

SOUTH COAST VET CARE ~ ANIMAL MATTERS

Rabbit Nutrition

Incorrect feeding causes some of the most common health problems in pet rabbits. A healthy diet for a pet bunny mimics the diet of his wild cousins.

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 the lawn, sampling a wide variety of plants and vegetables, and stripping bark from trees. The lifestyle may suit the rabbit, but it's not a very practical option for most rabbit owners.

Hay, Hay, Hay

Unlimited, good quality hay is the foundation of a healthy diet for your pet bunny. As well as meeting their basic nutritional requirements it has many other benefits. In fact, hay is so important that we recommend that it is fed to all rabbits, even those eating 'complete' rabbit food.

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

Good quality hay – sweet smelling and with minimal dust – can be difficult to find in pet shops. Try riding stables or feed store. Freeze-dried grass products can be used alongside or instead of hay and is particularly useful if you can't find a source of good quality hay.

The "Hay and Veggie" Diet versus Commercial Food

So, you've got the message about hay. Now it's time to decide on the right proportion of green food versus commercial rabbit food.

The "Hay and Veggie Diet" consists of

- Lots of hay
- A large selection of 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. However, it can be expensive and time consuming to prepare! An entire hay/veggie diet may be deficient in essential fatty acids and vitamins D and E so don't cut out commercial foods all together.

Most rabbit owners prefer to make more use of commercially prepared foods, which make feeding pet rabbits quicker and simpler. Used sensibly (in very 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 freeze-dried grass alongside commercial foods – it is perfectly fine to end up half way to the “hay and veggie” diet!

Healthy Treats

We love cakes and crisps – and so do many rabbits, if given the opportunity. If we overindulge on such foods we tend to get fat and suffer tooth decay. Rabbits do too, but they can also develop 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, apple cores, carrot/turnip peelings, cauliflower stalks. Many of treats marketed for rabbits (from milk-based yoghurt drops to sticks of sweetened cereals) should be fed in strict moderation or not at all.

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

How Much to Feed?

You’re aiming for a bunny who isn’t too fat or thin and whose droppings resemble raisins, you should only rarely find caecotrophs lying about – these are the dark, shiny, smelly ‘night’ pellets normally directly eaten from the anus. There are many possible causes of excess caecotrophs (obesity, reduced mobility, dental disease) but dietary problems are by far the most common: increase the proportion of hay, reduce the amount of rabbit mix/pellets, and get your rabbit checked by the vet.

Young rabbits can be offered food ad lib from weaning until growth slows down at 4-6 months. After that, adjust food intake to suit the rabbit. Obesity is a serious hazard to rabbits and it can be tricky to tell whether your pet is the correct weight.

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

Don’t Forget Water

Rabbits must have access to fresh water at all times. Rabbits eating lots of greens may not drink very much, while those on extruded food and hay tend to drink much 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. Choose a reputable brand – some are excellent, others poor. The main drawback is selective feeding by the rabbit which is fully 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 a lot less appetizing to the human eye.

Extruded foods are new. The ingredients are mixed, cooked and 'extruded'. They have all the important advantages of pellets but are much more palatable.

Complementary or Complete?

Complete foods provide the rabbit with all the nutrients it requires. However, feeding unlimited hay is still important, both to relieve boredom and strengthen the teeth.

Complementary foods are designed to be fed as one component of the diet. Hay and sometimes green food will need to be added to provide a balanced diet.

Selective Feeding and What to do about It

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

- If the rabbit develops a food fad, it may pick out favourite ingredients and reject the rest of the mix.
- If 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 foods and excrete 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 synthesize vitamin D from sunlight, but rabbits living indoors must either have vitamin D in their diet or spend time sunbathing outdoors, or they will become deficient. Vitamin D is added to commercial rabbit foods and also present in hay.

A normally 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.

Enjoy your Pet Rabbit!

Watching a bunny chomp its way through a large pile of hay holds a strange satisfaction for rabbit owners. It's not difficult to feed your rabbit properly, and if you follow the system outlined here you should end up with a healthy, happy rabbit with a healthy, happy digestive system.

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.