

Rabbit Dietary Guide:

General nutrition information for adult rabbits



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BASICS

Please note that this is a generic dietary guideline for adult rabbits. Not all rabbits will tolerate - or should be fed - exactly the same foods. It is important to find a diet that is suitable for your rabbit. Typically, an adult companion rabbit should have a nutritious daily diet of unlimited hay, a variety of fresh vegetables, a limited amount of pellets and fresh water.

HAY

Hay is the most important part of an adult rabbit's diet and should be provided in unlimited quantities. It is high in fibre, which keeps the digestive tract moving, helping to prevent blockages and stasis. In addition, hay helps to sustain healthy teeth by helping to reduce the risk of molar spurs.

There are two types of hay commonly available in pet stores: Alfalfa (a legume hay) and Timothy (a grass hay). Alfalfa has more protein and calcium than adult rabbits (over approximately 7 months old) generally need. Too much dietary calcium, along with hereditary factors and insufficient water intake may lead to kidney or bladder stones or sludge for some rabbits. For this reason, adult rabbits should be fed grass hay (Timothy, Brome, Orchard, for example).

Hay bought directly from a farmer who grows hay for horses is usually superior and inexpensive, especially if you have more than one rabbit. If you have storage facilities or can split a bale of hay with other rabbit owners, a 45 pound bale can be purchased for under 10.00. Hay that is specifically grown for rabbits can also be purchased on-line from a company such as Oxford Meadows Hay Company (www.oxfordmeadowshay.com).

When purchasing hay, remember that good hay should be mostly green in colour and should smell like grass. Hay mold can cause death in rabbits - look for white dust or black and/or white spots on the bale. If you drop the bale of hay and a lot of white dust flies up, it could be a sign of mold.

You may find the occasional weed in a bale of hay. Thistles should be picked out. Milkweed, which is poisonous to rabbits, is easily recognizable by its thick fibrous stem and broad elongated leaves.

Hay purchased in large quantities should be stored in a cool, dry place in a container that allows for airflow (a large cardboard box or Rubbermaid container with holes poked in it, for example).

It is important to keep offering hay, even if your rabbit is reluctant to eat it. Some rabbits can be quite suspicious of new foods, but will eventually learn to eat them. Try a different brand or type of hay or offer a mix of grass hays. Some rabbits prefer stalky, course hay, while others prefer a softer cut of hay. Keep in mind, the fresher the hay, the more likely it is that your rabbit will eat it. Also, you may consider decreasing the amount of other foods that you feed or offer hay first thing in the morning (when your rabbit is hungry), before feeding pellets or greens. However, never deny your rabbit other foods if he is not eating hay.

VEGETABLES

Vegetables can be an important part of a rabbit's balanced diet. For rabbits who drink little water, fresh vegetables can help to provide much needed hydration. It is important to realize, however, that some rabbits tolerate vegetables well, while others may suffer from gas or runny stools if they consume too many or the wrong kind of vegetables. Try to offer rabbits who tolerate vegetables at least 3 different types of greens daily (a minimum of 2 cups per 6 lbs. body weight per day). Introduce a small quantity of new greens every 5-7 days, and observe the rabbit's droppings closely. Remove any vegetable that causes soft stool or gas from the rabbit's diet immediately.

Remember to wash vegetables thoroughly and that spoiled greens can make a rabbit seriously ill. Avoid members of the cabbage/cauliflower family because they can cause gas, and do not feed iceberg lettuce, since it has little nutritional value. Supply mostly dark leafy veggies.

Try some of the following: Basil, Beet greens, Bell peppers, Bok Choy, Broccoli (mostly leaves and stems), Brussels sprouts, Carrot tops (wash thoroughly to remove pesticides!), Cilantro, Collard greens, Dandelion (greens and flowers - no pesticides!), Dill, Endive, Escarole, Kale, Mint, Mustard greens, Parsley (curly and flat leaf), Radicchio, Radish tops, Romaine lettuce, Spinach, Swiss chard (red and green) and Watercress.

Although high calcium vegetables contain less digestible calcium per volume than alfalfa hay or alfalfa based pellets, it is important to note that excess dietary calcium, along with other factors, may cause bladder stones or sludge in some rabbits. In addition, consuming vegetables that are high in oxalates in large quantities on a daily basis may cause crystals or stones to form in the kidneys. For these reasons, and so that your rabbit doesn't consume an abundance of any one vitamin, it is helpful to feed your rabbit a variety of greens.

CALCIUM/OXALATE LEVELS

	Calcium mg/100 gr serving	Oxalate mg/100 gr serving
broccoli	48	.19
carrots	27	.50
carrot tops	321*	N/A
collard greens	145	.45
dandelion	187	N/A
endive	52	.11
kale	135	.02
kohlrabi	24	N/A
parsley	138	1.70
romaine	36	N/A
spinach	99	.97
swiss chard	51	N/A
turnip greens	190	.05

Source: US dept. of agriculture and *HRHandbook

PELLETS

Pellets should be high in fibre (ideally a minimum 18%), low in protein (maximum content of 14% - 15%) and low in calcium (maximum 1%). Plain pellets are a healthier choice than mixes that contain seeds, nuts, corn or dried fruit, which are unnecessarily high in sugar and fat. Some rabbits over-consume pellets, which can lead to obesity and other health problems. If your rabbit has had a diet that consisted solely of pellets, introduce grass hay and slowly add a variety of greens, while gradually reducing pellet intake. Remember to make dietary changes slowly and to watch your rabbit closely. As you limit your rabbit's pellet intake, make sure he is

eating an increased amount of hay and greens. Do not restrict pellets too much if there is no other food source. A daily guideline for adult rabbits who eat hay and/or greens is approximately 1/8 cup for 2-4 lbs. of body weight.

Timothy based pellets are higher in fibre and lower in calcium than alfalfa pellets, but are not as readily available at most pet stores. These pellets can, however, be ordered from most vet clinics. Timothy pellets may be beneficial to rabbits who have stones or sludge, those who are overweight or those who suffer from intermittent soft stool. Timothy pellets may not be a good choice for long-haired rabbits (who need extra protein for hair growth) or thin rabbits.

FRUITS/TREATS

Fruits are high in sugars and calories. Feeding too much fruit can lead to obesity and an overgrowth of harmful bacteria in the digestive tract, which can possibly lead to stasis. Fruit intake should be limited to 1-2 tablespoons per 5 lbs. body weight per day. Acceptable fruits include apple, papaya, peach, pear, plums, raspberries and strawberries. Carrots, which are also high in sugar, should be considered a treat food. When feeding dried fruit as a treat to feed about half of the amount as fresh. Remember that one raisin is the same as one grape!

People food, such as bread and cookies, and commercially available rabbit treats, such as yogurt drops and seed and nut treats are also very high in sugar and calories and should be avoided. Chocolate is poisonous.

SPECIAL CASES

Rabbits who are thin or ill can be given more pellets to maintain a healthy weight. A product such as Oxbow's Critical Care or plain canned pumpkin can be fed for additional fibre and/or calories.

Long-haired rabbits need more protein for hair growth than short-haired rabbits. A long-haired rabbit who eats well, but continually loses weight may need to have its diet supplemented with more pellets or limited alfalfa hay (if sludge or stones are not a problem).

Rabbits with tooth problems may have difficulty eating vegetables, hay or pellets. Sometimes it is helpful to cut hay and vegetables into small pieces or soften pellets with warm water when caring for these rabbits. Again, a product such as Oxbow's Critical Care or plain canned pumpkin (not pie filling) can be fed for additional fibre or calories, if necessary.