

What's on the menu?

As Rabbit Awareness Week approaches, arm yourself with the knowledge and products you need to share with your rabbit-owning customers to help them meet all of their pet's dietary needs.

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Rabbits are very sociable and entertaining pets. They come in all shapes and sizes – with many hundreds of varieties. Just like dogs and cats, they are regularly thought of as one of the family. With gentle handling, the right diet and good veterinary care, a rabbit can live between 8 to 12 years; some may live longer. With the right care, small pets make great companions for children and adults alike.

As the experts in pet nutrition, in this article Nicole Paley of the Pet Food Manufacturers' Association (PFMA), focuses on the role of diet in keeping rabbits fit, healthy and well. When it comes to rabbit nutrition, there are a few characteristics of the rabbit's physiology, which really affect their daily dietary needs; here is some must-know information to share with your rabbit-owning customers.

A body sized serving of hay – every day!

Rabbits, along with guinea pigs and chinchillas have teeth that grow continually and need to be worn down. High levels of fibre in the diet are vital for good dental health and digestive well-being, so a plentiful supply of good quality hay is needed. Another good source of fibre is grass (freshly pulled long grass).

Vital tips for health

- Good quality hay and grass should make up most of a rabbit's diet.
- Rabbits should be provided hay ad lib and should eat a portion the size of their own body every day.
- They can also have free access to fresh grass.

Fresh leafy greens

Leafy greens provide additional nutrients and moisture in a rabbit's diet as well as offering a variety of textures and tastes providing stimulation and enrichment.

A word about calcium

Rabbits absorb calcium at a level that directly relates to the level offered in their food – this means that even if they do not require any

more calcium, they continue to absorb it. As a result, both the calcium content and the calcium to phosphorus ratio is important. A commercially prepared rabbit food will have the right calcium/phosphorus balance a rabbit needs for healthy body function.

The role of commercial rabbit food

There are different types of commercially manufactured rabbit foods available and the feeding guidelines need to be followed. As with cats and dogs, there are life stage products available including foods for growing rabbits or older rabbits that are inactive or prone to weight gain.

Exercise portion control

- Whatever type of manufactured pet food is fed, the portion size should be measured and controlled in accordance with the on-pack guidelines.
- It is important that rabbits have a controlled portion of manufactured food every day to ensure they are receiving all the vitamins and minerals they need to stay healthy. However, this should not replace hay.

Occasional treats

Occasional treating with a piece of fruit or root vegetable is good for bonding but such treats are high in sugar. Rabbits have evolved to require a high fibre, low sugar diet, so any sugary foods should only be fed occasionally.

Weight management

Weight and wellbeing should be monitored and food portions adjusted accordingly. Like cats and dogs, it is easy to do regular weight and body size checks at home. The PFMA rabbit size-o-meter is a great place to start.

Poop patrol

Rabbits eat their own poop and they need to do this to stay healthy – the first pass of poop,

which they eat directly from source, is called a caecotroph and it is softer than the second pass of poop, which looks more like a round, dry fibrous ball. If rabbit owners start to notice uneaten caecotrophs, you should consider advising your owners to increase their rabbit's hay intake and reducing the other more concentrated foods in their diet. If there is any evidence that they stop eating or pooping, veterinary advice should be sought.

How important is water?

Drinking water is incredibly important and a constant supply of clean fresh water should always be available. Specially designed bottles with metal spouts are a good option but some animals prefer to drink from a heavy bowl. So why not try advising your customers to offer both and see which their pets prefer.

Encourage exercise

Like us humans, rabbits should have plenty of exercise to keep them happy and in good shape. They need regular access to a large run. Activity can be encouraged and enhanced by hiding food and treats in hay around the run. A large litter tray filled with compost can also encourage them to actively dig and display natural behaviour.

Do your bit during Rabbit Awareness Week

PFMA has a range of rabbit focused posters, which can be displayed in store or handed out to customers, including:

- Rabbit Size-O-Meters
- Importance of Hay Poster
- Feeding Small Mammals Factsheets
- Visit: pfma.org.uk/factsheets-and-tools

Developing the science on rabbit nutrition

The pet food industry has a long history of research in to the nutritional needs of pets and diet formulation. In 2013, the first Nutritional Guidelines for Rabbits were developed by a group of leading rabbit

experts, supported by PFMA. These guidelines have been adopted by the European Pet Food Federation (FEDIAF).

To ensure the knowledge continues to grow, PFMA will once again bring together leading rabbit experts on 21 June for a review and discussion of the latest rabbit nutrition science.



Dry fibrous balls are the second pass of poop.



Rabbits should be eating this first pass of poop.



Be sure owners are meeting all a rabbit's dietary needs.

