



Birchwood Animal Hospital

~ for the love of animals since 1959 ~

BIRCHWOOD ANIMAL HOSPITAL

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Rabbit Care

Rabbits are friendly, quiet pets that enjoy human company. They do need a great deal of handling to remain tame pets.

When you are home to supervise your rabbit, he/she can be allowed free run of the home. However they will chew cords and furniture if not stopped. A permanent cage is required to provide a safe environment for your rabbit when you are unable to supervise.

Feeding

a) Clean, fresh water should be available at all times.

b) Rabbit pellets - A good quality rabbit pellet may be offered daily but in limited quantities. The uncontrolled feeding of a pelleted diet can lead to obesity, kidney, heart and liver disease or chronic diarrhea. These result from the high concentration of carbohydrates, low fibre and high calcium levels in the pellets. Make sure that you buy pellets high in fibre (18% or more) and that you only buy small quantities. Keep the pellets refrigerated or cool and dry to prevent spoilage. Old, rancid pellets can cause a rabbit to stop eating. If you must buy more than two months of pellets at a time, freeze the extra. The following chart shows daily amounts to be fed to your adult bunny. Do not refill the bowl even if the pellets are all eaten before the next day. Overfeeding of pellets is the number one cause of health problems that we see. Rabbits up to 8 months of age can have access to pellets free choice because they are still growing rapidly. For the pet rabbit over 8 months of age, feed the following maintenance diet:

<u>Body Weight</u>	<u>Daily Amount of Pellets</u>
1 - 2 kg. (2 - 5 lbs.)	1/8 Cup
3 - 4 kg. (5 - 8 lbs.)	1/4 Cup
4 - 5 kg. (8 - 11 lbs.)	1/2 Cup
5 - 7 kg. (11 - 15 lbs.)	3/4 Cup

Note: These food amounts are for the maintenance of the non-breeding, mature house rabbit.

c) Hay - Timothy or other grass hay should be offered daily in unlimited amounts. It is important that hay be available at all times for your bunny. Rabbits tend to eat small amounts of food frequently throughout the day and withholding hay for long periods of time can lead to intestinal upsets. The long, loose strands of hay are preferable, as opposed to the pressed cubes or chopped hay. The fibre in the hay is extremely important in promoting normal digestion and preventing hairballs. Hay also contains proteins and other nutrients essential to the good health of your pet. We do NOT recommend the use of **alfalfa** hay, particularly if it is being used along with pellets (which are already high in alfalfa hay), because it may provide too much calcium and extra carbohydrates which may lead to serious health problems and digestive upsets. Alfalfa hay can be offered to growing animals (under 6 months) and nursing females in addition to free choice grass hay.

Grass hay can be difficult to find if you do not know the right places to look. An excellent source is

www.oxbowanimalhealth.com which offers a wide variety of products.

By phoning the Manitoba Agriculture Representative in St. Pierre (1-204-433-7749) you will be able to access a list of farmers around Winnipeg who sell grass hay. You may be able to buy a "flake" from a bale

rather than the whole bale. Hay should be stored in a cool, dry place with good air circulation (don't close it tightly in a plastic bag). Discard wet or damp hay, or any hay that does not have a fresh smell. The best way to offer the hay is to use a hay rack on the outside of the cage. Your pet can pull the hay into the cage through the bars as desired. This keeps the hay clean and eliminates much of the waste. At certain times of the year, it may be difficult to obtain grass hay. At these times it is okay to use hay mixed with alfalfa, or use only alfalfa hay for a short time. **The most important thing is to always have hay available.** Remember, we are restricting the pellets. The hay is a major source of fibre and nutrients.

d) Fresh foods - These foods should be fed daily. Rabbits in the wild eat primarily grass and tough, fibrous leaves, bark and other difficult to digest plants. Their digestive tract functions best when it has to break down cellulose. *If your pet is not used to getting any fresh foods, then start out gradually with the green leafy vegetables and add a new food item from the following list every week. If the addition of any item leads to diarrhea or unformed stools in 24 - 48 hours, then remove it from the diet.*

Young bunnies should also be introduced to new foods gradually. However, once your pet is eating these foods, try to give at least three types daily. We find the addition of these fresh fibrous foods helps (along with hay) in the prevention of hairballs and other digestive upsets.

The following are all foods that you can try on your pet. The total amount of fresh food that can be given daily (once your pet has been gradually introduced to it as described above) is about 1 heaping cup, loosely packed, per 2.5 kg. (5 lbs.) of body weight - carrot tops, beet tops, dandelion greens and flowers (no pesticides, please), kale, collard greens, escarole, romaine lettuce (not leaf or head lettuce), parsley, clover, cabbage, broccoli (don't forget the leaves, carrot, green peppers, pea pods (the flat edible kind), Brussels sprouts, basil, peppermint leaves, raspberry leaves, raddichio, bok choy, and spinach.

e) Treat foods - In a small amount, you can give one of these "treat" foods daily. Give 1 level tablespoon per 2.5 kg. (5 lbs.) of body weight - strawberries, papaya, pineapple, apple, pear, melon, raspberries, peach, pear, or dried whole grain bread. Once can alternatively give 1 teaspoon per 2.5 kg (5 lbs.) of body weight of banana or dried fruit.

f) Vitamin additives - These are not considered to be necessary if the rabbit is getting pellets, hay and fresh foods in the diet. In fact, indiscriminate use of vitamins may lead to overdose and serious disease.

g) If you are unable to feed the diet as prescribed above, then Doc's Rabbit Enhancer should be added to the diet as a source of vitamins and hairball preventative.

h) Night droppings - It may seem strange to list this as a part of the diet, but these "special droppings" are an essential part of your pet's nutrition. During certain times of the day, usually in the evening, you may observe your pet licking the anal area and actually eating some of the droppings in the process. These "cecal pellets" as they are called are softer, greener and have a stronger odour than the normal hard, dry, round waste droppings. Your pet knows when these droppings are being produced and will eat them himself. These pellets come from the cecum, which is part of the digestive system where fermentation of food takes place, and they are rich in vitamins and nutrients that are needed by your rabbit to maintain good health. After eating these "vitamin pellets" he will re-digest the material and extract all the necessary nutrients. This habit may appear distasteful to us, but it is normal and important for your rabbit. Occasionally, a rabbit will drop these cecal pellets along with waste pellets instead of eating them. They will be soft, brighter green, come in clumps and are misshapen, but formed and have an odour. This is not considered diarrhea, and if it only occurs occasionally, it is not considered a disease problem.

Spaying and Neutering

Male rabbits generally make better pets if they are neutered since many of them will exhibit mounting and aggressive behaviour if left intact.

Many female rabbits also become aggressive and can develop reproductive problems. We recommend spaying to prevent these from happening.

Spaying and neutering can be done after 6 months of age. We use isoflurane gas anesthesia during these procedures. This is an extremely safe anaesthetic for rabbits.

General Care

Rabbits can be house trained to a litter pan using ordinary clay litter.

A rabbit's toenails should be clipped monthly.

Rabbits are generally very hardy and do not require veterinary attention often. However, early detection of a problem by watching for subtle changes in eating, activity, droppings etc. can prevent a small problem from developing into one that is much more serious.

Rabbits on other than the ideal diet should receive a hairball preventative preparation at least once weekly (typical hairball remedies cats are given to prevent hairball problems). Regular exercise is also encouraged.

Rabbit Food Pyramid

