

Rabbit Care

Rabbit Care

Below is an article from Cynthia K. Wheat, DVM, the Rabbit Sanctuary's rabbit veterinarian, that provides information on feeding your pet rabbit for optimal health. When fed properly and given proper care, pet rabbits can live between 8 to 12 years.

For more information about caring for your pet rabbit, please visit the House Rabbit Society's web site at www.rabbit.org.

FEEDING RABBITS FOR OPTIMAL HEALTH

Cynthia K. Wheat, DVM

Rabbits are natural foragers with gastrointestinal systems designed to consume large volumes of plant materials. The tough, fibrous plants eaten by rabbits in the wild are efficiently converted into protein and energy. Thus, plants keep the intestinal tract healthy and keep the teeth worn normally. In the spring, wild bunnies may feast on new grasses and clover. Cultivated crops and garden vegetables are the mainstay of a summer diet, and fall and winter provide dried grasses, straw, fallen fruit, bark and even twigs and shrubs.

Our pet rabbits are much the same as their wild cousins—they love to eat, chew, forage, and require large amounts of fiber to remain healthy. Unfortunately, inappropriate diets are the most common underlying cause of many diseases in pet bunnies. Chronic soft stools, liver and kidney diseases, gastrointestinal disorders, dental disease and obesity can all be attributed to unhealthy diets. Obese rabbits are unable to consume their cecotropes (night feces) and clean themselves. They also may be more likely to develop diseases such as diabetes and heart disease.

The three major components of a healthy diet—in order of importance are: 1. Hay 2. Fresh vegetables, and 3. Pellets. Many rabbits do well on a diet consisting of free-choice hay and vegetables only.

HAY: The most important part of any healthy diet. Hay should be available at all times (24 hours a day). Even baby bunnies as young as 3 - 4 weeks of age are able to nibble at hay. Hay has many benefits: Its abrasive quality helps to wear teeth normally, the time required to chew also aids in normal tooth wear and occupies the bunnies so less time is spent chewing on things in the house or themselves (!). Hay provides an excellent source of the indigestible fiber essential for bunny health. Grass hays are preferred; Timothy, Bermuda, Prairie, meadow and oat hay (not the oats you buy in the grocery). It is best to feed loose hay but if this is not available or a human member of the household has allergies, the cubes may be substituted. Alfalfa hay is too high in calories, protein and calcium to be fed long-term. It may be fed temporarily (when nothing else is available) to adults and is best used only in young rabbits (less than 6 months old). Sources of hay are feed stores, pet stores and horse barns (good horse quality hay is usually good for rabbits). You may have to buy an entire bale but this will keep if stored properly. Do not use hay that is contaminated with animal feces, is wet, moldy or doesn't smell fresh. Hay should be stored in a cool, dry place with adequate ventilation (not in tightly closed plastic bag).

FRESH VEGETABLES: Veggies should be fed daily. However, suddenly feeding fresh greens to a bunny that has never eaten anything except pellets may cause soft stools or diarrhea. These rabbits should be started on hay first. After the bunny is eating hay daily, start introducing the fresh foods gradually—add one new vegetable every 2 - 3 days. Romaine, kale and mustard greens are good choices to start feeding. If any new food causes soft stools, stop feeding it and try it again in 1 - 2 months. Once the bunny is eating a variety of vegetables you should start feeding a vegetable salad daily using at least three different vegetables mixed together. Feed a

minimum of 1 cup per 4 pounds of body weight. As long as the bunny is eating hay well, an unlimited amount of greens may be fed. Wash all food before feeding and try to use organically grown produce when possible. Vegetables should be fed raw—not cooked. Remember—the bunny must have hay with the greens.

Below is a list of recommended vegetables:

- Carrot tops
- Cilantro
- Beet tops
- Swiss chard
- Dandelion greens and flowers (no chemicals or pesticides)
- Parsley
- Clover
- Kale
- Cabbage
- Collards
- Broccoli - including leaves
- Escarole
- Carrot
- Romaine lettuce (no iceberg lettuce)
- Brussel sprouts
- Endive
- Radicchio
- Mint leaves
- Bok Choy

The premixed bags of salad greens are not a good choice—most contain too many low-nutrient foods such as iceberg lettuce.

PELLETS: The least important component of a good diet, pellets were originally designed for rabbits that needed to grow rapidly and often had short life spans (those used for meat, fur, and research). Pellets are high in calories, carbohydrates, protein, fat and calcium and low in fiber. Feeding a diet of mostly pellets can lead to obesity, liver and kidney disease and soft stools. Be sure to read labels. The pellets should be a good quality and contain the following amount of nutrients. Fiber, 18% or more; fat, less than 2.5%; protein, 16% or less; and calcium, 1% or less. All pellets are best fed within 90 days of the milling date (date often found on packages indicating when the feed was produced), and should be stored in air-tight containers. When switching brands of pellets, do so gradually to avoid gastrointestinal problems. Young rabbits that are growing rapidly should be given free-choice pellets until about six months old. After six months the following guidelines should be used:

Weight

Daily Pellets

2 - 4 lbs

1/8 cup

5 - 7 lbs

1/4 cup

8-10 lbs

1/2 cup

11 - 15 lbs

3/4 cup

Do not refill the bowl even if all of the pellets are eaten in less than 24 hours. Overfeeding leads to health problems. Breeding rabbits have different requirements and these guidelines apply only to pet rabbits.

Do not feed medicated pellets or food with bits of dried fruit and seeds. These are high in sugar and fat and marketed to appeal to humans.

TREATS: No more than 2 tablespoons per 2 pounds of body weight per day. Good treat foods include strawberries, papaya, pineapple, apples, pear, mango, tomato, peaches, blueberries, and raspberries. Dried fruits are okay but give half the amount; bananas and grapes are addictive—use only as occasional treats.

WATER: Water always should be available. Water containers should be cleaned daily as dirty water can harbor bacteria. Do not add medication to the water since the bunny may not like the taste and may drink less. Greens provide lots of water, so rabbits on a diet high in greens will naturally drink less water.

VITAMINS: Rabbits make their own vitamin C, B, and K, so supplements are not needed. Overdosage of vitamins can lead to health problems.

SALT BLOCKS: Salt blocks are not needed when the recommended diets are fed.

FOODS TO AVOID: Never feed salty or sugary snacks (candy, cakes, cookies or crackers), nuts, chocolate, breakfast cereals, legumes, peas, beans or other grains (corn, oats, wheat and bread). Never feed spoiled or moldy foods or potato peels. Remember—if it's not good enough for you to eat, then it's not good enough for the bunny to eat!