

# Rabbit Diet

## Grass Hay

Rabbits are herbivores and in their natural environment grasses are the most important part of their diet. Grasses are abrasive to the teeth, which is why the rabbit evolved teeth that grow throughout their life. The molars are particularly adapted to grinding up tough fibrous materials. Grasses also provide a variety of nutrients as well as indigestible fiber, which helps keep the intestinal tract moving at a normal speed, and digestible fiber that is used by the bacteria in the cecum to produce such things as vitamin B and amino acids.

The most important part of a rabbit's diet is good quality grass hay. It should be available at all times. The rabbit can eat



as much as he/she wants. You can use any grass hay, including timothy, orchard grass, brome, and others. Avoid alfalfa, which is not a grass but rather a legume (like peas and beans) and is too high in calories and some nutrients such as calcium and protein. While the hay can be provided in a hay feeder

or on the bottom of the cage, putting it in a basket or cardboard box can provide enrichment for the rabbit.

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## Fresh Vegetables

*“Offer your rabbit a variety (2-4) of different types of leafy, green vegetables daily”*

Fresh, dark, leafy green vegetables should be provided daily. A variety of greens should be offered. Some leafy greens to offer include: parsley, kale, dandelion greens, mustard greens, carrot tops, collard greens, cilantro, clover, and broccoli leaves (stems and tops may cause intestinal gas).

Carrots are high in carbohydrates that are converted to sugar in the gut and should only be given sparingly. Spinach should be avoided it is high in calcium. Iceberg lettuce and cabbage should not be given, but romaine and dark leaf

lettuce can be given in small quantities.

Always thoroughly wash all fresh produce to avoid exposing your pet to pesticide residues or bacterial contamination. Feed your rabbit a variety (2-4) of different types of greens daily. Remove any uneaten greens in a few hours.



## Food Bowls and Water

Food should be offered in a dish suspended an inch or two above the bedding. Food offered on the bottom of the cage may be soiled by droppings or urine. Heavy ceramic bowls are recommended because they resist tipping and chewing. Rabbits can be finicky and may refuse food if the type of food or the container is changed. Any change in the diet should be made gradually.

Fresh, clean water should always be available in sipper bottle or a heavy crock that prevents spillage and should be changed daily. Do not add any medications or vitamins to the water as it will change the taste of the water and promote bacterial growth. If the taste of the water is disagreeable the rabbit may not drink as much. Not drinking enough water can result in dehydration

and disease, such as kidney disease and kidney or bladder stones. In addition, many vitamins are inactivated shortly after they are exposed to air, water, and light.

It is very important that all food and water containers be cleaned and disinfected daily.

## Pellets

There are complete pelleted diets formulated for rabbits. However, these diets were developed for rabbits used in research and meat and fur production. The diets support maximum growth rates but are not ideal for longevity, gut function, and overall health.

While a growing rabbit (less than 4 months old) may be fed unlimited pellets, it is advisable to limit the pellets of adults. *Adults should be restricted to 1 tablespoon of pellets per kilogram of body weight daily*; otherwise, they may become obese. Use pellets that are grass-hay based, not alfalfa

based. Also, do NOT feed diets that have dried fruits, seeds, and other additives.

As previously discussed, the rabbit's intestinal tract is highly specialized for digesting fiber. When inadequate fiber is given, intestinal motility is reduced, the wrong types of bacterial flora proliferate, and toxins may be produced. Impactions, diarrhea, dental disease, enterotoxemia, and other disorders may result from the excessive feeding of grains (i.e. pellets, seeds, cereals, and breads). Additionally, pellets have higher levels of protein

and calcium than is necessary for adult rabbits.



## Treats

Foods to be avoided are the high starchy foods such as peas, beans, corn, nuts/seeds, cakes, cookies, cereals, grains, breads, etc. Other foods that can be offered in very limited quantity are those that are high in sugar and carbohydrates, such as carrots and fruits. These foods create an imbalance

in the normal bacteria in the intestinal tract and can lead to serious disease. You can offer *one* baby carrot or *small* piece of fruit daily at the most. However, 2-3 times weekly is probably a healthier frequency.

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## Foraging

Foraging for food is one of the most natural behaviors and provides great enrichment for pets. Most mammals will spend a good portion of their day looking for food. Try hiding food around the cage, in the bedding or exercise area so the rabbit has to forage for the food. Put the hay or

fresh food in places such as hidden in little crumbled pieces of paper, empty toilet or paper towel rolls, or non-toxic baskets. Offer pellets in a small hollow plastic ball with holes larger than the pellet. As the rabbit rolls it around, the food falls out and he/she gets to eat. It

provides exercise and stimulation. You do have to take care that the rabbit is eating and getting adequate nutrition. Also, be careful not to overfeed.



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