

## Feeding and Housing Your Pet Rabbit



### Housing

Rabbits can cope reasonably well with cold, but cannot tolerate damp conditions. For this reason it's best to have separate summer and winter accommodation for them. Ideally, from spring to autumn they need outdoor accommodation such as a hutch or shed where they can be shut at night or in wet weather, with daily access to a large grassy run where they can graze and take exercise. In winter they can be moved into a well-ventilated shed or outhouse, or indoors.

An outdoor run for rabbits should include access to plenty of grass and have shelter to get out of the sun or rain. If your garden is secure you can let them have free run but beware: They can dig out, be difficult to catch and you need to be wary of cats with the smaller rabbits.

Rabbits can be litter trained and kept indoors as you would a cat or dog. They make great companions. Make sure they do spend some time outside when it's nice and watch they don't chew your electrical cables!

Take care when picking your rabbit up. They must have their hind quarters supported or else they may panic and kick. This can result in nasty scratches to you and serious injury to them.

### Diet

Rabbits are herbivores. This means that in the wild they live entirely on low growing vegetation. It's important if you make any changes to their diet then you must do it gradually over a couple of weeks. This includes when adding in anything new.



### The Rabbit's Digestive Tract

The rabbit's digestive tract is designed to cope with this very bulky, fibrous diet. In the lower bowel there is a large blind-ended sac called the caecum, where bacteria break down the fibrous material and extract nutrients for the rabbit to use.

### Coprophagia

When the contents of the caecum are passed out of the anus, they are eaten again by the healthy rabbit, and complete a second trip down the digestive tract to extract nutrients, until they are passed as hard, dry pellets. These 'caecotrophs' are moist and smelly, and if not eaten, may get stuck around the rabbit's bottom, giving the appearance of 'diarrhoea'.

### The Importance of Fibre

Fibre is very important to the rabbit. Without sufficient fibre in the diet, the gut does not function properly and can lead to serious complications.

### So What Should You Feed?

The most important part of the rabbit's diet is fibre, much of which comes from grasses or hay. The rabbits that spend much of each day out and about, wandering round the garden eating a little of this and a little of that, are usually very healthy rabbits! All rabbits should be offered unlimited good quality hay (it should smell nice and not be too dusty), and plenty of fresh green food each day. This green food can be shop-bought vegetables, or weeds and grass from the garden. Avoid fruits, lettuce, and other watery vegetables such as cucumber.

### What About Pellets and Mixes?

You can feed a small quantity of a high-fibre pellets. Avoid the 'muesli type' mixes that are high in easily-digestible carbohydrates but low in fibre. Rabbit breeder pellets can be fed to breeding rabbits, but are too high in energy for the average pet.

### What About Supplements?

If your pet rabbit has plenty of time out of doors in the garden, and a good fibrous diet, it will not need supplements. Rabbits that live indoors, or that have health problems, may benefit from calcium supplementation. But ask your vet first – too much calcium can cause problems such as bladder stones.

### Don't Let Him Get Fat!

Lots of pet rabbits are obese. Rabbits are healthiest when lean and active! If in any doubt, get your rabbit checked by a vet or veterinary nurse. If he's overweight, reduce the mix or pellets that he's getting, until his waistline re-appears!



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Scarsdale Vets  
Pride Veterinary Centre  
Riverside Road  
Derby DE24 8HX  
Telephone: 01332 678333  
[www.scarsdalevets.com](http://www.scarsdalevets.com)

