

Rabbits

Diet Diet Diet!

The most important cause of disease and health problems in pet rabbits is an inappropriate diet. Rabbits in the wild eat grasses and small amounts of other plant materials such as bark and roots. We need to offer a similar diet to keep them healthy.

Rabbits need to eat two types of fibre: digestible fibre for energy and indigestible fibre for healthy gut motility and appetite.

1. Offer GRASS hay (known as timothy, paddock, meadow or oaten hay) NOT legume hays (lucerne or clover hay). Legumes contain far too much Calcium and protein and are only appropriate for growing rabbits or females who are pregnant or lactating (feeding babies).
2. Straw has little nutritional value but can help add fibre to the diet and is good for bedding.
3. Fresh leafy green vegetables. Two packed cups (=250gm) per kg per day. Broccoli, cabbage, endives, cabbages, celery, beet & carrot tops, brussel sprouts, spinach, bok choy and other Asian greens, chicory, dark-leafed lettuce and herbs such as dandelion, parsley, coriander, dill, mint etc
4. A SMALL amount of pellets. Look for pelleted food that contains >18% fibre (29% is better), 14-16% protein and 0.6-1% Calcium. Don't buy products that have no analysis.
5. An even SMALLER amount of treats! 1-2 tablespoons a day only, of fruits, root vegetables (carrot, sweet potato) and capsicum.
6. Avoid cereals, grains, nuts, seeds, maize, peas, bread, biscuits, sugar, breakfast cereals and chocolate!

Neutering

All female rabbits not kept for breeding should be desexed. The ideal time is about 5-6 months. Desexing protects against cancer of the uterus, which is very common, and decreases aggression.

Male rabbits should also be castrated to diminish the likelihood of aggression, territorial behaviour and bullying of other rabbits. They can be desexed at 4-6 months.

Vaccinations

There is no commercial vaccination for Myxomatosis but you can protect your rabbit against Calicivirus with an annual vaccination from 10-12 weeks of age (younger rabbits less than 12 weeks old require two vaccinations).

Housing and behavioural enrichment

Rabbits need daily exercise and can live free in a “rabbit-proofed” house. Otherwise they should have as large an enclosure as possible or be allowed supervised playtime out of their hutch.

For free roaming rabbits, indoors or out, provide places to run and hide when frightened. Overturned boxes or pipes can simulate a safe burrow. Rabbits roaming free outside will need special fencing to prevent escape by digging as well as climbing!

Wire floors can cause damage to the soles of the feet and secondary infections.

Change bedding materials frequently to remove anything soiled or wet. Straw or grass hays are suitable.

Provide chew-toys such as branches (of non-toxic wood), wooden toys and hide their treats in cardboard boxes.

Rabbit Proofing

Their tendency to chew on objects makes rabbits potential victims of electrocution. Electrical cords need to be hidden in conduit or placed well out of reach.

They may also potentially harm furniture, carpet and eat poisonous house plants!

Litter Training

Rabbits can be readily toilet trained, as they tend to use the same area each time for urinating and defecating. To train them, provide cat litter trays where they have chosen to go to the toilet. Then gradually move this tray to a more convenient place!

Use organic litter material such as straw, hay, shredded paper or recycled paper pellets.

However, undesexed bucks (males) may choose to defecate in several locations as a means of marking territory; both intact males and females may spray urine for the same reason.

Much of this information is thanks to the amazing Dr David Vella BVSc BSc BVSc Diplomate ABVP (Exotic Companion Mammals)