



## Rabbit Basics

[www.citycreaturesbuffalo.com](http://www.citycreaturesbuffalo.com)

There is only one species of rabbit, but over 50 different breeds. 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 exclusively grasses. 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 are called cecotropes, and provide them with important proteins and vitamins.

### Pet Rabbit Nutrition

Recommended daily diet for each 5 lb. body weight:

1. Unlimited Bermuda or Timothy grass hay
  - 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 or pregnant rabbits
2. Minimum of 1 cup vegetables
  - Select 3 different types dark green or dark yellow vegetables daily:  
Alfalfa sprouts, carrots 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 ¼ cup maintenance-type, alfalfa-based (18% or higher fiber) pellet. If using *Oxbow Bunny Basics T*, a timothy-based (27% fiber) pellet, can give up to ½ cup.
  - Do *not* feed gourmet pellets that have seeds and cereals!
4. Limited Fruits
  - If 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. No high fat or carbohydrates treats
  - *Never* feed cereals, bread, oats, corn, seeds, or nuts!!!

### Common Disease and Problems

1. 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, overgrowth teeth and other stresses. Although hairballs are rare, occasionally a rabbit in stasis may experience a hairball obstruction. Rabbits with stasis will have soft stools or small, hard stools. In some cases, acute death from abnormal fermentation and bacterial overgrowth (enterotoxemia) occurs. Acute, profuse diarrhea is a medical emergency, and is especially common in young rabbits.

## 2. Dental Problems

Tooth problems are also very common and linked to improper diet. 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.

## 3. 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.

## 4. 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.

## 5. Urinary and Reproductive Disease

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

## 6. 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.

## 7. Other

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.

## **Recommended Veterinary Care**

### 1. Yearly Exam

- Physical examination
- Dental examination
- Weight determination
- Nail trim
- Review diet and environmental dangers
- Baseline bloodwork:
  - Young rabbits less than 1 year of age:  
Rabbit Infectious Disease Panel
  - Mature rabbits over 1-2 years of age:  
Complete Blood Count  
Chemistry Panel

### 2. Spay/Neuter at 6-9 months

## **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 swelling on the jaw
- Weight loss

## **Useful Websites**

[www.heidihoefer.com](http://www.heidihoefer.com)  
House Rabbit Society ([www.rabbit.org](http://www.rabbit.org))

