

Feeding your pet rabbit

The phrase 'you are what you eat' has never been truer for the rabbit. Recent research by veterinary surgeons and rabbit food companies has shown that most of the common illnesses that rabbits suffer from could be prevented by feeding them a healthy diet. Unfortunately, many pet rabbits are being fed a diet that is the rabbit equivalent of 'junk food'. Feeding your rabbit the correct diet is not difficult - simply follow our guidelines.

Why is my rabbit's diet so important?

Your rabbit's health almost entirely depends on the food you feed it. An incorrect diet can be a contributing factor in all of these common problems in pet rabbits:

- Dental disease (maloccluded/overgrown teeth)
- Obesity
- Diarrhoea
- Fly strike
- Gut stasis
- Snuffles

It may be surprising, but some of these conditions can be fatal. It's hard to believe that you can significantly reduce the risk of your rabbit developing these conditions just by feeding it the right diet.

What is the correct diet for a rabbit?

Pet rabbits are the same species as wild rabbits but their diets are very different. Most pet rabbits are fed a diet consisting of commercial rabbit mix and greenfood: this can be high in carbohydrate and protein but low in fibre. Wild rabbits, however, eat mainly grass and hay (dried grass): this is high in fibre with moderate levels of protein. Wild rabbits are much less likely to suffer from the conditions listed above because of the fibre content in their diet. Therefore, the correct diet for a pet rabbit is one that is high in fibre.

Grass and hay should be the major components of your rabbit's diet as they are high in fibre. Vegetables and greenfoods are also important. There are also some commercial rabbit mixes that have been developed to provide pet rabbits with a high-fibre diet.

Hay and grass

Provide your rabbit with unlimited hay and grass. Ensure that the hay is good quality. Generally, hay that is sold in bales to feed horses is generally better quality than that available ready-bagged from pet shops. If you do buy large quantities of hay, store it carefully to prevent it becoming damp or mouldy - do not store it in plastic bags. Provide the hay in a hay rack to prevent it from being contaminated by droppings.

Allow the grass in your garden to grow long and pick it daily to give to your rabbit, or allow your rabbit to graze directly by placing it in a secure run on your lawn. (NB Never feed your rabbit lawn-mower clippings.) You can also grow small tubs of grass especially for rabbits from packs now sold in pet shops. Freeze-dried grass is also newly available for rabbits (called 'Supa forage' from Burgess, 'Dried grass' from Friendship Estates or 'Readigrass' from Spillers).

Vegetables and greenfoods

Provide your rabbit with these on a daily basis. Carrots, baby sweetcorn, celery, broccoli, chickweed, clover and sow thistle can be given daily. Dark green leafy vegetables, eg kale and spring greens, and dandelions contain high levels of calcium and should be fed in moderation. They should not be given to a rabbits with urinary or bladder problems.

Never pick weeds from the side of a busy road, or from places where dogs are exercised. Always wash vegetables and greenfoods before you give them to your rabbit. Only give your rabbit fresh vegetables and greens - if they have started to wilt or 'go-off' throw them away!

Commercial rabbit mix

Rabbits will thrive on a diet of grass, hay and vegetables alone. However, many owners also wish to feed a commercial mix. There are two excellent rabbit mixes with a high fibre content: Supreme's Russel Rabbit and Burgess Supa Rabbit Excel.

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Supa Rabbit Excel is an extruded feed and the pieces of mix all look the same. Russel Rabbit mixes are made up of lots of different cereals and dried vegetables. Some rabbits will pick out only the pieces they like (called 'selective feeding') - this means they may not be getting a properly balanced diet. It is important to feed only small quantities of mix and to leave the food in the bowl until most of the pieces have been eaten.

Check on the packet for the recommended amount to feed your rabbit per day. Weigh this amount out carefully - do not try to estimate it! No more than one teaspoon of pellets a day should be given to ensure your rabbit eats enough hay. Overfeeding commercial food to your rabbit will lead to obesity and may also result in crystals forming in its bladder. Remember that your rabbit does not have to have any commercial mix, and in fact many vets will argue that rabbits will be healthier if fed on hay, grass and vegetables alone.

How should I change my rabbit's diet?

It is very important not to change or alter your rabbit's diet suddenly. Make gradual changes over a period of at least 2 weeks so that your rabbit's digestive system has time to adjust. Give your rabbit a healthier diet by introducing hay, grass and greens as discussed above and change its rabbit mix to one of the high-fiber ones. Introduce grass and greens gradually to reduce the likelihood of diarrhoea.

Mix the new mix in the same feeding bowl with your rabbit's normal food in a ratio of 20:80 or 25:75. Feed this for 3-4 days to ensure that your rabbit is eating all of it (and accepting the new food). Watch carefully for signs such as loss of appetite, bloating, abnormally runny droppings and changes in behaviour or demeanour, as these may indicate that your rabbit is not adapting well to the new diet. If your rabbit is normal, increase the quantity of new mix to give a ratio of 40:60 or 50:50 and again feed this for 3-4 days, watching for problem signs as before. Increase the mix to 60:40 or 75:25 for another 3-4 day period, then to 80:20, and finally to 100% new mix.

If you need any other information on health issues concerning your pet, please contact Briarhill Veterinary Clinic on 091 38 00 00 and we will be happy to advise you.