

Rabbits and food: a special bond

Most health problems in rabbits have their origin in the diet

Rabbits have special teeth: they grow continuously. If the diet is not adjusted, the teeth will not wear properly and this has serious consequences. The teeth continue to grow in 2 directions: in the mouth and in the jawbones. The continued growth in the mouth causes **sharp tooth tips** that lead to wounds in the cheeks, tongue and lips. This is of course painful, causing the rabbit to become selective in eating or even stop eating, ultimately affecting digestion. Initially, this can be noticed in the form of **sticky droppings**: the droppings are no longer dry enough and stick to the anus in a plug. This is of course particularly attractive to flies, who like to lay their eggs in it. Eggs quickly turn into maggots that happily feed on the rabbit (**myiasis**). The digestive system can also come to a standstill. This is called **tympany** and is also a potentially fatal complication. In addition, the continued growth in the jaws causes **bone deformities**, **abscesses**, and **eye problems** due to the compression of the tear duct. Once these dental problems are in a more advanced stage, they are irreversible. At best, progress can be stabilized by regular dental care under anesthesia. Sometimes this even needs to be done monthly. Sometimes, if they survive the dangerous complications, they have to take pain medication for life. And yes, sometimes the situation has gotten so bad that euthanasia is the only fair solution for the rabbit.

An improper diet also leads to **obesity**. Being overweight means that the rabbit can no longer lick the nighttime droppings (caecotrophs) at the anus. The rabbit needs these nighttime droppings because it extracts essential nutrients from them. A lack of those nutrients leads, again, to **digestive problems**. Being overweight will also worsen **osteoarthritis**.

Finally, a maladjusted diet will also have a direct impact on the digestive system. A high-sugar diet causes an abnormal fermentation that is painful, causing the rabbit to stop eating, exacerbating the condition and leading to drumming.

TIP

Never clip a rabbit's incisors with nail clippers! This regularly causes fractures in the teeth below the gums, which causes irreparable damage and is particularly painful for the rabbit. Dental care is always work for a vet with expertise.

**TIP**

What can you do yourself?

- Weigh your rabbit weekly - if the weight goes down, something is wrong.
- Keep an eye on the droppings – if the droppings are shrinking, something is wrong.
- Look at eyes, nose, neck and front paws – if there is eye or nasal discharge, if an eye bulges out, if your rabbit salivates resulting in a wet chin or neck, or if the front paws are dirty on the inside, something wrong is going on.
- Listen to your rabbit – if it grinds its teeth something is wrong

Contact the vet in time!

The best prevention: an adapted diet

The good news is that all of these health problems, which interact and reinforce each other in complex ways, can be easily prevented by good dietary habits from an early age. Teeth wear properly due to sufficient cellulose (crude fiber) in the diet. A high content of cellulose ensures intestinal health. Its long structure ensures that the jaws grind well against each other, so that the teeth wear correctly.

The basic diet is grass and hay. Be careful with the young spring grass. Opt for **timothy hay** and avoid alfalfa hay.

Green food is also important. Give at least 3 leafy vegetables per day (1 cup per kg of body weight). Think of carrot tops, kale, broccoli leaves, romaine lettuce, rucola, lamb's lettuce, endive, clover, peppermint, dill, basil, ... and also wild plants such as plantain, dandelion leaves, wall, ... A maximum of one of these leafy vegetables may be rich in oxal (parsley, mustard plant, chard, beet leaves, the green of radishes, spinach). Be careful with other vegetables and give a maximum of one tablespoon per kg per day: Brussels sprouts, broccoli, zucchini, carrots, peppers, chicory, celery, snow peas.

Fruit is also allowed, but very limited: a maximum of 1 teaspoon per kg per day. Think of apple (without seed or stem), cherry (without seed), pear, peach, kiwi, tomato, melon, mango, papaya and berries. Avoid banana and grapes.

Commercial dry food is actually superfluous. If you still want to give this, choose good quality dry food, which makes up a maximum of 10% of the diet (1 tablespoon per kg per day). If you give more, the rabbit will prefer this, so that it will eat relatively less and therefore insufficient hay. The dry food must contain at least 18% crude fiber, and a maximum of 2.5% fat, 16% protein and 1% calcium.

Snacks such as nuts, chocolate, bread, peas, beans and grains are not allowed. So leave out those candy canes.



TIP

If your rabbit now mainly eats dry food, switch to hay before introducing the green food.



ISCAVETS
EEN PRAKTIJK MET EEN HART