

## 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 don't know where their next meal is coming from, so this is beneficial. In captivity, this has no benefit and leads to obesity.

### 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.


Pet Size-O-Meter

**Size-O-Meter Score:**

| Score | Condition  | Characteristics:  |
|-------|------------|---|
| 1     | Very Thin  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hip bones, ribs and spine are very sharp to the touch</li> <li>Loss of muscle and no fat cover</li> <li>The rump area curves in</li> </ul>                                 |
| 2     | Thin       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hip bones, ribs and spine are easily felt</li> <li>Loss of muscle and very little fat cover</li> <li>Rump area is flat</li> </ul>  |
| 3     | Ideal      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hip bones, ribs and spine easily felt but are rounded, not sharp - Ribs feel like a pocket full of pens!</li> <li>No abdominal bulge</li> <li>Rump area is flat</li> </ul> |
| 4     | Overweight | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pressure is needed to feel the ribs, spine and hip bones</li> <li>Some fat layers</li> <li>The rump is rounded</li> </ul>  |
| 5     | Obese      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Very hard to feel the spine and hip bones - Ribs can't be felt!</li> <li>Tummy sags with obvious fat padding</li> <li>Rump bulges out</li> </ul>                           |

1 Your pet is a healthy weight.
 2 Seek advice about your pet's weight.
 3 Seek advice as your pet could be at risk.

**Please note**  
Getting hands on is key to this simple system. Whilst the pictures in the Pet Size-O-Meter will help judging whether your pet is the right weight purely by sight alone has its difficulties. A long coat can disguise ribs, hip bones and the spine, while a short coat can make a rabbit's appearance more irregular and highlight these areas. You will need to gently feel your pet, which can be a pleasurable bonding experience for both of you!



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## 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.



Overweight rabbits



## 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 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.
- 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.

