

What is the BCS?

The use of body weight as unique measurement tool is not one sufficient tool to formulate one precise diagnosis of overweight and / or obesity; it will therefore be necessary to associate this with a body condition score (BCS), which allows to estimate in percentage the fat content of an animal in relation to its skeletal structure. Rabbits with BCS 10-15% higher compared to the weight, they will be overweight, while animals with one percentage over 15% will be obese.

This weight gain, if not correctly managed, can affect our health rabbit, being able to determine for example a reduction, even considerable, of the life expectation. In addition there will be one increased susceptibility to onset of pathologies that can affect the various organs (eg the liver) and apparatus (apparatus cardio-circulatory, app. urinary).

Rabbit Body Condition Score: (www.pfma.org.uk)

Very Thin

More than 20% below ideal body weight



Thin

Between 10-20% below ideal body weight



Ideal



Overweight

10-15% above ideal body weight



Obese

More than 15% above ideal body weight



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Dwarf rabbit:

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The importance of a varied and balanced diet:

The dwarf rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) is an extremely delicate animal and should never be neglected. Proper care, particularly regarding food, is essential for its wellbeing and the prevention of diseases. It is therefore important that from a baby it receives an appropriate diet, which can be set up by a specialist vet; if you already have a rabbit that is not following a correct diet, a vet may help with this by gradually modifying it.

Rabbits are strict herbivores and as such will consume mainly grass and hay, with the addition of vegetables and fruit. At home they should therefore be offered a diet that reflects the natural one as much as possible, with foods rich in fibres and mineral substances, which are essential for proper functioning of the gastro-enteric apparatus and constant tooth wear (page 3), whilst not being excessively high in calories.

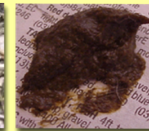
Cecotrophic assumption is essential for the intake of nutrients that are released from the cecal microflora and not absorbed in the next digestive tracts.



Normal faeces



Cecotroph



Diarrhoea



Grass and hay:

These must always be available and can be purchased in specialised shops or, with some precaution, fresh crops. Particular characteristics of good quality hay is the colour (which must be green), the smell (which should suggest the absence of mould) and composition (should come from a multi-plant lawn). Dandelion, borage, hibiscus, alfalfa and clover are some plants that could be offered.

Particular attention should be paid to plants that can often be found in gardens and at home and that are in fact toxic for rabbits, such as oleander, poinsettia, ferns. Wild plants that the rabbit should be kept away from include oak, poppies, potato and horse chestnut.

Pellets:

Shops sell special pellets for rabbits: when buying, pay attention to their composition, in particular the fibre content (which must not be less than 18%) and the absence of cereals and coccidiostats.

However, pellets should not be the basis of the diet: if anything, they can be used as a bonus, administered in small quantities in order to avoid excessive weight gain (further details on page 4) and incorrect tooth wearing.



Vegetables:

Very often if there is no garden available and therefore no possibility of providing fresh grass to the rabbit you can use vegetables. Seasonal ones are preferred. They must be fresh (not cold from the fridge!), washed and dried.

The recommended daily dose is around 150 / 200g per kilo of animal weight. However, they must not replace the hay as they have a lower fibre content.

Every day fibre-rich vegetables should be provided, such as celery and fennel. By alternating them during the week, you can choose from, for example, peppers, red radicchio, artichokes, belgian salad, carrots (an excess however could lead to overweight and then obesity: page. 4); less frequently rocket, cabbage, broccoli, spinach (as rich in calcium oxalates and therefore possibly contributing to the formation of urinary tract stones).

And now let's move on to fruit!

Pineapples, oranges, watermelon, bananas, cherries, strawberries, grapes, tangerines, apples, melon, peaches and pears can all be offered, making sure to take out the seeds and stones, alternating them twice a week (unless otherwise advised by your veterinarian) and being careful with the amount (as rich in sugars and therefore much appreciated by the rabbit, but dangerous for weight gain) and optimally fruit that is in season.



Foods not to be administered and dangerous !!!

Reiterating the concept that rabbits are herbivores, the following is dangerous for them: biscuits, cakes, bread, pasta, chips, dog and cat food, garlic and onion (which alter the intestinal flora and the immune system), aubergines, potatoes (both the tuber and the plant) and the tomato plant. Specific snacks and seed mixtures for rabbits are also included as they contain a lot of food fats, are poor in fibre and do not guarantee proper and correct teeth wearing.

Rabbit dental diseases:



In these animals food plays a fundamental role, not only for correct functioning of the gastro-enteric apparatus, but also for wearing down teeth, as they are constantly growing. Proper food management is therefore important for the prevention of problems, particularly dental issues, called malocclusion, which is when there is excessive and irregular tooth growth that could lead to much more serious problems that may injure the cheeks and tongue, as well as causing severe pain to the animal, meaning it stops eating, suffers physical decay and even death.

A diet should therefore be administered that reflects the natural diet as much as possible.

Clinical signs: - excessive salivation (moist and cheilitic dermatitis)

- tear flow (fig. 1)
- anorexia and weight loss
- hair loss due to reduced grooming
- incorrect chewing
- change in eating habits and food preferences



If you already have a rabbit that does not have a proper diet, a vet can always help you to correct it by modifying it gradually. If this is not enough and "structural" modifications are already present surgical correction of the teeth length would be required, which requires anaesthetising the rabbit.

Never use nippers or nail clippers as this causes pain to the animal and irreparable damage to the teeth!



fig.1:

This surgical intervention must however be followed by correction of the food supply to make sure it is effective. If the problem recurs and surgery is not enough, extracting the problematic teeth may be considered.