

## A Correct Diet is Vital for Rabbits

Many people keep rabbits rather than dogs and cats because rabbits can be happily left at home alone all day while their owners are out at work. Though often happy on their own, they are by nature social creatures that enjoy the company of their owners and other animals in the household. They are best kept in pairs because they form strong bonds with each other. They will play with toys, seek out and follow humans, and enjoy being stroked. Most rabbits will use a litter tray and so can live indoors in the house, but they can sometimes be destructive. A rabbit's natural response to pain or distress is to sit quietly, preferably hidden from view. As a result, many diseases and causes of suffering can be easily overlooked. Though the life expectancy of a domestic rabbit is potentially 10-12 years, few make it to this age. The sad thing is, many of these diseases are preventable. An incorrect diet can be the underlying cause to many health problems. Rabbits are strict herbivores that eat a variety of plants in the wild. Although they prefer grass and leaves, they can digest more fibrous foods and are able to survive on sparse vegetation. They do NOT need a high calorie diet, as their digestive system has evolved to use bacterial fermentation to break down fibre and form nutrients. Their teeth are continually growing and being worn down, to cut and grind food before it enters the stomach. Any undigested food that reaches the colon is split into large and small particles, and sent in opposite directions. The small particles pass into the cecum, which is the fermentation chamber full of bacteria. These bacteria break down the particles to form volatile fatty acids, amino acids, vitamins and other nutrients. Large particles that are difficult to break down pass rapidly through the colon, are compressed, and are excreted as hard fecal pellets. Once or twice a day, the motility of the colon changes and the cecum (fermentation chamber) contracts to expel its contents as slightly larger, softer fecal pellets. These are known as cecotropes. Rabbits eat these pellets of feces, the cecotropes. They are often consumed as they come out of the anus, and are a rich source of nutrients. If this cycle is broken, it disrupts the healthy bacteria that live in the rabbit's digestive tract. In very young rabbits, this can cause death by enterotoxemia, i.e. overproduction of toxins by a population of bacteria that is unbalanced and out of control. It can take a while for a rabbit to achieve a stable healthy gut flora (bacterial population), hence why young rabbits are so susceptible. So, what should I be feeding my rabbit? The best foods for rabbits are grass and wild plants as they are palatable, low in calories, high in fibre and wear the teeth down. Leafy green vegetables are very good, such as spinach, cabbage, kale and carrot tops. Remember that when a new food is introduced, it can cause a flurry of cecotropes, which must not be interpreted as diarrhea. On the contrary, it is perfectly normal and healthy! Low calorie but high fibre foods are GOOD, high calorie but low fibre foods are BAD! Rabbits on a low fibre diet tend to produce softer cecotropes which can stick to the fur around the anus, especially if the fur is fluffy. If this same diet is high in calories, as many of the commercial ones often are, then the rabbit is more likely to be fat and unable to reach their anus to eat the cecotropes. The end result is that a foul smelling mass of matted fecal material accumulates under the tail which is unpleasant for both the rabbit and the owner. Moreover, the skin under the matted feces becomes sore and the smelly, moist area attracts flies. This then leads to flystrike, which is very distressing and often fatal. Are teeth problems related to diet? Dental problems are possibly the commonest reason why vets see rabbits. There is universal agreement amongst experts that mixed muesli-type diets are at least partly responsible for these teeth problems. Although these types of rabbit food are cheap, tasty and convenient, they are totally unsuitable for rabbits. They are high in calories and low in fibre, and even if the manufacturer claims to have a balanced mixture of ingredients, many rabbits will cherry pick certain bits from the bowl. This means that certain tasty components such as peas or maize, which are very calcium deficient, are selectively eaten while less palatable ingredients are ignored. The continual growth of the rabbit's teeth is reliant on calcium intake, so when a rabbit's diet is deficient, it draws the calcium from its bones instead. This disrupts the tooth structure and can lead to wonky teeth, abscesses, blocked tear ducts, osteoporosis and spinal problems. In addition, rabbits with poor teeth cannot groom themselves properly and so can get mite infestations, leading to scaling and itchy skin. Poor teeth also make the rabbit unable to eat hay, so the proportion of fibre in the diet decreases and causes digestive problems, as discussed earlier. By and large, if a rabbit is eating large amounts of hay it is an indicator that it has healthy teeth.

## About the Author

Financial experts David Bach, Jean Chatzky and Glinda Bridgforth offer expert advice to help Americans.

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