

Feeding your rabbit

DIGESTION IN RABBITS

Rabbits are hindgut fermenters. This means that rather than digesting food in the stomach and absorbing nutrients immediately, they first pass food through most of the digestive tract to the caecum, a specialized outpocketing of the large intestine. The caecum ferments the food using special bacteria to help with digestion of nutrients and soluble fibre. Insoluble fibre is passed quickly out of the system and results in typical hard round faecal pellets. When fermentation of material in the caecum is finished, the caecum contracts and empties, resulting in production of dark-coloured wet, sticky faeces called caecotrophs. These caecotrophs are immediately eaten by the rabbit and they can then absorb the nutrients that have been made available by caecal bacteria. During this digestion cycle, fibre is used to move food particles and nutrients through the intestines in a timely fashion.

This unique method of digestion means that rabbits are very sensitive to the amount of fibre in their diet – fibre is essential to keep the gastrointestinal tract moving and processing nutrients. In addition, rabbits have teeth that are constantly growing. If they are not ground down by chewing on a fibrous diet, they can become overgrown and painful.

IDEAL DIETS FOR RABBITS

An ideal diet for a rabbit is high in fibre, low in carbohydrates and protein, and takes a lot of chewing to help keep teeth in good shape. At least 75% of the diet should consist of good quality grass hay such as Timothy, oat, brome, Bermuda, or orchard grass. Green leafy vegetables can be given to supplement the diet in small amounts – many rabbits enjoy celery, bok choy, kale, swiss chard, broccoli rabe, watercress, parsley, carrot-tops, mustard, dandelion, and turnip greens. However, these items are not essential. See a more complete chart overleaf for acceptable foods.

Fruits, seeds, and grains generally should not be given to rabbits, as they are high in carbohydrates and can lead to decreased gut motility. Some fruits are okay in small amounts, such as apples, pears, and raisins (see chart below). Rabbit pellets are often alfalfa based (high protein and calcium, low fibre), and do not provide the necessary chewing or the right balance of calcium and phosphate to keep the continually growing teeth in good shape. Rabbit foods should not contain locust beans, which can cause intestinal obstruction. Rabbits

should not be fed bread or other human foods. A proper diet is essential in rabbits in order to keep nutrients moving through the gut and protect and nurture the bacteria in the caecum, which in turn provide nutrition for the rabbit.



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GUT STASIS

Gastrointestinal stasis is a condition in which decreased stomach and/or intestinal motility results in physical illness. Early signs of gut stasis include decreased appetite, lethargy, and decreased faecal pellet production. If you notice any of these signs of illness, your rabbit should be examined by a veterinarian.

Gut stasis is generally a condition brought about by some other problem, such as fear, stress, pain, systemic disease, dental disease, oral antibiotic administration, or inappropriate diet. Poor diets are a very common problem in rabbits with gut stasis.

RECOMMENDED FOODS FOR YOUR RABBIT

Groceries	Wild foods	Obstruction Risks to avoid	Toxic plants and contaminants to avoid
Carrots and carrot tops, Celery, Chicory, Coriander, Green beans, Kale, Kohl rabi, Lettuce (small amounts), Parsley, Pear, Parsnip, Radish, Spinach, Spring greens, Sprout peelings, Sunflower plants (not seeds), Swedes, Sweetcorn, Tree leaves, Turnips, Watercress	Grass of any type, Agrimony, Brambles, Chickweed, Clover, Coltsfoot, Cowparsnip (hogweed), Dandelion, Young docks, Goosegrass, Ground elder, Groundsel, Knapweed, Mallow, Mayweed, Plantain, Raspberry, Sea beet, Shepherd's purse, Sow-thistle, Trefoil, Vetch, Wild strawberry, Yarrow	Locust bean seeds, Carob seeds, Dried peas, Dried sweet corn, Carpet fibres	Dieffenbacchia, Avocados and avocado leaves, Yew, Mold, Pesticides, Preservatives such as nitrophenol

