

John Burns
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Small animal guide



Rabbits, Guinea Pigs & Chinchillas

Nutritional Care of Small Animals

Rabbits, guinea pigs and chinchillas share a common need for a high fibre diet based on grass and hay.

- Fresh water and clean fresh hay should always be available.
- New foods should be introduced gradually as a sudden change in diet can cause serious digestive problems.
- Fruit should be used in minimal amounts as occasional treats only.

Rabbits

Correct Diet

Ideally the diet of the pet rabbit should mimic that of the wild rabbit. Grass and hay must be the bulk of the diet. Hay should always be available and supplemented with vegetables, wild plants and herbs. Dry pelleted food and cereal mixes should form the smallest part of the diet and may be weaned out completely on advice from a vet if the rabbit is overweight or suffering from a health problem.

Teeth

The teeth of the pet rabbit grow continuously and dental disease is a common reason for veterinary treatment. Overgrown teeth are an extremely painful condition and some rabbits can even die as a result of dental problems. The teeth need to be constantly worn down by grinding on tough fibrous material such as grass and hay. Dry pelleted food and cereal mixes do not provide this grinding action.

Did you know?

Rabbits are social animals and get very lonely without company. A pair of neutered rabbits will be much happier than a single bunny.

Digestive System

Rabbits produce two types of droppings, one of which they eat! This is essential as it helps them to digest all the nutrients they need. If your rabbit is fed on a low fibre diet (i.e. too much dry pelleted food and fruit and not enough grass and hay) it can suffer from 'sticky bottom' where their droppings stick to their fur. This can attract flies which lay their eggs in the fur, this is called fly strike. Fly strike can kill rabbits and is more likely to happen in the summer, the correct diet can help prevent this condition.

Obesity

Obesity is a growing problem in rabbits and is often caused by a lack of exercise as many rabbits are kept in small hutches with no access to a run. However, diet is also an important factor. Many rabbits get little or no hay, too much pelleted food or rabbit mix (which does not contain enough fibre) and are fed on crackers, crisps and fruit all of which cause weight gain.

Guinea Pigs

Correct Diet

Wild guinea pigs eat a wide variety of vegetation and feed at dawn and dusk. They are native to grasslands in Peru. Their wild diet includes grass, leaves, stems and wild plants/herbs. To have a healthy pet guinea pig, this diet should be mimicked as closely as possible.

Pet guinea pigs develop dietary preferences early in life and it can sometimes be difficult to introduce new foods to adult guinea pigs. Any new foods should be introduced in small amounts.

The diet of a pet guinea pig should comprise of at least 70% high quality grass hay (e.g. oat, timothy, orchard,

Did you know?

Rabbits and guinea pigs should not usually be housed together. These two species have different dietary requirements and larger rabbits may injure the smaller guinea pig.



meadow) or fresh grass, a variety of fresh vegetables, wild plants and herbs and small amounts of dry commercial pellets formulated for guinea pigs. Fruit should be offered as a treat only.

Teeth

The teeth of a guinea pig grow continuously throughout life. Painful dental problems can often occur if fed a diet which does not promote gnawing (e.g. too much dry pelleted food or cereal mixes and not enough fibrous/abrasive material such as grass and hay). Other health conditions such as fur chewing and hair balls have also been linked to a lack of fibre in the diet.

Vitamin C

Guinea pigs must obtain their vitamin C from the diet; most other species can actually produce vitamin C in the body. Pelleted foods and cereal mixes formulated for guinea pigs contain added vitamin C. However, fresh green leafy vegetables also contain high levels of vitamin C; kale, parsley, spinach and broccoli and can be fed as part of a healthy diet.

Pelleted or mixed dry rabbit food is not suitable for guinea pigs (if they are not fed on green leafy vegetables) because it does not contain enough added vitamin C.



Chinchillas

Correct Diet

Wild chinchillas originate from the mountainous regions of South America where they live in burrows and rock crevices. Their natural diet is very high in fibre and consists of different grasses, leaves, stems, roots with a few seeds and some fruit. There is much debate over feeding of chinchillas. Many people believe that hay and high fibre dry pellets are sufficient and that feeding fresh vegetables cause bloat. However, if introduced carefully vegetables are beneficial for their teeth as well as the digestive system. Hay should be the bulk of the diet followed by dried or fresh vegetables and wild plants. Some owners even dry the vegetation themselves. The dry pellets should form a smaller part of the diet and they should be low in fat and high in fibre. The dry pellets are normally available in longer pieces than rabbit or guinea pig food. This is because the chinchilla likes to hold the food in their front paws.

Teeth

Chinchillas have teeth which grow continuously. Dry pelleted food for chinchillas will not wear the teeth down and they must have access to good quality hay and abrasive foods such as green leafy vegetables and wild plants at all times. When the chinchilla eats these high fibre foods the grinding motion of the teeth helps to keep them from growing too long. You can also provide wood from 'safe' trees such as willow and apple which they will chew.

Digestive system

Like rabbits, chinchillas practise coprophagy. This means they produce two types of droppings one of which they eat. Eating the softer droppings is an important (and normal) behaviour which ensures they get all of the nutrients they need.

Obesity

Fruit and seeds contain too much sugar and fat and can cause obesity if fed in large amounts. Fruit should be offered as an occasional treat only. New foods such as vegetables should be introduced to the diet in small amounts to begin with and one at a time.



Nutritional support



Remember you are not alone. John Burns' team of expert nutritional advisors are just a phone call away. Whether you need in depth advice on managing specific health problems or simply fine tuning feeding amounts Burns has the experience and knowledge to help.

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