

# Rabbit Food: A Healthy Diet

By Debby Widolf

Contrary to popular belief, rabbits eat more than just carrots and lettuce. Here are some suggestions about what to feed your bunnies to keep them happy and healthy.



## Hay

The bottom of a rabbit food pyramid would contain long-stemmed fiber, in the form of hay. This is the primary food source for the wild cousins and ancestors of the domestic rabbit. Hay should be provided around the clock, which is called “free feeding.” Rabbits under one year of age can be fed alfalfa hay, but as they get older they should be switched to grass hay – timothy, orchard grass or a blend of grasses – especially if they are also being fed alfalfa pellets. Buy the freshest hay possible and check for mold and dust, which could make your rabbit very ill.

## Vegetables

Rabbits count vegetables and herbs among their favorite foods. Most greens found in a supermarket are safe for rabbits, with a few limitations and exceptions. Feed carrots and vegetables in the cabbage family, such as broccoli, just once a week. Do not feed your rabbit potatoes, corn, beans or seeds and nuts. These foods are difficult for rabbits to digest and can cause serious digestive problems.

A general guideline for greens is to feed about a cup for every 3 to 4 pounds of the rabbit’s weight daily. Here are some yummy suggestions: carrot and radish tops; broccoli leaves; kale; endive; red, green and romaine lettuce; and dandelion greens. Rabbits love fresh herbs such as mint, cilantro, basil, parsley and dill. For the young rabbit, add one new vegetable at a time, and for all rabbits, watch for signs of loose stool or diarrhea.

## Pellets

Rabbits under one year of age can be free-fed alfalfa pellets. As they age, the amount of pellets to feed is one-quarter to one-third cup per 4 to 5 pounds of the rabbit’s weight. As rabbits reach their senior years, around age 7 to 8, the amount of pellets may need to be increased. Be sure to feed grass hay (rather than alfalfa) if you are feeding your rabbits alfalfa pellets. Pellets based on timothy hay are also available and are a good alternative, especially if your rabbit is gaining weight or getting too much protein in his diet. Look for pellets with a high fiber content – the higher the better. Do not buy the rabbit food with additives such as dried corn, nuts and seeds.

## Treats

Rabbits have a sweet tooth! Treats are at the top of the food pyramid and should be fed sparingly. Small pieces of fruit such as apples, strawberries, papaya, bananas and pineapple are welcome treats. Never give your rabbit chocolate or other sugar-coated treats. One small section of graham cracker or a teaspoon of Cheerios are OK, but these should be given only occasionally.

## Water

Give your rabbits fresh water every day. A rabbit will drink as much water each day as a 20-pound dog. Water bottles are acceptable, but your rabbit will be encouraged to drink more if the water is in a heavy ceramic bowl.

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