



# Hay and Pellets

## What do you feed a bunny?

Most people think rabbit pellets and a carrot now and then are the only food a bunny needs.

But guess what the most important part of your bunny's diet is... Hay! (We cover pellets later in this section too!)

Hay is important for rabbits for many reasons. When a bunny munches a nice green pile of hay, she:

- Wears down her teeth that are constantly growing
- Gets lots of great fiber to keep things moving through the digestive tract
- Keeps herself busy rearranging it and searching for the best tasting pieces
- Learns and keeps good litterbox habits

A rabbit's digestive system is one of balance. She needs the right nutrients moving through to supply her body with energy, growth, and healing ability, and quality hay provides these nutrients. Hay mimics what a wild bunny eats—grasses she finds growing all around her. And like cats, bunnies groom themselves by licking their fur. But while cats can spit up a hairball, a bunny can't! Her system is one-way, so having bulky fiber pieces from hay keeps things moving right on through. A serious medical problem for a bunny is a blockage in her digestive system, whether from fur, munched carpet fibers, or just a dehydrated food mass. The surest way to prevent one of these health scares is to provide unlimited grass hay to your rabbit to keep things moving!

Chewing motions are different for different foods—pellets, hay, vegetables. Some use side-to-side motions and some use up-and-down. When you provide hay in bunny's diet along with pellets and veggies, you maximize how well her teeth get used to help keep them healthy and trimmed evenly.

One of the best places to put a big pile of hay—and we're talking a pile the size of your rabbit!—is in the end of the litterbox. Bunny likes sitting in a cozy box, especially one with tasty hay at the end! She can munch from the pile while doing her litterbox business at the other end. This is great training and keeps that cage clean! Hay is also entertaining for a rabbit—she will rearrange it, dig in it, and throw it around to find the best taste or to have it feel just the way she wants it for a nap. A bunny who isn't bored doesn't get in as much trouble chewing on your



house! Another hay toy: stuff it in an empty toilet paper tube. Most bunnies think it tastes even better that way and it makes a great toss toy, too!

## Where do you find quality hay?

An adult bunny needs a quality grass hay always available. Grass hays include timothy, orchard grass, bermuda grass, and others. You can find grass hays in pet stores, from horse farms or feed stores, at vet offices who specialize in bunnies, or online from pet hay suppliers. The trick is to find a good hay. Look for a green, fragrant hay. Most bunnies like soft kinds best, but having a mix of stalks and soft parts is great for providing the different kinds of bulk fiber that are good for teeth and digestive systems. Don't buy hay that is all brown, dusty, has visible mold, or smells moldy. Dusty/moldy hay is dangerous for a bunny!

The most important part of a good hay is one that your bunny will eat. If you find a huge bale of timothy for \$4 and bunny loves it, great! But if bunny won't eat it, it just won't do her any good. Picky bunnies often love Oxbow Hay brand [www.oxbowanimalhealth.com](http://www.oxbowanimalhealth.com) and Small Pet Select brand. Oxbow hay can be found in some pet and feed stores and online pet suppliers. If you can't find it locally, ask your pet supply store to order it for you or to start carrying it! Small Pet Select hay can be found at [www.smallpetselect.com](http://www.smallpetselect.com).

## What about alfalfa hay?

Alfalfa hay is high in protein and minerals like calcium, which can be too rich for your bunny to eat all the time, causing health problems like obesity and bladder stones. Alfalfa is great for a baby or growing bunny (up to 1 year old and begin decreasing amount at 7 months while introducing grass hays), but an adult bunny usually needs a grass hay like timothy, or a mixed grass hay that is mostly timothy but might have some alfalfa in it. Most bunnies do like the taste of alfalfa better, so you might tempt a picky bunny with it first and then switch him to timothy by mixing the hays together for a while.

## Okay, okay, my bunny needs lots of hay!

### But what about pellets?

Yes, pellets are part of a bunny diet too. It's possible to feed a non-pelleted diet, but this requires a careful balance of nutrient sources from many types of veggies and hay. Most rabbit owners prefer to provide a pelleted food in addition to the hay and vegetables their bunny eats.



Pellets are made from hay. They are also balanced with nutrients your bunny needs that might not be in a particular bale of hay depending on where it was grown or how the weather was that season. It's important to pick a quality pellet. Look for one that is plain—no colored pieces, crunchy puffs, seeds or nuts in it. Look for higher fiber (>18%) and lower protein (<14%) with calcium <0.9% and fat <2%. Ask your bunny vet for a recommendation. And most importantly, don't feed too much!

You will need to ration the pellets for most adult bunnies. If you don't, they tend to overeat and get fat, and when they are full from pellets, they don't eat enough hay! A common portion is  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup daily for a 5 to 7 pound adult rabbit. Bunnies who need to lose weight will need more restricted pellets and more exercise. Baby or growing bunnies (up to 6 months), or sick bunnies needing to gain weight, should be served unlimited pellets along with their piles of hay and their veggies. Baby and growing bunnies need to be fed alfalfa-based pellets.

For more information on the quantities to feed at various ages see <http://rabbit.org/faq-diet/> and for more information on veggies to feed, check out the greens and vegetables section!

View this resource online

<http://www.indianahrs.org/rabbit-care/food-pellets-hay.aspx>

