

## FEEDING YOUR RABBIT

Many of the veterinary problems relate to their diet. Wild rabbits are *herbivores* - they get all their nourishment from grazing on low-growing vegetation, such as grass, weeds, and what they can reach of trees and bushes, including, often, the bark. A rabbit's teeth keep growing throughout its life, the front teeth shaped like chisels for nipping off grass and gnawing on wood, and the ridged back (cheek) teeth for grinding down coarse plant material.

### Problems with teeth

Lots of rabbits have the disease called 'malocclusion', in which the upper teeth don't meet the lower ones properly. The teeth of these rabbits may need clipping or filing regularly throughout their life - sometimes as frequently as every three to four weeks!

Vets suspect this problem starts early in life when the young rabbit is weaned onto solid food. Correct diet at this stage helps teeth to develop correctly - strong and properly placed in the jaw. All parts of the body grow strong with exercise, and the jaw and teeth of the young rabbit needs the exercise of chewing and grinding coarse plant material to develop correctly.

### Other problems with the bowel (gut)

Correct diet also keeps the other parts of their bowel in good working order. Like other herbivores such as cows and horses, rabbits have a special expanded part of the bowel (the colon in rabbits) where the well-chewed plant material (grass and hay) is digested to release its nutrients. A rabbit's bowel won't function properly if it's fed a diet too low in fibre, leading to problems such as obesity, and accumulation of soft faeces (droppings) round the anus with the summer-time risk of fly-strike (flies laying their eggs on the rabbit, which then hatch out into maggots).

### Coprophagia

Coprophagia means eating faeces (drop-pings). Rabbits do this at night, eating the soft faeces directly from the anus so that they pass through the bowel again which enables the rabbit to extract much more nourishment from its diet. The second time round the faeces are passed as the familiar solid dry pellets.

If the soft faeces are allowed to accumul-ate around the

anus - most commonly be-cause the diet is too low in fibre - although it may also happen if the rabbit is too fat to turn round and reach its anus.

### How to feed your rabbit

Young rabbits should be fed on hay, plus either breeder pellets (which contain about 18% protein) or "Excel Supa Rabbit Junior" up to 16 weeks old (which has a reasonable protein level and is also high in fibre). They can also be given fresh grass and weeds (make sure they've not been sprayed with anything, and didn't grow too near a road), and once your rabbit has had its myxomatosis and VHD vaccinations, he or she can go out in a run or in the garden to graze.

Some young rabbits are sold with the warning 'don't feed greens or hay until they are six months old - it will give them diarrhoea'. **This is wrong** - just consider the way rabbits live in the wild! If the seller - shop or breeder - has rabbits which can't cope with a correct diet, then don't buy them and look elsewhere for a normal, healthy young rabbit.

Young rabbits reared in hutches may not have had access to fresh grass, and all changes in diet should be gradual. **Never feed** grass mowings or large quantities of lettuce because they can cause bloat.

Feed adult rabbits on hay, either breeder pellets or "Supreme Science Adult" or "Burgess Supa Rabbit Excel", and out-doors grazing. **Don't feed** 'muesli-type' rabbit mixes because they tend to be low in protein, and because, being high in carbohydrate and low in fibre, they don't help the development of either healthy teeth or a correctly functioning bowel.

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