

# HEY!!

## Let's chat about the importance of HAY!!

The simple fact is hay equals good health for rabbits. The main source of food, fibre and sustenance for a rabbit is hay. Domestic rabbits' diets need to be made up of 85-90% of hay daily.

### Why is hay so important?

Hay is extremely vital for a rabbits' overall health. A rabbit's teeth constantly grow, even the roots of the teeth, so a good diet in good quality hay is very important. We will get into what makes a good quality hay a bit further down.

If a rabbit is not eating a large amount of hay daily, then their constantly growing teeth can cause them numerous problems. For example, a diet lacking in an insufficient amount of hay can cause:

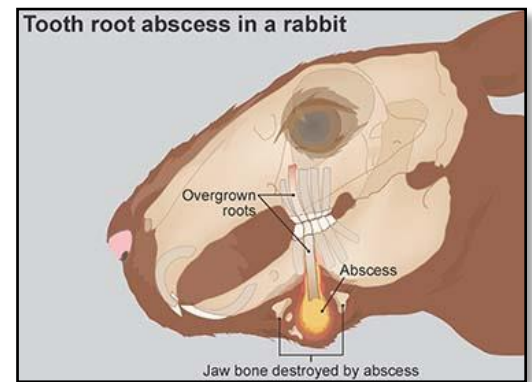


- **Stasis in the gut** (meaning the entire digestive system from the mouth to the bum) Which can be fatal and IS a rabbit emergency!
- Overgrown teeth or uneven teeth – such as spurs
- Pain in the mouth – cuts on the tongue, gums and insides of the mouth
- Ulcers in the mouth
- Issues with their jaw
- Problems with their eyes
- Problems with their nose
- Sneezing
- Malnourishment or poor nutrition
- Poor coat quality
- Issues with proper grooming
- Uneven wearing of the teeth



Rabbits have evolved so that the action of chewing hard strands of hay or grass wears the teeth down evenly. They pull the hay into their mouths from the front, but the chewing is actually from side to side. This helps to keep their teeth to wear in the proper way and helps them from developing spurs, or overgrowths on some teeth. If they are unable to eat hay or are reluctant and you have tried to offer them other types and tried the tricks, you should contact a rabbit savvy veterinarian to have their teeth checked.

When rabbits have spurs, they can become quite painful and they can cause other issues in the mouth like ulcers. Sometimes the spurs will need to be burred down by your vet. Generally, this must be done under anesthetic. This is the only way to remove the spurs. Rabbits teeth grow continuously, and if they are not at the proper length a lot of problems can occur.



If you notice any of the following signs, you should contact your veterinarian immediately.

- Lack of appetite
- Wet sides of the mouth or chin
- Runny eyes or runny eye
- Any swelling on the face
- Dirty bum (and they are a healthy weight)

Rabbits are also unable to vomit. Rabbits ingest loads of hair while grooming so this hay helps to also push the hair through the gut and out into the fecal pellets. If a rabbit is not ingesting enough hay and is shedding or is an avid groomer, this fur in the stomach can pose a very real health risk. So, hay is very vital and extremely important for many reasons.

## What makes a good quality hay?

There are a few things to be on the lookout for when you are purchasing hay. First it needs to be clean and dry and kept in a well-ventilated area where air can flow through.

It should either be all timothy hay, or a timothy blend. No straw and no alfalfa. Straw does not provide any nutritional value and can cause some issues in digestion and alfalfa has been known to cause kidney and bladder stones. If you are buying hay from a pet store, make sure it is a high quality like Oxbow or Kaytee. Sometimes they will get some mixed hay that are also good as well, just be sure to ensure that it does contain mostly timothy hay.

If you are purchasing hay from a farm or feed store you must make sure that it is not damp or wet, not musty or off smelling (the microbes that break down hay can and will also break down the lining of the rabbits' gut), not dusty or dirty. Hay from these farms is safe if you are getting clean and good quality hay.



Make sure to ask lots of questions and inspect and smell the hay before you take it home and feed it to your rabbit. If you do purchase a bale of hay you must keep it in a clean, dry and well-ventilated container up off the ground. Make sure the container has lots of holes drilled in it to allow for adequate air flow. If you ever smell a "sweet" smell to the hay when you are about to feed it, please dispose of the hay. It means it is going bad. Feeding that hay can be life threatening. Best to throw it away and get another bale asap.

## But....my rabbit won't really eat hay?



There are lots of ways to encourage your rabbit to eat hay. And the more hay they eat, the better! Sometimes offering a variety of hay is a good way to encourage them to consume more hay. By offering a mixture from time to time of some other hay blends like orchard grass or oat hay which are sweeter, can help to pique the interest in hay. Mixing it in with the regular hay also encourages them to forage and find just the right piece! Rabbits' are picky, and like us like to

have variety. Sometimes they want a hard piece, sometimes a softer or grass like piece. Try also not using a dish for their pellets or food. Take the food (we recommend no more than  $\frac{1}{4}$  of pellets a day) and divide it into two meals. When you give the morning hay, sprinkle the food into the hay! This makes them use their brain to find it and use some natural foraging behaviour that is not only good for them but helps to enrich a house rabbits' life.



In the warmer months, adding some grass from your lawn is also beneficial. It provides something different to forage on and had some vitamin D from being out in the sun! We can all use extra vitamin D. Red and white clover, dandelions and a few other grasses that commonly grow on lawns are also quite tasty to rabbits. Clover is quite sweet to them – so careful not to overfeed this one.

Their diet seems so boring – they must want more than just hay and grasses, right?

Nope! Rabbits are quite happy and content to eat what they know is good for them! There is no need to feed other things to try and “jazz” or “spice” up their diet. These little furry vegans are quite content to eat lots of hay and grasses.

In fact, because they have such sensitive stomachs and a low stomach PH – they truly need to have a strict diet to help keep the best overall health. It will prove to prolong your rabbits’ life as well. Avoid feeding them fruit, carrots or other sugary snacks. These have a very detrimental effect on the gut and can cause G.I. stasis which is a life-threatening condition that



comes on suddenly and requires immediate attention. This is an often-fatal condition that can kill your rabbit in 24 hours! A happy and healthy rabbit eats loads of hay daily, a small number of pellets (and some do not even require these), and a few handfuls of good greens a few times a week. Always be sure to provide some fresh water too.

Proper diet is key to having your rabbit live a long, healthy, happy and fulfilled life! When you want to give them a treat – add more hay! And remember they are very social animals. Spend lots of time with them – that is a treat for all involved!

Veterinary help and advice

When in doubt always consider making an appointment with your rabbit vet. They can perform a full physical exam, do regular x-rays or dental x-rays, bloodwork and a variety of other procedures. Remember rabbits are prey animals, at the bottom of the food chain. They are designed to hide their pain to shield them from predators. Your attention and love will be what ensures they live a long, healthy and happy life. And who does not want their rabbit around for as long as possible? <3