



## FEEDING PET RABBITS

The commonest problems that vets see in rabbits all stem from an incorrect diet – dental problems, facial abscesses, digestive disorders etc. This is why feeding your rabbit correctly is so important.

### The Basic Facts.

Rabbits need a **high fibre diet** – their digestive system has evolved to deal with such a diet and, indeed, too little fibre in the diet can give rise to digestive tract disturbances, often manifesting as diarrhoea. In addition, their teeth are continually growing, so without lots of chewing they can become overgrown and misaligned, and without the proper nutrients in their diet the teeth can become brittle.

The ideal diet for a rabbit is high fibre (20-35%), low fat (1-3%), moderate protein (12-13%) with sufficient but not excessive calcium (0.5-1%). These requirements are met by a very cheap and ubiquitous food – **GRASS!** – and, of course, this is what wild rabbits eat.

### The Ideal Lifestyle.

Running around in the garden with plenty of natural daylight, whilst eating a wide variety of plants and vegetables and nibbling branches and bark from trees. Lying in the sun, but with somewhere to bolt to if danger is sensed.

Ideal for rabbits, yes, but also very attractive to local cats and dogs, and not very popular if you like gardening!

However, rabbits are very adaptable and can be kept in a hutch or even indoors **provided they are fed correctly**, allowed exercise and have the opportunity to play and socialise with other rabbits and humans. Rabbits kept in solitary confinement in too small a hutch are far from happy, and may become fearful and aggressive.



### Commercial Rabbit Foods.

Rabbit foods in the form of a coarse mixture of cereals are convenient but provide insufficient fibre, too much carbohydrate and allow rabbits to select out their favourite ingredients – usually the cereal and peas – which can lead to obesity and an imbalanced diet. Insufficient fibre can produce digestive disorders, resulting in soft faeces that stick to the underside of the tail, which can cause problems if the rabbit cannot groom properly because it is too fat or has dental problems. **Do not** feed coarse mixture diets ad lib or exclusively, otherwise obesity, bad teeth, poor bones and problems with grooming will occur.



Rabbit foods are ‘complementary’, in that they are designed to be fed as **part** of the diet. In fact, concentrate rabbit foods are not essential if ad lib grass, hay and greens are available. Concentrate foods are fine to feed provided grass and hay make up the bulk of the diet. Two types are available: the ‘muesli’ type, consisting of pulses, grains, grass pellets and biscuits, and the ‘pelleted’ or ‘extruded’ type. Pelleted or extruded diets prevent selective feeding of the tastier, high carbohydrate parts which lead to an unbalanced diet. A general rule is to offer a **maximum** of 25g of pellets per kilogram body weight per day.

Treats: these are full of sugar and carbohydrates. They are like sweets for children, and rabbits like them. Equally, they like biscuits and chocolate. These are all unsuitable, fattening and very bad for the teeth. Nothing of this nature should be given hutch room!

Remember as well, that rabbits are considerably smaller than children, and that to them, a single piece of chocolate or a biscuit would be the equivalent of giving a child a whole meal of it!

## The Correct Way to Feed Pet Rabbits.

- The best food for rabbits is **GRASS!** If this is always available then they don't require anything else. Hay is not quite so good (lacking the moisture it is not quite so abrasive on their teeth), but can also be fed on its own.
- Grass and hay should be provided **every day**. Only good quality hay should be used and should be available at all times. Rabbits will eat it, but will also play with it as well. If grass is offered, pull up handfuls of it for the rabbit. **NEVER** use lawn clippings.
- Offer concentrate foods in small quantities only – a maximum of 25g per Kg body weight daily.
- Feed a wide variety of green foods and vegetables every day, and the more fibrous these foods are, the healthier they are from the rabbit's point of view. Examples are broccoli, cauliflower leaves, cabbage, spring greens, kale, parsley, sprout peelings, celery leaves, pea pods, radish and carrot tops.
- Garden weeds and tree leaves can be fed, and groundsel, sow thistle, plantain, ground elder, dandelions, brambles and chickweed are all popular, but always check for poisonous plants such as evergreens, foxglove etc.
- It is important that rabbits which are fed on food collected from outside are vaccinated against diseases that may be spread from wild rabbits.
- Succulent foods such as lettuce, tomatoes and fruit can be fed as treat items, although some rabbits cannot tolerate such foods at all. Certain vegetables such as dandelion or cabbage may result in red urine – this is normal and not harmful.
- Allow rabbits to run outside in natural daylight as much as possible, although bear in mind that rabbits like to escape and can be very destructive in the garden.
- When changing diets, introduce the new foods gradually, mixing them with the rabbits' normal food for a few weeks before removing the old food completely.



## Feeding Overweight Rabbits.

Some rabbits convert their food to fat very easily, especially if not allowed to lead an active life. Some rabbits are greedy and enjoy to excess such foods as cereal mixes and sugary treats. Obesity can result in serious health problems, including arthritis, osteoporosis, faecal retention around the rear end, urine scalding, flystrike and metabolic diseases.

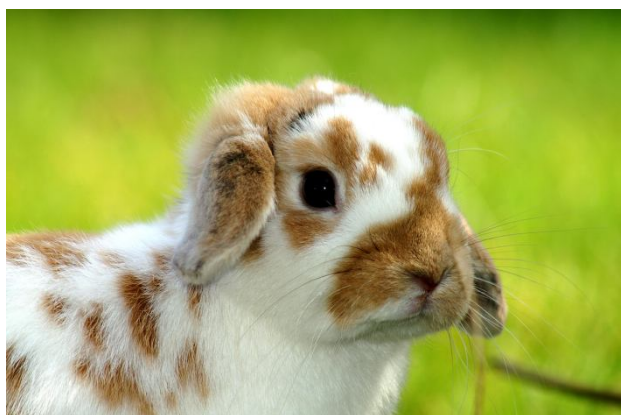
These rabbits should be placed onto a diet of grass and hay **ONLY**. If concentrate food is offered, then it should be only in very small quantities.

## Feeding Rabbits with Existing Dental Problems.

Rabbits with existing teeth problems or other related diseases may not easily accept dietary change, particularly if the rabbit has a sore face or mouth. Chewing fibrous foods such as grass or hay may be painful, and the acceptance of a new healthy diet may be difficult.

Although it is not possible to reverse many of the changes that have already taken place in rabbits with dental problems, it is possible to strengthen the teeth and surrounding bone by ensuring that the rabbit has sufficient calcium in the diet. Vitamin and mineral supplements that contain calcium and vitamin D are useful in rabbits which are finicky eaters or rabbits that have developed tooth problems already. It is important not to overdo supplements because rabbits given too much calcium can develop kidney and bladder stones. Only use supplements if the rabbit cannot be persuaded to eat a balanced diet, or if your vet has prescribed additional calcium and vitamin D.

There are several brands of supplements suitable for rabbits, but do not use more than one supplement at a time.



**CORRECT FEEDING +  
EXERCISE + VACCINATION  
= HEALTHY RABBITS**