

## MY RABBIT WON'T EAT HAY

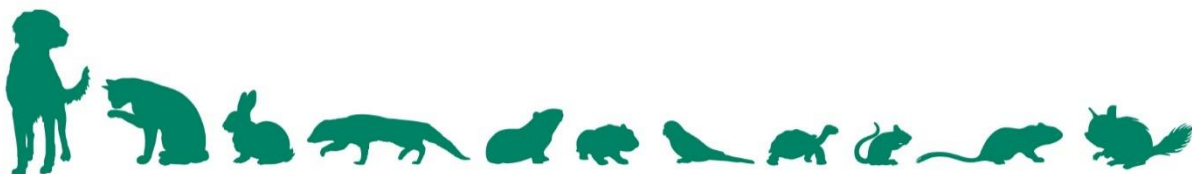
Hay and grass is extremely important for rabbits for three main reasons:

- **Dental health** – Rabbits teeth grow at an average rate of 3mm a week for their entire lives and they are designed to eat a constant supply of vegetation. The silica within hays and grasses play an essential role in wearing down these teeth, therefore the majority of your rabbit's diet (at least 80%) should be made up of hay or grass to reduce the risk of dental overgrowth.
- **Digestive health** – Rabbits have a large hindgut used to ferment grass material, to ensure that the gut continues to function normally, rabbits require a constant supply of fibre. Grasses and hays contain both digestible and indigestible fibre which promote normal gut movement. Lack of fibre and hays/grasses will lead to 'gut stasis' and increase the risk of other potentially serious conditions such as blockages in the stomach or intestines.
- **Behaviour** – Studies have shown a reduction in problematic behaviours such as aggression with cage mates, bar biting and chewing household items if rabbits are fed large quantities of grass and hay and a restricted amount of concentrated diets like pellets.

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

It is not uncommon for some rabbits to not to eat hay and there are a number of reasons for this.

- **Ill health** If your rabbit has a health issue eg dental disease which makes it painful to chew hay they may avoid it. It is important to have a thorough health check first to rule out such conditions before following the steps to improve hay intake.
- **Feeding too many pellets/muesli** – just like humans, rabbits will always prefer the higher calorific food stuffs to eat. Pelleted diets do not require the same chewing action as hay does and this puts your rabbit at risk of dental disease. Rabbits need a maximum of 20g of pellets per kilogram of body weight and even less for obese or neutered animals. Rabbits under six months of age can be fed larger quantities of pellets because they are growing - however, this should be tapered off as they approach six months of age. Many owners now choose not to feed pellets as they are not essential to their rabbit's diet.
- Muesli should never be fed to rabbits and other small mammals as it increases the risk of dental disease, causes abnormal gut function, vitamin and mineral imbalances and is even linked to some behavioural problems. The high sugar and carbohydrate content of muesli type foods also leads to obesity.



- **Too many treats and vegetables** – leading on from the previous point rabbits will simply choose to eat tastier foods rather than the essential hay needed. The average rabbits only needs one cup of leafy greens a day and items such as carrots and fruit which are high in sugars should not be fed.
- **Poor quality hay** – Some rabbits are fussy when it comes to eating some types of hay, most of the time this is due to the lower quality of hay. High quality hays are green and smell fresh when a packet is opened. If your hay smells stale or musty then this is likely a lower quality. Low quality hays can put your rabbits at risk of mites/lice and fungal infections as well as digestive problems.

### How can I get my rabbit to eat hay?

There are several ways to get your rabbit eating its proper diet:

- **Reduce pellets** – rabbits do not need pellets so it is safe to not feed them at all (unless your rabbit is under 6 months of age or a vet has specifically instructed you to feed more due to a health problem). If you still wish to feed them then they should get no more than 20g of pellets per kilo of body weight. Ideally they should be reserved for training treats or as part of environmental enrichment – not fed from a bowl. If you need to reduce the amount of pelleted food then do this slowly over the course of a week. This should encourage your rabbit to start eating hay. It is also important to monitor your rabbit's weight carefully during a dietary change to ensure that any weight loss is slow and controlled.
- **Different hay types** – some rabbits have a preference on the type of hay they like. There are many different varieties now available from meadow, timothy, rye, oat and orchard grasses. You may have to try different types to see which your rabbit prefers; this will be trial and error.
- **Making hay interesting** – rabbits are curious creatures who love to explore their environment, they also often love their greens. There are many ways to make hay interesting including – hiding/mixing in favourite foods such as herbs or pellets, present hay in a different way such as in toilet rolls or placing it in strategic places where your rabbit often sits e.g. above or in their litter tray.

**\*Please note that alfalfa hay should not be fed readily as this is high in calcium and can lead to kidney and bladder stones.\***

