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Basic Rabbit Care And Health Concerns

House rabbits are popular pets and proper diet, housing, and medical care can lead to years of enjoyment for people and rabbit alike. Rabbits have certain diet and physical needs that must be met to insure proper health.

Many people are surprised to learn that a rabbit's digestive system is most similar to a horse. Their feces differ little except in size. And the inside of a rabbit abdomen looks almost exactly like the inside of a horse abdomen. Both species are hind gut fermentors. That means they both have a very complex and sensitive digestion that involves a very large cecum (the human appendix is our version but is much smaller). The cecum is full of a balance of bacteria and enzymes that break down digestive material. This is extremely important because if something happens to this balance then severe health issues can occur that can quickly become deadly. For this reason diet is extremely important to rabbits.

A proper rabbit diet should consist of free access to as much grass hay as possible. Timothy hay is a very good choice. The hay should be the main part of the diet. We recommend that the hay be purchased from a store and not from a source that supplies livestock unless that source is organic with no possible pesticides or herbicides present. The hay is an excellent source of nutrition and fiber to help keep the intestinal activity balanced. The rabbit should also be fed a pellet diet of alfalfa or timothy hay pellets. The amount of pellets should be based on the size of the rabbit. The rabbit can also be offered some leafy greens such as parsley, kale, Romaine lettuce, etc. Some vegetables can also be offered in smaller quantities. Carrot, squash, pepper, sweet potato, etc. can be given. Fruits should be limited because the sugar can upset the intestinal balance. A slice of apple or strawberry occasionally won't generally cause any harm.

Following strict diet guidelines will keep the rabbits digestive system in the best possible condition. Rabbits also practice a dietary process call coprophagy. This means that they ingest their own feces at times. This should not cause concern. The purpose of ingesting the feces is to replenish the bacteria in the gut. The special feces they consume will be coated in a thick layer of mucous to prevent the rabbit's stomach acid from destroying the bacteria before it reaches the intestines.

A rabbit that is not eating is cause for immediate concern. If the rabbit hasn't eaten in 12 to 24 hours then an appointment should be made with a Veterinarian as soon as possible. The longer the rabbit goes without eating the higher the risk of the intestinal balance going astray and the rabbit potentially becoming toxic.

Housing is another important consideration with rabbits. Rabbits do not have foot pads like dogs and cats do. So placing them on a wire floored cage can cause problems eventually. It is recommended that the rabbit be housed in a wire cage with a solid bottom. Plastic or metal is usually the best material for a cage bottom because it can easily be cleaned. Rabbits can also be trained to use a litter box. Do not use cat litter in the box. Instead use wood chips such as pine or aspen. **Do not use cedar.** The oils in cedar can be irritating to the respiratory system. Rabbits also like a hide box if possible. The box should be big enough for the rabbit to get in and out of comfortably without scraping their sides. There really is no cage that is too big for a rabbit. They should have room to move without being cramped. Exercise outside the cage is always recommended as well. If the rabbit is taken outside to play then be sure to not place the rabbit in an area where the lawn has been sprayed with pesticides or herbicides.

It is also important to remember that rabbit urine is milky due to a high calcium content. This often startles people. The urine can also range in color from white to yellow to orange. This is normal for rabbits.

It is always recommended that a male rabbit be castrated and a female rabbit be spayed. This is usually recommended when the rabbit turns 6 months old but can be done a bit sooner. Males can become very aggressive if they are not castrated. And females have a high incidence of uterine cancer. Spaying eliminates this risk as well as helping calm the female.

Rabbits are also at risk of getting respiratory infections. Runny eyes and nose can be due to bacterial infections that can progress to pneumonia. Any rabbit with a purulent nasal or eye discharge needs to be seen by a Veterinarian. Rabbits also get abscesses. The material within the abscess is usually a very thick creamy material that can have a strong odor. Rabbit abscesses usually need to be lanced and drained by a Veterinarian and the rabbit placed on antibiotics. Rabbits can also have severe ear mites. Such ear problems can be critical and lead to infections that cause the rabbit to have pronounced balance problems.

Some rabbits have dental problems. They may have an alignment issue where the teeth to no abrade each other causing some teeth to overgrow. If this happens then the rabbit can starve due to a physical inability to eat. If this happens then a Veterinarian with special equipment can grind the involved teeth down to allow the rabbit to eat again. Catching this problem early is recommended before other problems develop.

Rabbits live an average of 5 to 7 years but we have seen very well cared for rabbits as old as 12 years before. Keeping the rabbit on a proper diet, keeping clean housing at all times, and spaying or castrating the rabbit can prevent a lot of future health problems.