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Switching to Hay

Introducing Hay

Many rabbits have simply never seen that long, dry stuff (also known as hay) and don't recognize it as food. For them always keep an abundant supply of hay in the litter box and if the rabbit seems disciplined not to sample on his own, a long piece of hay can be tapped on his nose. This tapping quickly gets annoying and causes the rabbit to bite at the hay to make it stop bothering him. This test helps determine if a rabbit is simply unaware that hay is food or if he is just being stubborn. Bunnies that haven't seen hay before are usually quick to figure out that the hay they bite off tastes good and will proceed to eat. Good habits should be reinforced by providing pellets only once a day for a limited time – a couple hours at most. If they don't finish their pellets in that time, remove them and leave them to their hay pile for the rest of the day.

Making the Switch

For rabbits used to "gourmet" pellets with all of the extra seeds, fruit, and nuts, keep a small quantity of higher-calorie, higher-protein pellets on hand and mix it in with Oxbow rabbit pellets to gradually switch the rabbit over to low-calorie, low-protein pellets. Some rabbits can be switched in a matter of days. Others will carefully eat the "good" pellets and leave all of "bland" pellets behind. For these rabbits, provide only the "bland" pellets (and lots of hay) for a couple of days, which usually gets them realizing that's all they're going to get, so they better start eating them.

Gaining Greens

Rabbit owners can be less stern about greens. When feeding high-quality Oxbow pellets, rabbits are getting a nutritionally complete diet. Greens supplement the diet with micronutrients, but more importantly with taste and texture variety. Because rabbits, like people, may experience adverse reactions, such as gas or soft stools, when trying new foods, only introduce one new food at a time. Romaine lettuce, parsley, and cilantro are good options. When first introducing an item, offer one herb stalk or one lettuce leaf. Assuming there are no adverse reactions, the serving can be increased over the next two to four days. A second new food can then be added using the process. If a rabbit doesn't eat the food right away, try placing it in the food dish and walking away. Many rabbits are cautious about new foods and need time to investigate and think it over before tasting it. Others will wait until they are alone before sampling the food.

Say No to that Cute Twitchy Nose!

This won't be easy. Rabbits are very good about giving a pathetic yet accusing looks that lead you to believe they are about to starve to death. Remember this: owners that stick to a healthier diet will likely enjoy having a furry companion in their lives longer. Just like with people, rabbits that eat a well-balanced diet are more likely to live longer, healthier lives.

By: Minnesota Companion Rabbit Society (MCRS)