

# **RVC Exotics Service**

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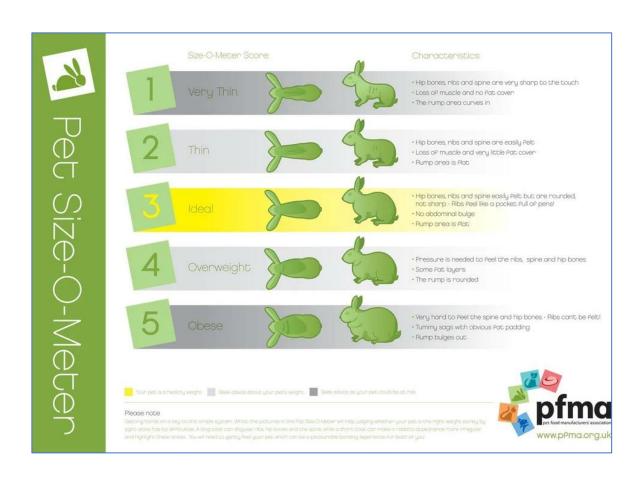
# **RABBIT DIET AND WEIGHT LOSS**

#### What do rabbits eat?

In the wild, rabbits survive on very low energy foods such as grasses and weeds. Their digestive systems have evolved to eat this low nutrient food, and their gut can extract energy very well from this. Rabbits even perform caecotrophy (eat their own poo) to extract even more energy and vitamins from their food source. Rabbits will tend toward eating the higher energy food stuffs over the healthier alternatives (such as always eating pelleted food over hay). In the wild, they need to eat high calorie foods quickly as they are vulnerable to predators. This is called 'selective feeding' of the richer foods first. In captivity, this can lead to obesity if too many commercial foods or treats are given.

### How can I tell my rabbit is overweight?

Rabbits are evolutionarily adapted for speed. Their bones are light and their bodies are evolved for explosive running from predators. Therefore, they should not have much body fat on them. We define how over or underweight a rabbit is by body condition scoring (BCS) out of a score of one to five. 1/5 being emaciated and 5/5 being morbidly obese. 3/5 is the ideal weight. It is not possible to tell how over or underweight an animal is just based on their weight, as all animals (just like humans) have different body shapes and sizes. This can be determined during an examination by your vet or vet nurse, who will be able to advise on the condition of your pet.



## Why is it so bad that my rabbit is overweight?

Just like in humans and other animals, being overweight puts rabbits at a higher risk of developing diseases such as:

- heart disease
- liver disease
- cancer
- pododermatitis (sore hocks)
- arthritis
- broken bones
- urinary sludge
- bladder infections

If rabbits are also not eating enough hay in their diet and eat high levels of concentrates or fresh foods this can result in:

- dental disease
- dysbiosis (imbalance of gut bacteria leading to diarrhoea)
- uneaten caecotrophs
- gastrointestinal blockages
- gut stasis
- urine scalding and faecal accumulation around the bottom this can easily lead to **flystrike.**

It's therefore no surprise that being overweight will drastically shorten your pet's life, so all the more reason to keep them in good shape so you can enjoy as much time together as you can.



### How can I get my rabbit to lose weight?

It is very important not to make rapid changes to your rabbit's diet as this can cause gastrointestinal upset, any change should be made slowly over the course of weeks. The ideal rabbit diet should be the following:

- As much fresh, good quality grass and hay as possible available at all times.
- A cup of green leafy vegetables ONCE a day (this can be split up over the day if desired)
- Pellets are not essential for rabbits but if fed then a maximum of 20g of pellets a day placed into a puzzle feeder or exercise ball to encourage them to exercise and forage. In some rabbits these should be cut out completely until the desired weight is achieved.
- Treats can be small amounts of dried or fresh herbs and only fed once or twice a week



#### What should I never feed?

- Fruits, carrots and sweet corns overload the gut with sugars and starch and can eventually lead to severe health issues
- Muesli based foods are unbalanced and unhealthy and promote selective feeding and dental disease.
- seed and nuts sticks/treats are not appropriate
- human foods such as biscuits, bread and nuts must be completely avoided.



#### **Exercise**

Rabbits should be encouraged to exercise by giving them access to a large, predator proof space. They should have food hidden around this environment rather than placed in a bowl or the same place each day to encourage foraging activity. Go online to look up ideas for environmental enrichment for rabbits to encourage play and exercise.

