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## RABBIT CARE

### DIET

Rabbits living in the wild have adapted to eating grasses and roughage that most other animals can't digest. This must be taken into account when feeding your pet rabbit. The commonly available rabbit pellets have been developed to provide nutrition to fast-growing, young bunnies for use in laboratories or for meat. For the adult pet bunny, the most important food to feed is hay. I prefer owners feed loose, long strands of hay, as opposed to hay cubes or chopped hay. The fiber in hay is important: to promote normal digestion, to prevent diarrhea, for proper teeth growth, and to prevent hairballs. Young rabbits (up to 8 months of age) should have access to fresh water and pellets free choice. Older rabbits (older than 8 months) should have water and hay available at all times but should have limited amounts of pellets according to the following chart:

2-5 pounds	1/8 cup daily	8-11 pounds	1/2 cup daily
5-8 pounds	1/4 cup daily	11-15 pounds	3/4 cup daily

In addition, fresh foods can be offered such as: carrots, beet tops, dandelion greens, escarole, romaine lettuce (not iceberg lettuce), parsley, clover, cabbage, broccoli (florets, stems and leaves), green peppers, brussel sprouts, basil, bok choy and spinach. It is important to start out gradually when trying these foods. Only add one new food per week and monitor for diarrhea. The total amount of these foods shouldn't exceed one measuring cup per 5 pounds body weight per day.

Treat foods can be given but not exceeding 1 level tablespoon per 5 pounds of body weight per day. These would include: strawberries, papaya, pineapple, apple, pear, melon, raspberries, peach, pear, or dried whole grain bread.

One important and unusual component to rabbit nutrition is called "night droppings". During certain times of the day, usually in the evening, you may observe your pet licking the anal area and actually eating some of his droppings. These cecal pellets are an important part of rabbits' diet and are softer, greener, and have a stronger odor than the normal hard, dry, round waste droppings.

### HOUSING

Metal cages may be used with wire flooring of 14 gauge wire (1" x 1/2" square openings) but a solid floored area should be provided to prevent sore hocks and allow an area for resting. Solid floored cages can be covered with towels (as long as your bunny doesn't eat towels), carpeting, wood, or synthetic fleece (found in fabric stores). This synthetic fleece is convenient because it can be machine washed and won't disintegrate into long strands if it is chewed. Do not use aquaria or other solid-walled cages because proper air circulation is important to prevent respiratory diseases.

Rabbits can be housed indoors or outdoors but care must be taken when housing rabbits outdoors. Bunnies are very sensitive to high humidity and heat. Outdoor rabbits should have some sort of cooling if temperatures rise above the mid 80's. A gallon jug frozen solid with ice can provide cooling for a rabbit that cannot be brought into air-conditioning.

Indoor rabbits should be kept monitored initially to make sure they don't chew on electrical cords or carpeting. Rabbits can be litter box trained relatively easily. Initially you need to keep your pet in a small area, either in a cage or a blocked off section of the room and place a litter box in the corner (try to pick a corner your pet has already used). It is helpful to put some of the droppings in the box. You can reward your bunny with one of the treat foods listed whenever the box is used successfully. Don't worry if your bunny sits for extended periods in the box unless he is soiling himself. It is best to use pelleted paper or other organic products in the litter pan. These are non-toxic and digestible if eaten, they're easier to clean up than wood shavings or clay litter, they control odor better and are compostable. Examples include: Care Fresh, Yesterday's News, Critter Litter, Mountain Cat Kitty Litter and Harvest Litter.

### COMMON MEDICAL PROBLEMS

**Females:** The leading cause of death in the female rabbit is a cancer of the uterus called adenocarcinoma. This is a malignant disease that often spreads to other parts of the body before it is diagnosed. This cancer is preventable by spaying your bunny prior to 2 years of age. This surgery involves removing the ovaries and uterus and helps prevent the occurrence of breast cancer later in life.

**Males:** Some male bunnies (especially the dwarf varieties) can become extremely aggressive when they reach sexual maturity. They may bite their owners and other rabbit cagemates excessively, and start to spray urine outside their regular litter box area. The urine may develop a strong and unpleasant odor due to the male hormones. The best solution to these behavioral problems is neutering any time after 5 months of age.

**Overgrown Teeth:** Rabbits' teeth grow constantly throughout their lives. If the incisors (front teeth) or molars (cheek teeth) don't line up properly overgrowth can occur. The overgrown "spikes" can cut into the tongue or cheek and cause pain, infections, loss of appetite, excessive drooling, etc. The incisors can be easily trimmed by our veterinarian during an office visit but overgrown molars require anesthesia and a few hours in the hospital to correct. One reason hay is an important part of a rabbit's diet is that it forces them to chew the roughage and allow their teeth to be worn down properly. Unfortunately some rabbits are born with poorly aligned teeth and will require dental work every few weeks throughout their lives (unless a veterinary orthodontist comes along willing to put braces on rabbits' teeth!)

**Diarrhea:** This is one of the most common conditions seen in pet rabbits, especially those that are not receiving enough fiber in their diet. Other causes of soft or pasty stool include hairballs, various types of bacteria, viruses and other intestinal parasites. Checking a stool sample is one of the first tests we will request for rabbits with diarrhea.

**Respiratory Diseases:** Many types of infections can cause respiratory disease in rabbits but one bacterium in particular is more dangerous than others-*Pasteurella multocida*. A large percentage of rabbits carry this bacterium in their bodies without any health problems until the rabbit undergoes some sort of stress. This could be as simple as moving their cage to a different location, changing food, or could be due to another health problem. During these stressful situations *Pasteurella* can reproduce rapidly and cause a variety of symptoms. The most common symptoms are of runny noses, watery eyes, sniffing and sneezing. It can also cause skin bumps (abscesses), middle ear infections (causing problems with balance, a head tilt and ear pain), or other symptoms such as lethargy, loss of appetite, fever and difficulty breathing. Treatment involves antibiotics but may not completely eliminate the infection.