

Evergreen Avian & Exotic Animal Hospital

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Rabbit Diet

(adapted from Oxbow Animal Health flyer on Rabbit Care)

Your rabbit is a strict herbivore meaning that he/she only eats plant material. The rabbit gastrointestinal tract must move continuously for health, which requires frequent intake of high fiber plant matter. A diet of mainly grass hay provides the best fiber for the gut to process. Fortified pellets can be fed daily to help provide additional nutrition. Fresh greens fed in small portions daily provide interest as well as additional nutrients. The bunny diet pyramid can be thought of as 75% grass hay, always available, 20% fortified pellets and 5% treats (leafy green vegetables) by daily volume. Rabbits should never be fed bread, bread type foods, crackers, sugary treat foods. The rule for a rabbit's diet: green, leafy, hay. If the food doesn't fit that, it probably isn't appropriate.

Hay

Grass hay is absolutely vital for digestive tract health. It helps to prevent obesity, dental disease, diarrhea and boredom. Your rabbit should have unlimited access to quality grass hay (timothy, orchard grass, oat grass, botanical, meadow grass). Unless the hay in your rabbit's habitat is soiled, do not replace it. Replacing it could encourage picky eating. Quantity: your rabbit should eat a pile the size of his/her body daily. Rabbits less than a year old can receive alfalfa hay in addition to grass hay. After 1 year of age, alfalfa should be used only as a treat or as directed by your veterinarian. For example pregnant and nursing rabbits or ones recovering from illness may have higher nutritional needs and may benefit from addition of some alfalfa hay.

Grass hay should make up the majority of the diet. Offer a variety of hays rather than just one type. This will also help keep interest in the food for your rabbit. Hay is a product of nature so it is normal for each bag to look and feel slightly different. Hay is perishable and should always smell good, and be somewhat green in color. It should be free of excessive dust.

Pellets

A complete fortified pellet can be fed at approximately 20% of the daily intake by volume (think 1/4-1/2 cup per 2-3 kg (4.5-6 lb) rabbit per day. This will assure that your rabbit is getting all the vitamins and minerals required for a healthy diet. A high-fiber, age-appropriate pellet such as an adult or young rabbit food is best for your rabbit. Adult rabbit pellets should be timothy based. Pellet mixes should not contain nuts, corn, seeds or fruit.

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Veggies and Treats

Treats are a great way to bond with your rabbit. The main purpose of a treat should be to encourage interaction between you and your rabbit. Offering too many treats can encourage your rabbit to refuse basic foods and prevent his/her intake of a balanced diet. Contrary to popular belief, rabbits do not need carrots. Better to feed the leafy portion of the carrot than the orange root, although they do enjoy it. Rabbits also do not need sweet treats such as yogurt drops, seed sticks, and fruit. Nutritious treats on the market include Simple Rewards (several flavors – veggie, barley, timothy). Treats should only be offered after your rabbit eats basic foods.

Fruit

Fruits are not a natural food for rabbits despite the Beatrix Potter book “Peter Rabbit” where Peter eats milk and blackberries. 1 teaspoon size portion of high fiber fruit such as banana, papaya, apple or strawberry occasionally is ok.

Vegetables

Veggies, especially leafy greens are healthy and natural food choices for your rabbit. Greens also are a good source of water and offer a variety of textures. Leafy greens should be given in moderation with no more than the size of your rabbit’s head every day. Greens include romaine, big, red and green leaf lettuces, carrot tops, kale, chard, mustard greens, dandelion, cilantro, parsley. Avoid iceberg lettuce as it might cause digestive upset. As with any new food, be sure to introduce new greens and vegetables slowly to avoid upsetting your rabbit’s digestive system and causing diarrhea.