

Healthy Food Trio Makes for a Healthy Rabbit

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Eating only carrots may be good for Bugs Bunny, but your rabbit needs more. For domestic rabbits, good nutrition comes in threes. Part one of a healthy diet is hay. Hay is a critical part of a bunny's diet and should always be available to eat. Hay provides the necessary fiber component that helps to keep the rabbit's gastrointestinal system in good condition. A visit to your local pet store will show you that there are many varieties of hay to choose from. Among the rabbits I have seen during veterinary visits, alfalfa and timothy are the two most common hay types selected by bunny owners.

I recommend timothy and other grass hays over alfalfa because timothy has more fiber content. Alfalfa hay is also high in protein and calcium. In the long run, high calcium diets may be harmful to the health of the rabbit's urinary system and may contribute to the formation of bladder stones. The selection of good quality timothy hay requires a combination of factors. Choose hay that does not have too many stems. Gentle pressure applied to a bag of hay may reveal many hard stems that stick your hands and fingers. Remember that these same stems may also stick your rabbit's gums. The hay should also have a slight greenish color, which will tell you that it's fresh and not too old. Use your nose to decide whether the hay smells a little like fresh cut vegetation.

Part two of a healthy diet is vegetables—specifically dark green leafy vegetables. Like hay, greens have high fiber content and are very good for the health of your rabbit's gastrointestinal system. Greens are also a nice complement to hay because they have high water content. Rabbits love to eat greens because they are very soft and easy to chew. For this reason, greens are an especially good choice for rabbits with dental issues. Many rabbits, like children, can be very picky about the kind of veggies they will or won't eat and finding their favorite greens can sometimes be challenging.

I recommend that owners start by offering Romaine lettuce, which is high in vitamins and minerals and seems to be extremely palatable to bunnies. Other than Romaine lettuce, I do not recommend other lettuces, such as iceberg. They tend to have little or no nutritional value for rabbits. A variety of other dark greens are available to try, including kale, collard greens, dandelion greens, turnip greens, etc. Spinach has lots of vitamins and minerals but due to its high calcium content it should be offered sparingly. Dark green leafy vegetables (1 to 3 leaves per rabbit, depending on the size of the rabbit) may be offered once to twice daily as a regular part of your rabbit's diet.

Part three—and often the most overused part by rabbit owners—of a healthy diet is rabbit pellets. Commercially prepared rabbit pellets have become a mainstay in the domestic rabbit diet due to the ease of availability in the marketplace and the ease with which they may be given to rabbits. The majority of rabbit pellets available are alfalfa-based. Like alfalfa hay, alfalfa-based rabbit pellets have less fiber, more protein, and more calcium than timothy-based pellets. Rabbits that eat too many alfalfa-based pellets, especially those offered unlimited access, tend to become overweight due to the high protein and low fiber content. A veterinarian familiar with your rabbit is one of the best resources available to determine if your rabbit is overweight, determine the amount of pellets your rabbit should receive daily, and to help you make any changes in the diet.

Finally, make sure your rabbit has access to clean water. A rabbit drinks as much water per day as a small dog whose body weight is three to five times greater than it. With adequate water added as an essential ingredient, a rabbit diet can be as simple as 1-2-3.