

# Rabbit Nutrition DIET

Compiled by the House Rabbit Resource Network

Each part of your rabbit's diet plays a role in maintaining general health, avoiding certain serious illnesses, or adding to your rabbit's mental and emotional well-being. Following the basic statement of this diet, details are given in footnotes for those who care to go into more depth. Any changes to your rabbit's diet should be done very slowly so as not to cause intestinal upset. Rabbits are crepuscular, or, most active at dawn and dusk. Depending on your rabbit's preferences or times of real hunger, you may want to put your rabbit on a feeding schedule with the majority of food given during these times.

- Only rabbit pellets of good quality should be fed. <sup>1, 2</sup>
- These can be given freely unless your rabbit is overweight
- Papaya tablets (any flavor) containing the enzymes bromelain and/or papain morning and/or evening. <sup>4</sup> and/or one quarter teaspoon Prozyme™ sprinkled on the pellets or fresh fruit/vegetables. <sup>5</sup>
- One half teaspoon grain such as thick rolled or crimped oats (not instant) per pound of body weight (do not overfeed starches).
- Coastal feed hay, timothy or alfalfa. <sup>6</sup>
- A recommended portion of safe fruit and vegetables. <sup>7</sup>
- Fresh water daily.

<sup>1</sup> One way of assuring a quality pellet is to choose one that is manufactured nationally. These are typically manufactured with identical ingredients in identical portions throughout the year, tested on enough rabbits for the results to be statistically significant, and they are quality controlled. Pellets from grocery and pet stores tend to spend long periods on warehouse shelves where they become stale. Pellets produced locally may contain high levels of calcium or have other imbalances and may not be produced with sufficient quality control to guarantee the same product between purchases. Approach these brands with caution. Rabbit pellets should contain 16-20% crude fiber and 14-16% protein. Rabbits up to eight months of age can have

access to pellets and alfalfa free choice. However, after eight months, house rabbits should receive a maintenance ratio of pellets to body weight as follows:

- 1/8 cup daily 2-4 lb ideal body weight.  
1/4 cup daily 5-7 lb ideal body weight
- 1/2 cup daily 8-10 lb ideal body weight.  
3/4 cup daily 11-15 lb ideal body weight

When in doubt, ask.

Do not refill your rabbit's bowl even if the pellets are all eaten before the next day. Pellets should make up less of your rabbit's diet as he/she grows older. However, underweight rabbits and older, frail rabbits need unrestricted pellets to keep their weight up.

- <sup>2</sup> If you change the brand of pellets you feed your rabbit, begin with what the rabbit has been eating and mix a small amount of the new pellet into it. Gradually increase the ratio of the new pellet until the rabbit is eating only the new pellets. This procedure will help avoid intestinal upsets due to the change in pellets or prevent the rabbit's refusing to eat. Do not refill your rabbit's bowl with fresh pellets on top of old. Gourmet type pellets which contain dried fruits, nuts, and vegetables have been suspected of causing fatty liver and kidney disease (Washington House Rabbit Society). Never feed your rabbit a pellet which has antibiotics added to it. Should your rabbit ever become ill, you may find your rabbit has become de-sensitized to the antibiotics which could save his/her life. Moldy, bug infested, stale, old, or "off-smelling" pellets should be discarded immediately.
- <sup>3</sup> Over feeding of pellets is the cause of many health problems in rabbits. An overweight rabbit is probably more in need of exercise than having his/her food limited. Should your rabbit need to lose weight or develop an intolerance to pellets (symptoms include excessive cecal pellets or chronic diarrhea), please contact the House Rabbit Resource Network for a copy of a special diet for your rabbit.

## "Diet" Continued

4 It is thought that papaya tablets added to your rabbit's diet will help prevent hairball blockages. Tablets must contain the enzymes bromelain and/or papain in order to be effective. Like cats, rabbits groom themselves and are subject to hairballs. Unlike cats, though, rabbits do not have a gag reflex and are unable to vomit. A "dosage" is difficult to recommend due to the variety of factors to consider. If you have a small rabbit with little or no shedding, a single tablet twice daily may be sufficient. A large rabbit in full molt may need six or more tablets daily.

S In addition to or in place of the papaya tablets, an enzyme product such as Prozyme™ given at mealtime. This product is activated by moisture and can be sprinkled on your rabbit's fresh food. Prozyme™ contains the same enzymes as the papaya tablets. It is also recommended that you treat your rabbit with approximately 1 to 1 1/2 inch ribbon of petroleum laxative such as Laxatone™ or Petromalt™ one to two times a week given between meals. Do not mix the Prozyme™ or petroleum laxative products — they are to be given separately. For information on these products and their sources, contact the House Rabbit Resource Network.

6 A high fiber diet is essential to your rabbit's good health. Coastal and timothy hay can be fed in unlimited amounts. Due to its high caloric and calcium content, alfalfa should be fed to growing bunnies only up to 8 months of age or for older rabbits who are in need of the calories.

7 Appropriate portions of those foods listed below will, of course, vary from one rabbit to the next depending on size and your rabbit's likes and dislikes. Never offer a rabbit anything but fresh produce.

## The following are "safe" fruits and vegetables:

- carrots and tops
- parsley
- watercress
- cilantro
- mint
- radish leaves
- collard greens
- beet greens
- mustard greens \*

- dandelion greens (*never picked from unknown yards or roadsides due to pesticide contamination*)
- red or romaine lettuce
- green leaf lettuce
- apple
- endive
- grapes
- kale \*
- pear
- spinach \*
- banana
- celery and/or leaves
- blueberries
- brussel sprouts
- raspberries
- broccoli
- strawberries
- peaches/nectarines
- tomato
- turnip greens
- pea pods (*such as Chinese*)
- papaya, fresh or dried (*no sugar-coating*)

\* feed only occasionally. Contains oxalates which can be toxic over time.

## Never offer a rabbit:

- raw beans
- apple seeds \*
- potato or peels
- cauliflower
- peach, apricot, nectarine pits \*
- iceberg lettuce
- rhubarb \*
- cabbage
- corn
- anything too old to eat yourself

\* poisonous

## Treats

You will find your rabbit will have his or her own likes and dislikes when it comes to different foods. Like people, rabbits are capable of "pigging out" on treats that fail to provide good nutrition or those which may upset the intestinal tract. Use common sense about what and how much you feed your rabbit. Remember that rabbits are vegetarians with limited or no ability to digest milk products, meats, etc. Think of rabbit treats as candy is to a child and limit them accordingly. Keep in mind that a sudden

## "Diet" Continued

overload of starches and/or sugar in the hindgut can upset your rabbit's digestion.

## In General

A rabbit's diet should be made up of good quality pellets, fresh hay (alfalfa, timothy or oat), water and fresh vegetables. Anything beyond that is a "treat" and should be given in limited quantities.

Pellets should be fresh, and should be relatively high in fiber (18% minimum fiber). Do not purchase more than six weeks worth of feed at a time, as it will become spoiled. Pellets should make up less of a rabbit's diet as he or she grows older, and hay should be available 24 hours a day. When shopping for vegetables, look for a selection of different veggies — Look for both dark leafy veggies and root vegetables, and try to get different colors. Stay away from beans and rhubarb.

Hay is essential to a rabbit's good health, providing roughage which reduces the danger of hairballs and other blockages. Apple tree twigs also provide good roughage.

## Dietary Recommendations

### Babies and "teenagers"

- Birth to 3 weeks — mother's milk
- 3 to 4 weeks — mother's milk, nibbles of alfalfa and pellets
- 4 to 7 weeks — mother's milk, access to alfalfa and pellets
- 7 weeks to 7 months — unlimited pellets, unlimited hay (*plus see 12 weeks below*)
- 12 weeks--introduce vegetables (*one at a time, quantities under 1/2 oz.*) Young adults: 7 months to 1 year
- introduce grass and oat hays, decrease alfalfa
- decrease pellets to 1/2 cup per 6 lbs. body weight
- increase daily vegetables gradually
- fruit daily ration no more than 1 oz., to 2 oz, per 6lbs. body weight (*because of calories*)

### Mature adults (1- 5 years)

- Unlimited grass hay, oat hay, straw
- 1/4 to 1/2 cup pellets per 6lbs. body weight (*depending on metabolism and/or proportionate to veggies*)
- Minimum 2 cups chopped vegetables per 6 lbs. body weight

- fruit daily ration no more than 2 oz. (2 TBL) per 6lbs. body weight

### Senior rabbits (Over 6 years)

- If sufficient weight is maintained, continue adult diet
- Frail, older rabbits may need unrestricted pellets to keep weight up. Alfalfa can be given to underweight rabbits, only if calcium levels are normal. Annual blood workups are highly recommended for geriatric rabbits.

**Note:** When you feed a lower quantity of pellets, you must replace the nutritional value without the calories, which is done by increasing the vegetables. Also, a variety of hay and straw must be encouraged all day long, we do this by offering fresh hay a couple of times a day.

