

# Pet Rabbit Basics



**T**here is only one species of rabbit, but over 50 different breeds. Today, the rabbit is the 3<sup>rd</sup> most popular pet in the US. Rabbits are classified as lagomorphs due to an extra set of upper incisors called "peg" teeth. Both the incisors and molars grow continuously throughout the rabbit's life. Wild rabbits feed continuously, eating grasses exclusively. This herbivorous diet is unlike that of rodents, which eat primarily grains and tubers. Most of rabbit digestion occurs in the hindgut (cecum), and this high fiber diet maintains normal gastrointestinal motility and fermentation. It is normal for rabbits to eat their "soft" stools during the night. These special stools are called cecotropes, and provide rabbits with important proteins and vitamins. Rabbits have a life expectancy of 8-12 years depending on the size/breed.

---

## Pet Rabbit Nutrition

*Recommended daily diet for each 5 lb. body weight:*

### 1. Unlimited Bermuda, Timothy or Orchard grass hay

This is the most important part of your rabbit's diet. These hays are high fiber and help keep your rabbit's teeth in good health and promote optimal digestive function.

Alfalfa hay is *not* recommended for most adult house rabbits, as it is too high in calcium content and calories, but can be offered free choice to young, pregnant or underweight rabbits.

### 2. Minimum of 1 cup vegetables

Select 3 different types of dark green or dark yellow vegetables daily. Some healthy options include:

Alfalfa sprouts, basil, beet greens, broccoli leaves, Brussels sprouts, carrot and carrot tops, cilantro, collard greens, endive, green peppers, parsley, romaine lettuce, kale, outer cabbage leaves, raspberry leaves, wheat grass, pea pods (not the peas), squash, raddichio, dandelion leaves
--

### 3. High fiber pellets

No more than 1/4 cup maintenance-type, alfalfa-based (18% or higher fiber) pellet.

If you feed a timothy-based (27% fiber) pellet, you can give up to 1/2 cup.

\* Do *not* feed gourmet pellets that have seeds/nuts and cereals! This is extremely important because of the risk of excessive fermentation and gas production in your rabbit's intestinal tract.

### 4. Limited fruits

If your rabbit is not overweight, a small amount of high fiber fruit (up to 3 types) totaling 1-2 level tablespoons can be fed:

Apple, peach, plum, pear, melon, raspberry, papaya, blueberry, blackberry, strawberry, pineapple.
---

\* *Avoid* sugary fruits, such as bananas and grapes.

### 5. Treats

Never feed cereals, bread, oats, corn, seeds, or nuts!!! These high fat or high carbohydrate items can cause severe digestive upset in rabbits.

---

## Common Diseases and Problems in Rabbits

### Gastrointestinal (GI) Disease

GI stasis (abnormal motility) is the number one problem in pet rabbits and is the most common cause of decreased appetite and stools in an otherwise healthy rabbit. Primary causes include an improper diet, overgrown teeth and other stressors. Hairballs occur occasionally in a rabbit in stasis and may lead to stomach obstruction. Rabbits with stasis will have soft stools or small, hard stools. In some cases, acute death from abnormal

fermentation and excessive bacterial overgrowth (enterotoxemia) occurs. Acute, profuse diarrhea is a medical emergency, and is especially common in young rabbits.

## Dental Problems

Tooth problems are also very common and linked to improper diet and genetics. Rabbit teeth grow 4-5 inches a year! If overgrown, the teeth may wear abnormally, causing painful points and spurs, leading to tooth root abscesses. Rabbits with dental disease will often drool and stop eating. Gastrointestinal stasis is usually a secondary problem that develops.

## Obesity

Obesity is common in pet rabbits and is due to improper diet (too many pellets or treats) and lack of exercise. Obesity can lead to lameness and sores on the feet, an inability to groom (urine and fecal accumulation) and GI stasis.

## Respiratory Disease

Pasteurella is a bacteria that most rabbits carry and acquire at birth. In some rabbits, it can lead to eye, nose, lung, skin and bone infections.

## Urinary and Reproductive Disease

Kidney disease occurs in older rabbits and may be caused by infections, toxins, cancer, and age-related degeneration. Uterine tumors are very common in older, unspayed females. Urinary infections and stones can occur in both sexes from excess calcium excretion from an improper diet.

## Parasites

Coccidia can cause diarrhea in young rabbits less than 6 months of age. Some exhibit blood in the stools. Encephalitozoon is a parasite causing kidney and neurologic disease, especially in older rabbits. External parasites, such as lice, mites and fleas also occur occasionally.

## Other Problems

Rabbits are prone to digging and chewing and may get torn nails, ingest foreign-body material or experience electrocution. Spinal fractures and paralysis may occur from improper handling and falls.

Caging should have smooth, non-porous surfaces such as plastic. Newspaper or recycled paper bedding may be used. Avoid wire bottom surfaces

as they may lead to foot sores. Avoid corn-cob bedding which may be eaten inadvertently and could lead to GI upset.

---

## Recommended Veterinary Care

### First Visit

- Physical examination
- Review diet
- Blood test: Antibody level for *E.cuniculi*
- Spay/Neuter at 6 months

### Yearly Exam

- Physical examination
- Dental examination
- Weight determination/body condition assessment
- Nail trim, ear cleaning (if needed)
- Mature rabbits over 1-2 years of age:
  - Complete Blood Count
  - Chemistry Panel

---

## Signs of Illness:

- Decreased or loss of appetite
- Poor hair coat
- Decreased or absence of stools or diarrhea
- Lameness
- Runny eyes and nose
- Excessive hiding
- Abnormal swellings on the jaw
- Weight loss

---

## Useful Websites

House Rabbit Society ([www.rabbit.org](http://www.rabbit.org))  
NYS HRS ([www.therabbitresource.org](http://www.therabbitresource.org))  
[language.rabbitspeak.com](http://language.rabbitspeak.com)  
[Busybunny.com](http://Busybunny.com)  
[Bunnybytes.com](http://Bunnybytes.com)



*Specialized Care for Avian & Exotic Pets*  
10882 Main St, Clarence, NY 14031  
ph (716) 759-0144 fax (716) 759-0146  
© 2013 Laura Wade, DVM, Dipl ABVP