

# Basic Rabbit Care

## DIET

A good rabbit diet should be made up of good quality pellets, fresh hay, water and fresh vegetables. Anything beyond this a "treat" and should be given in limited quantities.

- Hay is essential to a rabbit's good health. Roughage, reduces the danger of gastrointestinal stasis. Non-toxic twigs (i.e. apple tree) also provide roughage.
- Pellets should be fresh, and should be relatively high in fiber (20-25% minimum crude fiber). Pellets should make up less of the rabbit's diet, as it grows older.
- Offer a variety of vegetables including leafy greens and root vegetables. Add one vegetable to the diet at a time. Eliminate any item that causes soft stools or diarrhea.

Alfalfa, radish & clover sprouts	Green peppers
Basil	Mint
Beet greens (tops)	Parsley
Bok choy	Pea pods (flat edible kind)
Brussels sprouts	Peppermint leaves
Carrot & carrot tops	Radicchio
Celery	Radish tops
Cilantro	Raspberry leaves
Clover	Spinach
Dandelion greens and flowers (no pesticides)	Watercress
Escarole	Wheat grass

## Feeding schedule

Age	Hay	Pellets	Vegetables	Fruit
7 weeks to 7 months	Unlimited alfalfa	Unlimited	---	---
12 weeks	Unlimited alfalfa	Unlimited	Introduce vegetables (one at a time) in small quantities < 1/2 oz (15 g)	---
7 months to 1 year	Introduce grass hay, decrease alfalfa	Decrease amount fed to ½ cup per 6 lbs (2.7 kg) BW	Increase vegetables fed daily gradually	No more than 1-2 oz (30-60g) per 6 lbs (2.7 kg) BW
Adult (1-5 y)	Unlimited grass hay, oat hay, straw	¼ to ½ cup per 6 lbs (2.7 kg) BW	1-2 cups per 6 lbs (2.7 kg) BW	No more than 2 tbsp per 6 lbs (2.7 kg) BW
Seniors (>6 y)	Increase alfalfa hay fed to frail, older rabbits but monitor calcium levels	Continue adult diet if weight is okay; frail, older rabbits may fed unlimited pellets		

BW: body weight kg: kilograms lbs: pounds g: grams oz: ounce

## **HOUSING**

Essential supplies for all indoor rabbit habitats include a water bottle or bowl, feed bowl, hay, and toys. Bowls need to be heavy enough not to be tipped over. Provide a litter box with organic litter (do not use softwood shavings such as pine or cedar). It is also helpful to attach the litter pans to the cage with clips, wire, or 1-inch (2.5 cm) C-clamps.

### **Substrate**

House pet rabbits on solid flooring:

- Wire floors on commercial cages may be removed with J-clip removers or a small awl and needle nosed jewelry pliers.
- If the wire floor is not removed, a variety of materials may be used to cover the wire floor including carpet remnants, grass mats, synthetic sheepskin, and toweling. If your bunny starts to chew on or ingest any of the non-natural floor coverings, replace them with another item.
- Absorbent bedding such as recycled paper product or aspen shavings may also be used.

### **Cage Furniture**

- Shelves may be added to the cages for resting, lookout, or exercise if there is sufficient height between the floor of the cage and the top. A flat roofed house of wood or cardboard will provide the same in addition to a private area for the bunny. A hooded litter box or a pet carrier may be placed in a room for privacy (make sure that your bunny doesn't eat the plastic carrier or litter box).
- Clip a small piece of plexiglass to the cage wire behind the hay container to keep the hay inside the cage. A 4 in (10 cm) piece of plexiglass may be placed along the bottom to deflect urine or debris.

### **Bunny Proofing Your Home**

Bunny-proofing your home is part of living with a house rabbit. It is natural for rabbits to chew on furniture, rugs, drapes, and, most deadly of all, electrical cords. Young rabbits (< 1 year of age) are more inclined to mischief and require more confinement and/or bunny proofing than mature rabbits.

1. It is imperative that electrical cords be hidden or covered with tubing or hard plastic casing, since one bite by your bunny could be fatal. Conceal cords within

- vinyl tubing, found at hardware stores, so that the rabbit cannot reach them. Split the tubing lengthwise with a utility knife so the cord may be pushed inside.
2. Use plexiglass to cover wallpaper or part of a carpet. Tack a thin strip of untreated wood over a baseboard to protect it from bunny teeth. Arrange furniture to hide cords and electrical outlets. Place grass mats over carpet to protect your rug.
  3. Gates, such as those used to keep children and dogs out of certain areas, are another way to set up an area for your bunny. If your rabbit seems overly interested in chewing the gate, try decorating it with permitted chew toys as a diversion.
  4. Give your rabbit enough attention, safe chewable items and toys, so that it is distracted from chewing furniture and rugs. To keep bunnies happy and relieve boredom, provide them with plenty of toys:
    - Untreated wicker baskets and wood
    - Willow bark balls
    - Grass mats, jute and hemp doormats
    - Cat balls or other cat toys that roll or can be tossed
    - Hard plastic baby toys. Make sure that the rabbit is not eating and ingesting these toys!
    - Large tubs of hay, newspapers, or a towel may be used as an outlet for digging.
    - Nudge and roll toys like large rubber balls, empty Quaker Oat boxes and small tins
    - Create a climbing area with baskets, boxes, and pillows
    - Tunnels can be made from open-ended cardboard boxes, cat tunnels, and cardboard propped up against the side of a wall.
    - Paper bags and cardboard boxes for crawling inside, scratching, and chewing.
    - A cardboard box stuffed with hay, straw, or shredded paper makes an inexpensive play box.
    - Yellow Pages for shredding
    - Straw whisk broom
    - Untreated wood twigs and logs that have been aged for at least 3 months. Apple tree branches can be eaten fresh off the tree. Stay away from: cherry, peach, apricot, plum and redwood, which are all poisonous.
  5. Remove poisonous plants and other toxic substances as well as any small objects that could be ingested.

### **Temperature and Humidity**

Place the cage in the coolest, least humid area of the house away from heat and drafts. A temperature range of 60-70°F (16-21°C) is best for pet rabbits. Temperatures in the upper 80s and higher can potentially cause fatal heat stroke. Leave a frozen bottle of water in

the cage, and wet down the rabbit's ears during hot weather to help cool the bunny. Cool tiles may also be used as a cool spot for rabbits to lie on in warm weather.

## **References and Recommended Reading**

Bays TB. Rabbit behavior. In: Bays TB, Lightfoot T, Mayer J (eds). Exotic Pet Behavior. St. Louis, MO: Saunders; 2006. Pp. 1-49.

Harriman M. House Rabbit Handbook: How to Live with an Urban Rabbit, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Alameda: Drollery Press; 2005.

House Rabbit Society at <http://www.rabbit.org/index.html> accessed on Mar 30, 2011.

McBride A. Why Does My Rabbit...?, revised ed. London: Souvenir Press; 2003.

Quesenberry KE, Carpenter JW (eds). Ferrets, Rabbits and Rodents: Clinical Medicine and Surgery, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. St. Louis, MO: Saunders; 2005.