables, along with their cecotropes, contains all the nutrition necessary. Do not use supplemental vitamins, salt, or mineral blocks in a healthy pet - rabbits will obtain all the vitamins they need from their cecotropes, grass hay and green foods and small amount of pellets.

Commercial Rabbit Pellets should generally only comprise 10% of a pet rabbit's diet - no more than 1/4 cup per 4 pounds of body weight daily. Do not buy pellet mixes that are alfalfa based, or contain seeds, dried fruits or nuts - we recommend a high quality pellet that contains >18% fiber and <1% calcium, like Oxbow, Kaytee or Mazuri. Water should always be available and changed daily, in a bowl that is weighted or secured so that it does not tip over.



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Cecotropes are elongated, greenish in color, coated in mucous and have a strong odor. These droppings are rich in organisms and nutrients like amino acids, fatty acids and vitamins. By eating cecotropes, rabbits can extract the maximum nutrients from low-energy food materials. If a rabbit is eating a rich (pellet-heavy) diet, there may be a few cecotropes dropped in the cage. If you see a large number, you should consult your veterinarian.

Cages can be used as a home base for part of the day, but should never be kept completely confined, as rabbits are designed to run and jump and move about a large area. Cages should allow the rabbit to stand up on his hind legs without hitting the top of the cage, and have space for a litter box. The floor can be solid or wire, and kept in a well ventilated, cool area. The optimum temperature range for a rabbit is 60F to 70F - the potential for a fatal heat stroke exists for >80F and beyond. Never leave a rabbit outside in a pen unsupervised because dogs, cats, or wildlife may be able to knock over the fencing or harm your pet. If you allow your pet free access to your house you need to bunny-proof by blocking all escape routes, access to electrical and computer cords, cover furniture to protect it from the rabbit's teeth and claws, and remove access to toxic plants, rodenticides, insecticides and other toxic materials.

Litter Box training for rabbits is relatively easy. When beginning training, confine your pet in a small area, either in a cage or a blocked off section of the room, and place a litter box in the corner; try to pick the corner your pet has already used for her toilet. Make sure the sides of the box are low enough so your pet can get in and out easily. Never punish your pet while in the litter box. Pelleted litter makes the best bedding and is preferred over wood shavings - do not use clay or clumping kitty litter.

Rest/Hide Areas are important, as the ancestors of pet rabbits would have spent a good portion of their day in protected underground burrows. Our pet rabbits retain the same need to have a protected area in which they feel safe and secure. Some rabbits are content to sit in a box full of hay, others like a completely enclosed box in which to hide. Try providing places to hide, such as untreated wicker or straw baskets, litter pans or other shallow boxes filled with hay, cardboard boxes with an entrance hole and the bottom removed, or large cardboard tubes.

Toys are a great way to provide mental stimulation; all rabbits like to chew, so give them toilet paper or paper towel rolls, small empty cardboard cartons, small piles of shredded paper, branches from untreated trees (dry the wood for at least a month to prevent any adverse reactions to the sap), wooden chew toys designed for birds, unfinished unpainted wicker or straw baskets. They like things that make noise such as keys, empty plastic or metal cans, hard plastic baby toys and jar lids. To make a toy more interesting, you can hide in it healthy treats, as described in the diet section, or stuff hay in hiding areas. Giving the rabbit a sense that he or she is foraging for food is an excellent mental activity.



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Handling your rabbit requires care and attention to prevent serious spinal injuries. The main thing to remember is to always support the hindquarters. Scoop up under the chest and then place your other hand under the back legs to lift your bunny from the floor. Ask your veterinarian or an experienced rabbit handler about other methods used to handle rabbits. When handling or medicating your bunny, working near the floor can prevent injury. Visit www.cahcares.com/rabbit for videos on the appropriate handling methods for medication administration.

Dental Disease is any condition that causes a rabbit's teeth to be worn down improperly or cause malocclusion (trauma to the face, breed/genetic malformation, infectious and nutritional disease, diet) can result in serious dental disease. The best prevention is a healthy diet including grass hay and green foods. Regardless of whether your rabbit is experiencing problems, they should have a dental examination performed by a veterinarian at least once a year. You should never attempt to trim a rabbit's overgrown teeth without consulting your veterinarian, as this can lead to irreversible damage. Any drooling or loss of appetite should be considered a medical emergency. Pudding-like stools can be a sign of problems with GI motility, usually caused by an inappropriate diet. This should also be monitored closely.

Urinary Disease can be best prevented through adequate water intake, which is accomplished through the feeding of green foods and providing fresh water daily. The normal color of rabbit urine can range from yellow to dark orange-red. The color comes from plant pigments in the food or from normal pigments produced in the wall of the bladder. The urine can be clear or cloudy with a white precipitate. The white precipitate is excess calcium excreted through the urine. Rabbits can develop disease of the bladder or kidneys and may exhibit signs such as blood in the urine, straining to urinate, inappropriate or frequent urination, or the complete inability to urinate. If your pet is exhibiting any of these signs, consult your veterinarian immediately.

Spay/Castration can be performed in rabbits after 4 months of age, and can work to prevent certain health concerns and negative behavioral changes. Uterine adenocarcinoma is a malignant cancer that can affect female rabbits over two years of age, and the best prevention of this disease is to remove the reproductive organs in a surgical procedure called a spay. Some male rabbits have a tendency to become aggressive in their adolescence (8-18 months of age) and can also start spraying urine on vertical surfaces outside the toilet area to mark their territory. Surgical removal of the testicles, called castration, can control these behaviors if it is done before the behavior occurs or shortly thereafter.

We hope this provides you guidelines for a foundation of health and success for your rabbit - never hesitate to contact us with any questions or concerns! - *the staff of Cornerstone Animal Hospital*