

Caring for your rabbit

Rabbit nutrition

Rabbits are strict herbivores and should only be fed a vegetarian diet. Wild rabbits survive by eating lots of high fibre food and their diet as pets should reflect this. This means fibre is an important part of the diet and should be offered at all times in the form of good quality timothy or grass hay. Alfalfa hay is often too high in calories and should be avoided (in most adult rabbits) to avoid obesity.

Grass can be offered although care is required with lush grass which may lead to dietary upset. When introducing a rabbit to grazing outside, the key is to do it gradually. Feeding already cut grass to rabbits is not recommended. Leafy greens should be offered to rabbits with a selection of different types available. Good choices include:

- Kale
- Beetroot tops
- Carrot tops
- Broccoli leaves
- Parsley
- Dandelion leaves
- Cabbage leaves
- Chicory



If you would like any further information about how to care for your rabbit, please call the surgery on

01379 852146

or email admin@oakwoodvets.co.uk

Fruit can be offered but only in small quantities and preferably high-fibre, low sugar varieties such as apples and pears. High sugar fruits (eg. bananas and grapes) and root vegetables (eg. carrots) should only be fed in small amounts, and the feeding of citrus fruits should be avoided completely. A commercial rabbit food can be offered as a supplementary food although it is important to choose a pelleted food rather than a museli-type mix. This will prevent the rabbit from picking out its favourite bits which can lead to a nutrient imbalance. These foods should NEVER be fed as a complete diet.

If a rabbit's diet does not contain the correct balance of nutrients and long fibre the digestive system can fail. This can cause a variety of problems ranging from overgrown teeth and dental misalignment, through to fly strike due to a dirty bottom, anorexia, obesity and gut stasis and, in the worst case, these may be life-threatening.

Myxomatosis

We are all too aware that rural East Anglia sees lots of cases of myxomatosis every year. Unprotected rabbits are at serious risk from this infection as treatment for myxomatosis is typically unsuccessful. The main way to protect your rabbit is by way of vaccination. This is an injection given every year to maintain the maximum protection and your rabbit would be given a health check at the same time.

As myxomatosis is spread by fleas and biting flies, the second way to maximise protection against this virus is by using an insecticidal product. Here at Oakwood we stock a spot-on formulation specifically recommended for this purpose - please contact us for details.

Neutering

Rabbits can be spayed (females) or castrated (males) from four months of age. Spaying females, apart from the benefit of eliminating the risk of unwanted pregnancies, can also prevent uterine adenocarcinoma - a type of uterine cancer. There can be some benefits with regards to the doe's behaviour, and spaying can be useful in the management of aggression, sexual behaviours and territorial behaviours. Castrating male rabbits again can be useful to prevent them from breeding, and would be recommended if two or more male rabbits are to be housed together to help reduce (although it may not eliminate!) aggression.

Both surgeries require an anaesthetic and usually just a day spent at the surgery. If you require any further information about these procedures then please ask at the surgery.

Fly Strike

The presentation of a fly-blown rabbit is all too common in most veterinary practices. Generally blow-flies will not lay eggs on healthy rabbits - they are attracted to soiled fur or infected skin to lay their eggs. The most common site for fly strike is at the base of the spine as this is a difficult area for rabbits to groom - especially if they are overweight. Dental disease will also prevent effective grooming, and uneaten faecal pellets or damp, dirty bedding increase the risk of fly strike. When the eggs hatch out maggots are concealed by matted, soiled fur and may not be obvious until the rabbit becomes unwell.

It is therefore important that your rabbit is kept clean, inspected daily and any signs of disease (including urine scalding or faeces stuck to the fur) is thoroughly checked out by your vet.

Medications can be used to help in the prevention of fly-strike and may be useful at high risk times. The most important factor in ensuring your bunny does not get 'struck' is maintaining their good health and regular monitoring and cleaning.

Worming & Parasites

Rabbits can suffer from parasites and worms just like cats and dogs. One of the most common is a parasite called *Encephalozoon Cuniculi*. It is reported to be prevalent in the world rabbit population and approximately 50% of domestic rabbits have come into contact with it.



If infected, rabbits can show nervous signs including head tilts, weakness in their back legs, seizures, blindness and kidney disease. It is spread in urine and can survive in the environment for weeks.

Prevention of this disease is important as treatment is rarely successful. Good general hygiene, preventing contact with wild rabbits and not collecting greens for your rabbit from wild-rabbit inhabited areas are all important, as is using a licensed parasiticide at times of stress. Please ask at the surgery for more details.