

Feeding Rabbits

Rabbits, like horses, are hindgut fermenters. They do not have multiple stomachs and are not ruminants (like goat or sheep), and thus have very sensitive digestive systems. The most important part of your feeding program is finding something that works and sticking with it. Every time you switch feeds or feeding programs, you are basically starting over, as you will likely lose any condition that you have on your animals.

Water

The most important nutrient for any animal is water. Water builds cells and removes waste and toxins. Animals should have constant access to fresh, clean water. Water should always be available and any water that has sat for more than 24 hours should be replaced with fresh water.

Water can be offered in bowls or bottles. Bowls are easier for animals to drink from, but can easily be dumped or soiled. Young animals may get into the bowl and dirty the water or a bowl may be dumped, leaving the animal without water. Water in a bowl that is not changed multiple times a day and the bowl washed regularly is an invitation to disease. Bottles, while slightly more work for an animal to use, keep the water clean. Also, most bottles can hold more water than a bowl and cannot be moved or soiled. Animals that do not know how to drink out of a bottle can be trained to do so by placing a small amount of jam on the tip of the water spout to encourage it to lick the spout.

Feed Options

Rabbit can be fed in two different manners. The most common way to feed rabbits is to feed a complete pelleted feed. The pellets provide everything that your rabbits need and are convenient to store and feed. Pellets are really the only way to go when feeding show animals or animals in an intense commercial setting. They allow for the best flesh condition and faster growth. Rabbits fed pellets do not need a salt or mineral lick. Pellet should be fed at the same time every day. Pellets can be free fed or limited fed. The only animals that should be free fed are lactating does, does with litters, and weanlings up to six months. Buck and dry does should be fed a certain amount at the same time every day. A general rule is 1 ounce of feed per pound of body weight, but this should be adjusted based on the individual animal. Ideally, you should be able to run your hand over the animal's spine and feel gentle, rolling bumps. A prominent, spiky feeling spine is underfed and if you cannot easily feel the spine, the animal is overfed. Pellets should be fed by weight (6 ounces), not volume (1 cup).

Pellets should have between 16 and 18 percent protein. Other nutritional values are important, but generally do not fluctuate between brands as much as protein does. The best brand is a brand that can be gotten consistently and fresh. The first ingredient should be alfalfa and all ingredients should be named products (not things like "forage product"). Corn should be avoided.

Besides feeding pellets, the other option for feeding rabbits is best for those who wish to produce rabbit meat that is organic or more "natural." Rabbits can be fed a "natural" diet that is

based off alfalfa hay. The alfalfa hay is a legume and provides the 16-18 percent protein that your animals need. Rabbits are offered free choice alfalfa hay, as well as a smaller amount of grain mix, such as oats or barley, and a mineral block. I personally do not have experience with this method of feeding and I believe anyone who wishes to try this type of feeding should do extensive research on a rabbit's nutritional needs and the possible problems with this type of feeding. More information on organic feeding can be found on the USDA National Organic Program website. Information on the nutritional content of grains and forage products can be found at fedipedia.org

Hay

While pellets provide all of the nutrients that a rabbit needs to survive, hay provides long stem fiber, which is good for digestive health. Hay does not need to be constantly available, but there are serious health benefits to offering it at least weekly. Besides the benefits to a rabbit's sensitive digestive system, it is also a good form of enrichment for your animals, as it gives them something to do.

Kits should be offered hay constantly once they are out of the box. Before they leave the nest box, kits will begin nibbling the hay that the nest is made of. Once out of the nest box, the kits will start to eat pellets. This change from mother's milk to pellets may cause digestive upset called weaning enteritis. This is caused by an imbalance of the gut flora and results in diarrhea, which can be life threatening. By offering hay, the kits will eat hay along with the pellets and the hay will keep the gut moving so that there is less of a chance for an imbalance. If a kit is found with diarrhea, all pellets should be removed and only hay should be offered for three days.

Treats

Rabbits are herbivores, not vegetarians. Therefore, they should not be fed fruit or vegetables except as occasional treats. Rabbits' digestive systems were not designed to digest the high sugar and water content of fruits and vegetables. Rather, good treats would be things such as hay, dandelions and dandelion leaves, plantain (the lawn weed), and other suitable plants. Small amounts of vegetables can be offered at most once a week to animals over six months.

Switching Feed

Because of how sensitive a rabbit's digestive system is, all changes in diet should be done very slowly. To change pellets, begin by mixing 90% of the old feed with 10% of the new feed. Do this for at least three days or until there is no sign of digestive upsets. Then move to 75%-25%, 50%-50%, and so on. This may take up to a month. Slower is better!

New additions to the diet, such as a new treat or new vegetable, should be done very slowly. If this small amount upset the digestive system, only feed hay for a few days.