

# RABBIT - DIET

Providing adequate nutrition for pet rabbits is a deceptively difficult task. Commercial rabbit pellets are readily available from pet and feed stores but they are often woefully inadequate, especially regarding their fibre (roughage) content. Furthermore, the high protein and mineral levels in most commercial rabbit pellets (because they are made from milled alfalfa hay, which is rich in these nutrients, make them inappropriate as a dietary staple for many house rabbits. Rabbit owners will have a difficult time purchasing acceptable commercial pellets for their pet rabbit(s) because the crude fibre content printed on the packaging is usually ambiguous. It should be between 18 and 23% (computed on a dry matter basis) but is often listed in such a way that the exact crude fibre content of the product cannot be determined by the pet owner. Commercial pellets fed free choice tend to promote obesity of inactive pet rabbits. This is because these diets are calorie rich as they were originally formulated for consumption by rapidly growing rabbits raised for their meat and fur. At this time, we offer the following dietary recommendations for house rabbits:



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- ✂ Oxbow pellets. 1/8 cup per day for adult rabbits. See Nutrition for more information on this product.
- ✂ Equal volumes of timothy (grass) hay and oat or barley (grain) hay. \*If a suitable commercial alfalfa pellet product cannot be found, add alfalfa hay to the diet and feed equal volumes of all 3 hays. The hays should be available to rabbits at all times, day and night.
- ✂ Assorted fresh vegetables (especially leafy greens) and fruit.
- ✂ Routine vitamin and mineral supplementation is usually not necessary if a pet rabbit is fed as outlined above.
- ✂ Providing an iodized salt lick is recommended because the iodine contained therein may help counteract the tendency for cabbage, kale, mustard greens and similar foods to produce goiter (enlargement of the Thyroid gland(s)).
- ✂ Do not feed seeds, nuts, candy, and cookies (as well as other similar dessert type items).
- ✂ Clean, fresh water should be available at all times either in a bottle equipped with a sipper tube or in a heavy ceramic dish that cannot be overturned. The water container, regardless of the type used, should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected at least every one to two days.
- ✂ Many rabbits love to gnaw on their cage and on certain items in the cage. We suggest offering pesticide-free fruit tree twigs or blocks of wood on which your rabbit can chew whenever he/she desires.

Many veterinarians advocate the daily addition of pineapple or pina colada yogurt to the diet. Most rabbits willingly accept the yogurt, especially if they are introduced to it at a young age. Yogurt may help to promote and maintain the normal bacterial flora within the digestive tract, thereby helping to prevent digestive disorders. If pellets are fed, they should be as fresh as possible when purchased and should be purchased in relatively small quantities. It is advisable that the pellets be stored in the refrigerator to prevent premature spoilage. Pellets that will probably not be used within two months of purchase should be frozen immediately post purchase. Refusal to eat rancid pellets is a relatively common cause of anorexia among rabbits.

## INGESTION OF NIGHT FECES

Rabbits engage in a relatively unique behaviour when they deliberately ingest small, soft, moist (often mucus-covered), light green fecal pellets directly from the anus. These special "night stools" (also known as "cecal" or cecotropes) are especially rich in protein, vitamins, and minerals. Rabbits must obtain these nutrients in this fashion. This behaviour is most often carried out in the early morning hours and is rarely observed by rabbit owners. Rabbits will, at times however, choose not to ingest the night pellets and these slightly different appearing droppings will be noted by the pet owner in the morning. Some rabbit owners believe that reducing the amount of starchy foods (i.e. crackers, oatmeal, etc.) in the diet may help to encourage an individual rabbit to return to consuming its cecals.