



FEEDING PET RABBITS

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The digestive system of a rabbit is adapted for a fibrous diet, and indigestible fibre is essential to maintain good health in rabbits. Rabbit 'food' in the form of a mixture of cereals and pellets are a convenient way to feed pet rabbits, but often provide insufficient fibre and excessive carbohydrate levels. These diets also allow the rabbit to select out its favourite ingredients, usually cereals and peas, which alone do not provide sufficient calcium to maintain good bones and teeth.

The ideal diet for pet rabbits is a high fibre (approx 20%), low fat (1-3%), moderate protein (12-13%) diet, which also contains sufficient, but not excessive calcium (0.5-1%) balanced with phosphorous at a ratio of 2:1.

Rabbits also require vitamin D to absorb calcium from their diet. This process requires natural daylight.

Picking out favourite ingredients, can lead to calcium deficiency, and therefore poor bones and teeth. Insufficient fibre can lead to digestive disorders, such as fur balls, soft faeces and even gut stasis, which can prove fatal. Overeating, especially selectively, can lead to obesity, which prevents them grooming properly and can lead to skin conditions and fly strike, which again can be fatal.

Wild rabbits spend time foraging and chewing hard fibrous food. The provision of hay or grass gives pet rabbits a similar experience, as well as dental exercise and boredom relief.

COMPLETE AND COMPLEMENTARY RABBIT FOODS

Some rabbit foods are designed to be fed as the only feedstuff required by the rabbit. These foods are classed as 'complete'; they contain a source of fibre and are well balanced provided the rabbit eats **THE WHOLE MIXTURE**. If the rabbit leaves some of the food uneaten and selects out its favourite ingredients, then it will be eating an unbalanced diet, which can result in deficiencies.

Most rabbit foods are 'complementary' and are designed to be only a part of the diet and fed alongside grass or hay.

THE IDEAL WAY TO KEEP AND FEED PET RABBITS

Ideally rabbits would like to run around the garden, grazing grass, browsing and eating a wide variety of plants and vegetables, and bark from trees. They enjoy lying in the sun but also like a burrow or safe place to bolt to if they sense danger. Sadly there are not many owners that wish to keep their rabbits in this fashion, especially keen gardeners. However rabbits are very adaptable and can be kept happily in a hutch or even indoors, provided they are fed correctly,

allowed free exercise-in the daylight, and have some companionship either from another rabbit, or humans. Rabbits are not solitary animals, and although a rabbit kept in a hutch in solitary confinement may live for several years, it would have a miserable time.

THE WRONG WAY TO FEED RABBITS

Most rabbit owners buy their rabbit food from a pet shop where it is sold loose with no information label. Often the cereals are sweetened so the rabbits enjoy those portions, and leave the rest. Then the owners throw away the remnants, and refill the bowl and the rabbit selects what it wants. And so on.....This diet will eventually lead to obesity, skin problems and dental disease. A diet with no hay, grass or green stuff would be completely wrong, even if it is marketed as a complete food. Commercial treats are often full of sugar and carbohydrate, and are best avoided. Fibre treats are available and are the best to give, especially as a training reward.

COMMON MYTHS

Greens are harmful to rabbits and cause diarrhoea-This advice is often given to new owners, along with warnings about too much grass, lettuce or pears. Like so many myths there is a certain amount of truth in it as most green foods will cause a mild transient soft stool when first introduced. This is harmless and usually clears up on its own. When introducing new foods, do so gradually, offer high fibre vegs such as broccoli or spring greens to start with, but some rabbits cannot tolerate certain foods so they should be excluded from the diet. The main culprits are succulent foods such as lettuce, salads, parsley and soft fruits such as bananas or pears. The more fibrous the food the more the rabbit will enjoy them. Garden weeds, tree leaves, brambles and fresh grass are all ideal.

Rabbits have to gnaw twigs and wood to wear their teeth down-Again there is some truth in this as rabbits do enjoy chewing, fruit tree bark is ideal, but a high fibre diet that has sufficient calcium and vitamin D (and sunlight) will prevent teeth problems.

THE RIGHT WAY TO FEED RABBITS

Introduce new foods gradually

Provide grass, grass and more grass every day, hay can be fed where grass is unavailable or overnight. Grass or Hay should always be available.

Feed a wide range of greens daily, garden weeds, tree leaves, kitchen peelings etc NB dandelion and cabbage can produce harmless red coloured urine!

Feed a pelleted food that can't be selectively eaten, or ensure ALL of a muesli type diet is eaten.

Follow feeding guidelines to prevent obesity.

Allow rabbits access to the outside, to run around and graze in daylight. Take care to prevent escape or attack. NB rabbits can be very destructive in the garden!

Fresh clean water should always be available.