

The Fat Rabbit

It sounds strange but it is true; obese rabbits (pure-bred and crossbred) do exist. Unfortunately, owners are often unaware their poor bunny could be burdened with excessive weight, possibly with serious consequences. Apart from lethargy, fat rabbits are susceptible to heart, liver and kidney disease, chronic diarrhoea, splayed legs, heat stress in hot weather, arthritis in their later years and breeding and birthing difficulties.

It is important not to be complacent or blasé about fat rabbits for in reality they are most likely to be silently suffering. It is their birthright to enjoy a natural state of health and vitality. Furthermore, animal protection societies regard the practice of allowing our pets to become severely obese as inhumane and in some cases, prosecute the owners.

Case story

I have seen far too many fat rabbits in my time. I will never forget giving a routine health check on a monster sized Lop before taking him in as a boarder. As well as being concerned about his overall size, I was shocked to see maggots squirming around his rump. The owners were horrified, not realising he was in such a sorry state. As he did not have a wound or diarrhoea, but was quite smelly, I concluded the infestation occurred because he could not physically reach around to clean himself. Fortunately, after a trip to the vet and proper treatment, he survived to go on a much-needed diet.

Causes of weight gain

Pellets

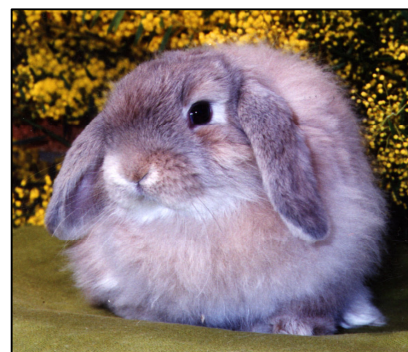
These are a concentrated product originally produced to quickly fatten up meat rabbits. Pellets are a labour saving convenience as well as a good source of protein but they should not be eaten in excess or ad-lib (always available) unless of course the ultimate plan is to have rabbit stew! A pet rabbit need only be allowed to eat limited portions – for example a daily ration of a quarter to one cup, depending on the size of the rabbit. It is also worth regularly assessing the amount given to make sure it is appropriate.

De-sexing

Similar to cats and dogs, de-sexing rabbits seems to be a factor in weight gain. Pet owners need to be aware of this side effect and monitor weight change over a period of time, adjusting pellet quantities accordingly.

Lack of exercise

Sitting in a hutch all day long is boring and does not provide enough activity to keep fit. Rabbits generally try to keep themselves occupied by nibbling every bit of food available, and if edible food is lacking they may also gnaw at other things such as wood, plastic, carpet and so on. They would fare better to snack on healthy hay, grass or autumn leaves. Try to provide a large hutch or an exercise run to help burn off extra calories. As well as the benefit of physical exercise, it's a pleasure to watch bunnies happily racing around. Once their weight is back to normal, they feel energised and no doubt thoroughly enjoy kicking up their heels or performing happy bunny jigs!



I'm not fat; I'm just a fur ball!

Do's and don'ts

Do not increase a doe's ration of pellets during pregnancy; a good maintenance diet with lots of variety should keep her in top condition. Only increase the amount of pellets if the doe needs to put on weight or when kittens are venturing out of the nest (see 'Introducing solids', page 180).

Corn kernels, rolled oats and all types of seeds are fattening, so only add small amounts to the feed bowl and preferably only during winter months.

Do not starve a bunny to effect a quick weight reduction. Gaining weight is a gradual process, as should losing weight be. Simply cut back the amount of pellets to a consistent quantity for their breed size. Or instead of daily rations of pellets you can feed generous handfuls of hay and fresh vegetation one day a week. Consider more 'non-pellet' days if your rabbit is already accustomed to lots of vegetation.

Many bunnies heartily enjoy their food and often act as if they are really hungry – do not be fooled by these con artists! If you simply cannot control yourself under the insistence of those pathetic, imploring eyes, it is okay to supplement the normal diet with non-fattening vegetation.

Whenever in doubt check your bunny's weight!

Scales

There are guidelines available for recognised rabbit breeds in all show standard handbooks that outline their recommended weight. Then it is quick and easy to find out his actual weight by placing him on kitchen scales. If the bunny is too large or heavy for kitchen scales, first weigh yourself on bathroom scales then again with the rabbit in your arms and compare the difference. If you have a rabbit that is not a recognised breed, then guidelines are not so readily available and you may have to rely on other means of determining his appropriate weight.

Hands on

Pop bunny on a piece of carpet (prevents slipping) and run the palm of your hand over the length of his backbone. If the spine feels prominent, he needs an immediate increase in protein, via pellets. If his pellet intake seems adequate, yet he has a hearty appetite and is still relatively skinny you should investigate further for an explanation. For instance, he may be malnourished because of a fur ball or because of teeth problems. If on the other hand your rabbit has a heavy, fat stomach, an extra large dewlap (storage of fat under the chin or chest), loose, hanging flab on hips and shoulders, immediately decrease his daily ration of pellets.

Ask the expert

Ask a breeder, rabbit judge or your veterinarian to check the condition of your rabbit. By finding out if your bunny is normal, fat or skinny from someone with knowledge and experience, you will be able to confidently assess any need to address weight changes.

*An excerpt taken from
'The Wonderful World of Pet Rabbits'
Available from the author Christine Carter
Phone (02) 6231 5862
E-mail: ccarter@netspeed.com.au
Website: <http://www.petrabbitworld.com/>*

