

Brook House Veterinary Hospital



12 LANDGUARD ROAD
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Rabbits

Feeding your Rabbit

Rabbits are classed in the mammalian order 'Lagomorpha'. They are similar to rodents but have a unique digestive system.

Poor diet can be the cause of ill health, especially dental and digestive problems. To maintain healthy teeth and bones your rabbit must be fed a balanced diet. Calcium and fibre are particularly important. The rabbit was designed to function on a diet of grass.

In the wild rabbits spend most of their day eating. The gut is designed to digest large quantities of fibrous food. The best diet for your rabbit is lots of grass and hay. This can be supplemented with greens such as curly kale, cabbage, broccoli, carrot tops, spring greens and cauliflower leaves. Weeds such as brambles and dandelion leaves are also a good source of essential nutrients. (Ensure all weeds are washed thoroughly and not been sprayed with chemicals). A high fibre diet such as this ensures the gastrointestinal system is constantly in motion. The act of chewing promotes even wear on teeth.

Rabbit mix is not a suitable diet for your rabbit. It lacks dietary fibre and selective feeding means that a balanced diet of minerals is not obtained. If your rabbit is accustomed to eating such a diet this can be gradually withdrawn over several weeks. Pelleted diets are better than mix as they reduce selective feeding but should still only be fed in small quantities as a supplement to the main diet.

Daily exercise in a safe outdoor run exposes your rabbit to sunlight. This is important, as it is required for vitamin d production that allows calcium absorption in the gut.



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Teeth

- Overgrown teeth and malocclusion is the most common problem in rabbits, which can lead to euthanasia.
- Rabbit's teeth constantly grow during their life and will become overgrown if the diet is inappropriate or the teeth are not aligned properly.
- Overgrown teeth become spiked and can cause damage to the mouth and tongue, which causes infection, ulcers and inability to pick up and eat food.
- Clinical signs include: poor appetite, weight loss, dribbling, eye infections and matted droppings around the tail.
- Malocclusion of the incisors can be genetic. It is mainly dietary related in older rabbits.
- Correct diet is essential to wear the teeth down effectively. As said before this should be mainly roughage.
- Some rabbits don't eat the pellet part of mixed diets. These pellets contain calcium and phosphorus essential for bone and tooth growth.
- It is important that your rabbit is fed correctly from a young age. Once dental abnormalities set in they are likely to cause problems for the rest for your pet's life.



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Fly Strike

Flies laying eggs onto a rabbit cause this. The eggs then hatch into maggots. Bluebottles and green bottle flies produce maggots that mature very rapidly and eat flesh within 24hrs. This condition is often fatal.

Risk: This depends on the time of year. It is most commonly encountered in the summer months. Rabbits with dirty bottoms are usually affected. It is very important to keep your rabbit and its hutch clean and dry. Dirty hutches attract flies.

Signs: It is important to check rabbits twice daily in the summer months. If your rabbit is quieter than normal then check immediately for any maggots or eggs. It is important to phone the veterinary surgeon immediately. Fly strike is a true emergency. Do not make your rabbit wet as the fur will need to be shaven at the practice.

Treatment: Fly strike is often fatal but a full recovery is possible if treated quickly. The rabbit is usually in pain and severe shock. The maggots need to be removed and the wound cleaned.

Prevention: A healthy diet and a good hygiene routine are very important. Rear guard is a product available from veterinary practices. This is a liquid that can be applied to the rabbit that should help prevent fly strike for up to ten weeks.



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Neutering

- Rabbits become sexually mature between 4-6 months in small breeds and 6-9 months in larger breeds.
- Young rabbits should be separated at 16 weeks of age into single sex groups.
- Females should be spayed at 6 months of age.
- Males should be castrated at 5-6 months of age.
- Entire males are more prone to behavioural problems e.g. fighting, biting and urine spraying.
- Spaying females between 6 months and 2 years of age dramatically decreases chances of uterine tumours developing.
- Neutered rabbits are more prone to obesity as they get older, therefore don't allow over eating.

Vaccinations

- Viral haemorrhagic disease (VHD) and Myxomatosis can be vaccinated against.
- Both diseases are fatal and incurable once infected.
- VHD can be spread by direct contact between rabbits (wild and domestic). It can also be spread by indirect contact from people, fleas and other objects.
- VHD vaccination can be done from 12 weeks of age. A yearly booster is required to maintain immunity.
- Fleas and other biting insects spread myxomatosis. It is transmitted this way from wild rabbits to domestic rabbits.
- Vaccination can start from 6 weeks. Boosters are required every 6 – 12 months depending on incidence of disease in your local area.
- Both vaccines can't be given together. They need to be given a minimum of 14 days apart.

