Rabbit nutrition
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Why is what I feed my rabbit important?

Rabbits have a rather complicated and sensitive digestive system and so they are very reliant on correct feeding by their owners. Many clinical diseases and problems which we see at the surgery are caused by inappropriate or unbalanced diets. Conditions which can occur as a result of inappropriate feeding include dental disease, eye problems, osteoporosis (brittle bones), diarrhoea, cystitis, obesity and 'fly-strike'.

What should I feed my rabbit?

As in the wild, rabbits should be fed mainly good quality grass and hay. As most pet rabbits are unable to perform extensive grazing and browsing all day, every day, a supplementary dry food is also recommended. Other items of fruit and vegetables can be given in small quantities.
Why do rabbits need grass and hay?

In the wild, grass and herbs will make up a large proportion of a rabbit’s diet, so their digestive tracts and metabolism have been adapted to cope with this diet.

The teeth of rabbits are different to those of cats and dogs as they grow continuously throughout their lives. Their molar (back) teeth are continually ground down during the chewing of the long fibres found in grasses. If we do not provide enough long fibrous material in the diet then their teeth will not receive the same wearing effect and they will become over long – leading to dental problems.

Secondly, the slowly digestible fibre of grass and hay is important for gut health. Rabbits have an unusual digestive system which gains nutrition by bacterial fermentation of ingested food in the lower intestine. The fermented food is then passed out of the body as ‘caecotrophs’ (often referred to as ‘sticky poo’), which then stick to the rabbit’s bottom and are then eaten by the rabbit for a second time to allow absorption of nutrients. If this system does not occur the rabbit may become malnourished despite eating plenty of food. The rabbit may also get diarrhoea and a dirty bottom. (See Fly-strike in rabbits information sheet).

What sort of dry food should I feed?

There are many brands of concentrated dried food available. For reasons explained above these should be considered almost as a supplement rather than the main component of the diet. These foods are important, however, and when choosing a diet it is important that it has been specifically formulated for rabbits as they have different nutritional requirements to other small pets. We strongly recommend that the diet you choose is fully pelleted – i.e. all of the ingredients are milled together so that each pellet looks the same. This is because the vast majority of rabbits are selective eaters – they will pick out the bits they like and leave those they find less palatable. Unfortunately, the bits most rabbits leave are the ‘boring’ brown bits, which are in-fact the calcium impregnated grass pellets. Without these pellets the diets are very low in calcium. Rabbits have a very high calcium requirement – without a good regular supply, their bones become soft. This can lead to both dental problems and even broken bones.

It is important, however, that rabbits are not fed too much dry food. Firstly, for reasons stated above, the slowly digestible fibres should be main source of nutrition. If too much pelleted food is offered, the rabbit may eat that in preference to grass and hay. Secondly, the rabbit may also neglect to eat it’s caecotrophs in favour of the dry food, leading to a dirty bottom and ‘fly-strike’. Thirdly, over-feeding can also lead to obesity which is an increasingly common problem in rabbits. As is the case with other animals and humans, being obese causes many health problems – specifically it results in reduced activity, leading to osteoporosis (brittle bones) and reduced ability to groom (See Fly-strike in rabbits information sheet).

In general, a rabbit will need one to two egg-cups full of dry food a day, depending on the size of the rabbit.

Can I give my rabbit treats?

As part of a varied diet, feeding small amounts of fruit, vegetables and herbs is fine, so long as these are not eaten exclusively in favour of hay and grass. The feeding of highly digestible ‘treats’ like biscuits and bread is a really bad idea. These foods will change the environment in the gut and damage the normal bacterial population which is essential for gut health and function. A good rule of thumb is to consider whether a rabbit is likely to come across a food in the wild and therefore be adapted to eat it. Remember that digestive biscuits do not grow readily in the wild!!

What should my rabbit drink?

Always make sure your rabbit has a plentiful supply of fresh water to drink. Some rabbits like a bowl and other prefer a bottle – do not suddenly change your rabbit’s water source. Water bowls and bottles should be regularly cleaned. Leaking bottles and spilt bowls will lead to wet bedding. When bedding is wet, foot sores and respiratory infections can occur – so bottles must be regularly checked and bowls should be heavy enough so that they are not constantly being knocked over.

If you have any concerns or queries regarding your rabbit’s nutrition, please do not hesitate to contact us.