

Rabbits

Depending on the information source, rabbits are the third or fourth most common pet in the United States. They are very personable, clean and inquisitive. They have a unique digestive system that requires attention to the diet. They can be litterbox trained. Rabbits, like all exotic pets, can be subtle in their signs of disease.

Diet

Grass is not a very nutritious feed unless the fiber can be broken down. Any grass eating animal has to have some way to render the indigestible fiber in grass into a digestible form the animal can use. Animals like cattle, deer and elk have four stomach compartments, three of which are large chambers full of bacteria that chop up the fiber for the animal which the animal then eructates (burps up) re-chews and swallows the cud. The fiber in the cud is then able to be digested by more simple processes. These animals are called ruminants after the rumen the largest bacterial stomach chamber.

Rabbits have developed an enlarged chamber full of bacteria called the cecum, further down the digestive system, that again does much of the work for the rabbit by chopping up the indigestible fiber. Instead of a cud, rabbits have developed two types of feces; a hard dry "day" pellet containing the fiber even the bacteria could not break down and a "night" feces or cecotroph which the rabbit eats directly from their anus and this contains the digestible fiber component. The cecotrophs are softer and smellier than the day feces and tend to occur in a bunch like a cluster of grapes. Owners will sometimes mistake it for diarrhea. Accumulations of un-eaten cecotrophs around the anus can be a hint that the rabbit is becoming arthritic and can't make the bend to groom the area.

Cecotroph production can occur at any time of day, though usually at night, and not only provide the rabbit with digestible fiber, but also B-vitamins and protein. The stomach content in a rabbit is normally very acidic, but when the rabbit ingests cecotrophs, the stomach becomes much less acidic to allow re-seeding of the gut with viable bacteria to continue the digestive cycle. It is an

amazing, complicated system driven by fiber and fiber means grass hay. I would consider it an inconvenience if I ran out of pellets or greens, but an emergency if I ran out of hay for my rabbit. Hay should be available all day every day for your rabbit and should make up 70% of the diet. Fresh dark leafy greens should make up 20% of the diet. Pellets and treats should be 10%. The current amount recommended for pellets is one tablespoon per two pounds of body weight per day, not a never-ending bowl of pellets.

In the west, the most commonly recommended hay is Timothy. In the south, it is Bermuda or orchard grass hay. Nutritionally these grasses are all equivalents and can be substituted for each other. Any feed change should be done gradually over several days while monitoring the rabbit's behavior and fecal output.

Many feed stores sell grass/alfalfa blends in their hay. Alfalfa is ok for pregnant does or young growing rabbits, but due to the high calcium content is not my choice as an everyday hay. Most pellets are made out of alfalfa because it processes through the machinery and binds into a pellet more easily than grass. Rabbits eliminate excess calcium in the urine and too much can contribute to urinary tract stones and/or bladder sludge.

Besides keeping the digestive system moving normally, the fiber in grass hay also helps to keep the teeth at their proper size and in alignment. A rabbit's teeth grow continuously and the time spent grinding the hay into a swallowable size is a vital factor in keeping the teeth at the proper height for effective chewing. Also there are natural abrasives called silicates in grass that enhance the tooth wear. The front teeth, the incisors, are impressive but only serve to clip plant material and present it to the cheek teeth for grinding. The cheek teeth do 90% of the food processing work. One of the problems with pellets is the pellet making machinery does too much of the grinding work for the rabbit; it's the time the rabbit spends grinding that is important for adequate tooth wear.

Twenty percent of the diet should be dark leafy greens; kale, dandelions, red leaf lettuce, greens, etc. I would not use iceberg or much romaine lettuce due to their poor nutritional content. I would also avoid spinach and broccoli due to the high oxalate content, a chemical that combines with excess calcium to form stones.

Pellets should be fed at one tablespoon per two pounds of body weight per day. Timothy hay based pellets are available from Oxbow and Kaytee. Treats can include small amounts of fruits and vegetables. Most fruits are going to have simple sugars as the carbohydrate source, rabbits are built to break down complex carbohydrates in fiber. Fibrous vegetables like carrots and celery are counted as a treat portion of the diet or as a small portion of the green mix.

Papaya tablets are commonly given as a hairball remedy even though they don't dissolve hair. They are, however, a great indicator of how your rabbit is feeling as many rabbits go nuts over the tablets becoming very agitated when the can is rattled. If the rabbit is ignoring the tablets when usually they are eager for them, something is wrong.

HUSBANDRY

Rabbits have a better quality of life as indoor pets. A rabbit left outdoors in a hutch is a veterinary visit waiting to happen. Outdoor rabbits do not get the attention indoor animals do and unfortunately this results in problems being found much later and being much more severe than they normally would. A common example is fly strike or maggot infestations. Also, predators find a hutch bunny irresistible. A rabbit's primary defense is speed and mobility and these are eliminated by confinement in a hutch. Most hutches typically have wire floors which can cause sores on the hocks and damage the felt pads on all the feet. Heat stroke can occur with outdoor rabbits even on a moderate day if there isn't any shade provided. Bad things happen to outdoor rabbits.

Rabbits are curious and will investigate their surroundings thoroughly. Electrical cords are a potential hazard in the home. Rabbits will also tend to chew on baseboards, carpet and linoleum at times. Chew blocks and toys are safe, but not mandatory as dental wear isn't due to the toy, it is due to the enamel surfaces of the teeth grinding against each other.

Rabbits can be trained to use a litter-box, a good thing since a medium sized rabbit will produce 80 to 140 pellets per day. Rabbit urine is thick and leaves a chalky residue of calcium salts when it dries. It is not unusual for the urine to have a red or orange color due to pigments, this can be mistaken for blood.

Homestead

Animal

Hospital

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