

SELECTIVE FEEDING

Rabbit mix only provides a balanced diet if the rabbit eats it all. Serious health problems can develop in rabbits who are selective eaters. This can occur in two ways:

- The rabbit develops a food fad, picks out favourite ingredients, and rejects the rest of the mix.
- Two or more rabbits live together and each one eats different components of the rabbit mix.

If selective eating is a problem, switch to a pelleted or extruded food, or try another brand of rabbit mix. If you persevere with mix, reduce the quantity provided so that the rabbit eats everything in the bowl before its next meal.

RABBITS, CALCIUM, AND VITAMIN D

Like all mammals, rabbits obtain calcium from their diet. Rabbits absorb calcium in proportion to what is present in their food and excrete any excess calcium via the kidneys which is why rabbit urine is often chalky. Too much or too little calcium can cause problems. Calcium deficiency is linked to dental disease, but excess calcium causes urinary stones and bladder problems.

Rabbits also need vitamin D to enable dietary calcium to be absorbed from the gut. Outdoor rabbits with access to a lawn run can synthesise vitamin D from sunlight, but rabbits living indoors or in hutches will become deficient unless they have enough vitamin D in their diet or spend time sunbathing outdoors. Vitamin D is added to commercial rabbit foods and also present in hay. A normal healthy rabbit eating plenty of hay and limited quantities of a good quality commercial rabbit food does not need a vitamin or mineral supplement. Rabbits with existing dental disease or those that are fussy eaters may benefit from receiving one. Ask your vet for advice.

WARNING

NEVER change your rabbit's diet suddenly: abrupt changes of diet can trigger fatal digestive upsets, especially in baby rabbits or those that are stressed (e.g. changing homes). Take at least 1-2 weeks to change over and feed lots of hay during this period.

COPROPHAGY

As well as the food you provide, rabbits eat some of their own droppings! The hard, dry "rabbit raisins" are waste products, but rabbits also produce dark, shiny, smelly "night" pellets called caecotrophs. These are normally eaten directly from the anus ("coprophagy"), and you won't see them very often. If your rabbit starts producing lots of caecotrophs, look for a reason. Possible causes include obesity, reduced mobility, and dental disease, but dietary problems are by far the most common. If your rabbit is affected, increase the proportion of hay, reduce the amount of rabbit mix/pellets, and have him/her checked by the vet.

FURTHER READING

Rabbit Nutrition by Virginia Richardson & Fiona Webb (Coney Publications, 1999). The Winter 1999 issue of "Rabbiting On" concentrated on healthy eating for rabbits. Back copies are available for £2.50 (while stocks last) from the RWA, details below.

This leaflet is brought to you by the Rabbit Welfare Fund - the charitable wing of the Rabbit Welfare Association (RWA).

If you love rabbits, please consider supporting the Rabbit Welfare Fund. You can make a donation, or you may like to join the RWA. As well as fund-raising activities, most RWA members kindly make a small donation to the RWF in addition to their annual £17.50 RWA membership fee. RWA members receive a fabulous quarterly magazine packed with health, behaviour and care advice to help you to build a wonderful relationship with your bunny - whether she/he lives indoors or out.

To contact the RWA/Rabbit Welfare Fund:
Ring the RWA National Helpline on 0870 046 5249

**Write to us at PO Box 603, Horsham,
West Sussex RH13 SWL.**

Log onto our websites
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The RWF Guide to Feeding your Pet Rabbit



Many common health problems in pet rabbits are caused by incorrect feeding. A healthy diet for a pet bunny should mimic the diet of his wild cousins. This leaflet explains what your rabbit should be eating and why.





RABBITS EAT GRASS

Rabbits are designed to eat grass. The most natural life for a pet rabbit would be to run loose in the garden, grazing on the lawn, sampling a wide variety of plants and vegetables and stripping bark from trees.

This lifestyle may suit the rabbit, but it's not a very practical option for most owners!

Daily access to a large run on the lawn ensures survival of both rabbit and garden

whilst still retaining the benefits of a grass-based diet. But with more rabbits living permanently indoors, it's vital that rabbit owners understand how to feed their pet properly.

So, what makes grass such a perfect rabbit food and how can your alternative match up?

GRASS HAS:

- High fibre - at least 20%
- Moderate protein - 12 to 15%
- Low fat, starch and sugar
- Abrasive action on teeth

"HAY IS MAGIC"

Unlimited, good quality hay is the foundation of a healthy diet for pet rabbits. As well as meeting their basic nutritional requirements it has many other benefits. It's so important, it should even be fed to rabbits eating "complete" rabbit foods.

Nibbling hay keeps bunnies busy, reducing boredom and helping to prevent behavioural problems. Chewing hay strengthens teeth and jaws. Hay also provides lots of long-strand fibre to maintain healthy gut movement.

Good quality hay - sweet smelling with minimal dust - can be difficult to find in pet shops. Try riding stables or farms instead. Kiln-dried grass products can be used alongside or instead of hay, and are particularly useful if you can't get good hay.

THE "HAY & VEGGIE" DIET VS. COMMERCIAL FOOD

If hay is the bulk of the diet, how much green food and/or rabbit mix should the rabbit have?

THE "HAY & VEGGIE DIET" CONSISTS OF:

- lots of hay
- a large selection of leafy greens and vegetables
- very small amount of mix or pellets

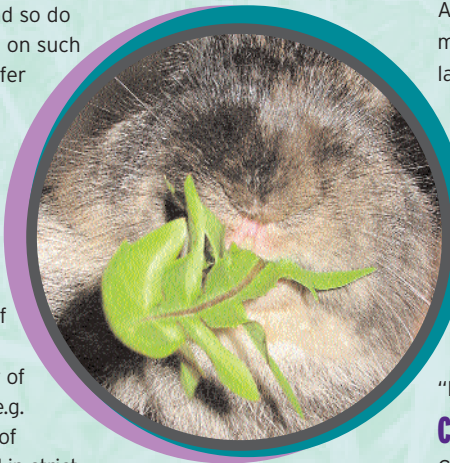
This is a natural way to feed your bunny and worth trying if your rabbit has an easily-upset tummy. But it can be expensive and time consuming to prepare. Also, a totally hay/veggie diet may be deficient in some important nutrients, so we don't suggest cutting out commercial foods altogether.

Most rabbit owners prefer to use commercial rabbit foods, which make feeding pet rabbits quicker and simpler. Used sensibly (in limited quantities plus lots of hay!) they can form an integral part of a healthy diet for most rabbits. You can always feed greens, veggies or kiln-dried grass alongside commercial foods - it's perfectly acceptable to end up half way to the "hay & veggie" diet!

HEALTHY TREATS

We all love crisps and cakes - and so do many rabbits! If we over-indulge on such foods we tend to get fat and suffer from tooth decay. So do rabbits, but they can also develop more serious problems: excess sugars and starchy treats can wreak havoc with the sensitive population of bacteria in the gut, leading to fatal digestive upsets. Stick to healthy treats - chunks of carrot or broccoli; swede / turnip peelings; cauliflower stalks. Many of the treats marketed for rabbits (e.g. milk-based yoghurt drops; sticks of sweetened cereals) should be fed in strict moderation or not at all.

If you cannot resist allowing your rabbit eat your food, limit him to one pea sized piece of cake; a one inch chunk of banana; or a peanut. That's all. Anything more and you risk both his waistline and his health.



HOW MUCH TO FEED?

The target is a bunny who isn't too fat or too thin and whose droppings resemble raisins. Young rabbits can have as much as they can eat from weaning until growth slows down at 4-6 months. After that, adjust food intake to suit the rabbit. Obesity is a serious health hazard to rabbits and it can be tricky to tell whether your pet is the correct weight. Ask your vet for advice when you take your bunny for his vaccinations.

If your rabbit stops eating for more than 24 hours, or changes his favourite foods, take him to the vet, even if he appears otherwise okay. There could be a serious health problem developing.

DON'T FORGET THE WATER!

Rabbits must have access to fresh water at all times. Rabbits eating lots of greens may not drink very much; those on extruded foods tend to drink more. Bottles are easier to keep clean for hutch rabbits, but indoor rabbits usually prefer a water bowl.

UNDERSTANDING RABBIT FOOD LABELS. MIX, PELLETS OR EXTRUDED?

● Rabbit mixes look like muesli and are popular with owners. Always choose a properly formulated, reputable brand. The main drawback is selective feeding by the rabbit - explained later in this leaflet.

● Rabbit pellets are bite-sized nuggets. Every pellet has the same composition which helps ensure that the rabbit eats a balanced diet. They're not as popular as rabbit mixes, largely because they look less appetising to the human eye.

● In extruded foods, the ingredients are mixed, cooked and "extruded". They have all the important advantages of pellets but are much more palatable. You can even get a "lite" version in some brands; better for bunnies' waistlines!

COMPLEMENTARY OR COMPLETE?

Complete foods provide the rabbit with all the nutrients it requires, but you still need to feed hay to relieve boredom and strengthen the teeth.

Complementary foods are designed to be fed as one part of the diet. Hay and sometimes greenfood must be added to provide a balanced diet.