

Rabbit Nutrition

The best diet for rabbits will mimic their natural grass-based diet in the wild. Unlimited mixed grass/timothy hay should make up 85 – 90 % of their diet

Dark leafy greens should make up 10 – 15 % of their diet (1 cup per 2 kg body weight) — Select combination of three types (eg. parsley, carrot tops, cilantro, romaine lettuce, dandelion leaves, basil, beet greens, broccoli leaves, brussel sprouts collard greens, kale)

Good quality pellets (Oxbow), 1/8 cup per 2 kg body weight maximum. The ideal situation would be to slowly eliminate all pellets from the diet

Fresh fruits as a treat only (1 tablespoon a day maximum) as they can cause gastrointestinal upset. Choose high fibre treats eg. apple, melon, papaya, blueberry. Avoid sugary fruits eg. grapes, and banana and carrots!

Water access at all times. Offer a water bowl and water bottle. Clean daily.

Rabbit Digestive Tract Fundamentals and the Importance of High Fibre

The rabbit digestive tract is adapted to digest a high fibre diet consisting mainly of grasses (hay)

The rabbit produces two types of fecal pellets — hard/dry, soft/moist

The proximal colon (lower part of the bowel) contracts and divides ingested food into fibrous and non-fibrous particles. Fibre moves through the colon to be excreted as hard fecal pellets and non-fibrous food is moved into the caecum for

fermentation (via bacteria). The fecal pellets excreted from this area are soft and mucous covered (caecotropes, soft feces or night feces) and are rich in nutrients. These are re-ingested by the rabbits in order to absorb the nutrients. In order to maintain this delicate balance of hard and soft feces, the right amount of fibre must be ingested.

Helpful Hints

Salt licks and mineral blocks are unnecessary if your rabbit is eating a balanced diet — some blocks may contain too high levels of calcium that can be harmful

Grass clippings from the lawn can be harmful as they ferment too rapidly and can cause gastrointestinal upset. They may also contain pesticides

Many rabbits eat the majority of their diet in the early evening or overnight

Long term continuous ingestion of certain vegetables can cause problems eg. kale, spinach, alfalfa — this can be avoided by offering two to three types daily and changing the types of vegetables each day

Avoid sudden changes in diet — changes need to be made slowly over days or weeks gradually offering small amounts of the new item

Obesity in a rabbit is not cute! Obesity can predispose the rabbit to many health problems — gastrointestinal, arthritis, back issues, respiratory problems and cardiac issues. Avoid obesity by sticking to a mostly hay diet and fresh leafy greens

Supplementing with papaya or pineapple enzyme is not necessary. It used to be thought that the enzymes would “break up” hairballs in the rabbits stomach. We now know that hair in the rabbits stomach is normal in moderate amounts.

When hair is found in large amounts it is a sign of a gastrointestinal motility (movement) disorder. The hair itself is not the primary issue. When the gastrointestinal tract slows it leads to dehydration and impaction of the material in the stomach and sometimes the cecum. This condition is called gastric or cecal stasis. There is no benefit to giving enzyme products to dissolve hair since the problem is not the accumulation of hair and these products do not dissolve hair anyways.

Rabbits absorb more digestible calcium from their diet than they need at the moment and the majority of excess calcium is excreted through the kidney. Although, calcium absorption and metabolism is not completely understood in the rabbit we know that too much calcium is one of the risk factors for the development of bladder sludge or stones. To avoid excess calcium remove commercial pellets and alfalfa from the diet and feed hay and leafy greens. Some greens have a higher calcium content than others but not all of the calcium is digestible. Restricting the type of leafy greens based on calcium content may not be important.

A 2.5 to 3 kg rabbit typically passes about 150 fecal pellets a day

What If Your Rabbit Doesn't Eat Hay?

Book an appointment with your veterinarian to ensure that nothing medical is going on. This may include having dental x-rays taken. If the failure to eat hay has no medical origin start by reducing the amount of pellets to . cup per 2 kg body weight while introducing grass hay in multiple locations including the litterbox. Once the rabbit starts eating the hay gradually reduce the amount of pellets over the next few weeks. You can also try introducing a small amount of chopped hay with the greens, slowly decreasing some of the greens and increasing the hay. Or try different types of hay.