

NUTRITION

WHAT DO RABBITS EAT?

More important than what they **will eat** is what **they should eat**.

A good quality rabbit pellet made from alfalfa forage and wheat middlings and a good quality grass hay is all they really need. **Ask for a starter supply of food where you purchase your bunny** and be sure to get the name and protein content used. Rabbit pellets are available in 16%, 17%, 18% and 20% protein. 16 and 17 percent are the most common with the higher protein reserved for fattening fryers and maintenance of does with large litters.

The key is to select one feed and **STICK TO IT!** All rabbit pellets are not created equal! Abrupt change of diet can cause **diarrhea and death overnight!**

If you have started using a feed and perhaps leave town and take the bunny along, suddenly discovering you left the food at home, **DO NOT**, under any circumstances, run down to the first pet store you find and buy something off the shelf! Feed your bunny a bland diet of dry bread and dry Quaker Oatmeal (yes, people food) until you return home. You will save yourself a lot of heartaches.

If the feed your bunny was raised on is not available in your area, be sure to mix the starter feed with the new feed and switch over gradually, adding dry Quaker Oatmeal or straw to minimize stomach upset.

HOW MUCH DO THEY EAT?

Once again there are variables based on weather, age of the bunny, amount of exercise and good common sense!

The basic rule is one ounce of pellets per pound of body weight. A 2 pound dwarf would get 2 oz or 1/4 cup per day. See "Don't Fill the Feeder" below..

Babies up to 3 months of age may have as much as they want to eat providing it doesn't upset their stomach. **START SLOWLY!** Environmental changes as subtle as the water can upset a young bunnies' digestive system so start with 1/4 to 1/2 cup of feed morning and night **the first day** and then

gradually increase the amount a few tablespoons at a time until you find what he will clean up at a given feeding.

Youngsters that have just been taken away from their mother appreciate a little piece of bread with milk poured over it for a week or two to help them wean gradually. Any kind of bread and any kind of milk is okay. If you find your baby eating the bread and milk and not the pellets, don't worry. It's like giving a child milk and cookies and wondering why they don't want spinach! If the bunny is still ignoring the pellets after a week or two, slowly decrease the bread and milk and he will make the transition just fine.

Never feed more pellets, hay or straw than they will consume in 8 hours. Once the feed is exposed to daylight and air, it begins to lose nutrients and absorb moisture which makes it less palatable.

DON'T FILL THE FEEDER!

The best indicator of your rabbit's health is his appetite. He won't eat if he doesn't feel well. If the feeder is kept full all the time, you won't know until it's too late that something is wrong.

Healthy rabbits' appetites will increase slightly in cooler weather and decrease in warmer weather but are pretty consistent in dietary requirements.

From the age of three to four months, gradually begin to decrease the food to the adult portion using the following guideline:

An easy formula for an adult rabbit would be **ONE OUNCE OF FOOD PER DAY PER POUND OF BODY WEIGHT.**

For example a 2 pound Netherland dwarf would get 2 oz. or a 1/4 cup; a 4 pound Holland Lop would get 4 oz. or 1/2 cup; a 6 pound Mini Lop would get 6 oz. or 3/4 cup; a 12 pound French Lop would get 12 oz. or 1-1/2 cups.

Remember these are general guidelines for a caged rabbit. I would rather see a bunny a little too lean than too fat. Like people, they live longer if they don't get too fat. Similarly, each will metabolize what they eat differently.

The best guide is how your rabbits looks and feels. My basic guide to tell if one is too fat is to see if I can get a handful of loose skin over its' back. If not, its too fat! If I can feel every bone down its spine, it's too thin. Some breeds tend to be beefier than others. If you buy from a breeder, ask to feel what a good weight rabbit should feel like, then go from there.

There is no substitute for common sense! If you're feeding the scheduled amount and your rabbit feels too thin or too fat, adjust the quantity accordingly. If he still feels too fat or too thin, consult your vet to rule out parasites or a metabolic disorder.

WHAT ABOUT WATER?

A rabbit can live for quite a while without food but **it cannot live without water**. Lots of fresh water should always be available.

Changes in water can sometimes upset a young bunny's tummy. It isn't necessary to use bottled water but just be aware that changing from well water to chlorinated city water or vice versa can take a little getting used to. Limiting feed for the first few days and supplementing with a bland diet of oatmeal will help reduce the stress.

IS GRASS OKAY TO EAT?

Yes, if it hasn't been sprayed with pesticides or recently treated with weed killers or Ammonia Sulphate.

NEVER FEED GRASS CLIPPINGS ! They tend to get "hot" and ferment quickly.

WHAT ABOUT HAY?

Hay, preferably grass hay, should be fed daily or weekly (at the very least) as an additional source of roughage.

Timothy and other grass hays are good roughage without too many calories and may be feed free choice. Be sure they haven't been sprayed. Some sprays that aren't toxic to large livestock can be tough on bunnies. *Timothy is readily available at most Pet Stores .*

Alfalfa is good treat for all ages but is too rich in calcium and protein to be fed every day. The pellets are Alfalfa based and adding fresh Alfalfa can cause an overload.

Oat Hay is tough on tender baby tummies unless you pick off the oat kernels. It is fine for adults and they like it for a variety.

Pea or Bean Hay is a favorite of rabbits but is not always easy to find and has a tendency to have mold which can be toxic. Again, this is very rich and should only be used as a treat.

WHAT ABOUT VEGETABLES?

NO LETTUCE OR CELERY EVER, EVER, EVER !!!!

A wild rabbit or back yard bunny can get into the vegetable patch and eat lettuce or celery and when it gets an upset stomach it can go off and find a Dandelion green or mint leaf to make it well. A domestic rabbit in a cage can't tell you it doesn't feel well until it develops diarrhea and then IT CAN BE TOO LATE.

The key to feeding ANYTHING is MODERATION! Start out slowly offering very small pieces and only introduce ONE new treat on any given day. Bunnies under the age of 3 months should not have ANY FRUITS OR VEGETABLES.

A baby carrot or small apple slice or small (quarter size) banana slice are the safest to start with (in small pieces) at the age of 3 months.

NO OTHER FRUITS OR VEGETABLES UNTIL SIX MONTHS IF AGE should be fed in order to allow the digestive system time to develop fully. Then, as with a human baby, introduce new foods (except lettuce and celery) slowly in very small amounts.

Apples, pears, fresh pineapple, fresh papaya, kiwi, citrus of all kinds and watermelon seem to be favorite snacks. Strawberries seem to be on the "least favorite" list. The crunchier the better for the sake of their teeth.

Greens such as fresh spinach, kale, chard, parsley are welcome treats as well but be very careful not to overdo it for fear of the onset of diarrhea. Kale

is okay in small quantities on occasion. Be cautious of foods that give you gas! It does the same thing to your bunny! OUCH! Dark green leafy vegetables are high in oxylates that can lead to bladder sludge and stones so if you feel you must feed greens, do it sparingly!

Just remember, **all things in moderation!**

At the first sign of a soft or runny bowel movement, take the fruit or vegetable away and feed plain straw, dry oatmeal or dry bread.

DO THEY NEED SALT?

Sometimes. It's a good idea to have it available to them. Most feeds contain adequate amounts of salt and many rabbits will ignore the salt lick but I assume they're the best judge of whether they need it or not so it's there if they want some. A salt lick can rust the cage so put it in a little bowl or in the feeder to protect the cage. Feeders are less expensive to replace than the cage!

DO THEY NEED VITAMINS?

A good quality rabbit food should have all they need and if they get fruits and vegetables from time to time it **shouldn't be necessary**.

I have used chewable children's vitamins on my show rabbits or for a pregnant doe who looked to be a little out of condition.

DO THEY NEED SHEETROCK?

Sheetrock is an easy source of extra calcium and has some absorbent qualities for sore feet. But if you plan to ever have your rabbit in the house I don't recommend giving him sheetrock to eat because that makes the walls of your house fair game!

Beware of green sheetrock for use in bathrooms since it is treated and should not be used!.

If you feel compelled to add calcium to your rabbits diet, try chewable Tums or oyster shell chips added to the feed once a month or so. Basically, the feed has all a non-nursing rabbit should need.

TOO MUCH CALCIUM can cause stones to develop in the urinary tract requiring surgical intervention. When in doubt, don't do anything unless you consult a good rabbit vet first.