

TACKLING RABBIT OBESITY

Obesity is the most prevalent form of malnutrition in pets presented to veterinary practices. Obesity increases the risks of development or progression of many diseases, with long-term studies showing that obesity shortens life expectancy.

DISORDERS FOR WHICH OBESITY IS A RISK FACTOR:






- JOINT STRESS AND AGGREGATION OF OSTEOARTHRITIS
- HEPATIC LIPIDOSIS (FAT DEPOSITED BY THE LIVER)
- DECREASED STAMINA AND EXERCISE TOLERANCE
- CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE AND ATHEROSCLEROSIS
- DECREASED GROOMING AND DEVELOPMENT OF MATTING
- DECREASED ABILITY TO CONSUME CAECOTROPHS AND THEREFORE POOR NUTRITION

DEVELOPMENT OF OBESITY:

Weight gain occurs when rabbits have a 'positive energy balance' for an extended period of time, meaning they are taking in more calories than they are using. This excess energy is stored as fat. In most instances the body is able to regulate energy intake so it matches energy use, maintain the body condition around its 'set point'. However certain factors can affect this set point and predispose your rabbit to gain weight. Neutered rabbits are more likely to gain weight as their metabolic rate decreases and rabbits therefore require less food than intact rabbits to maintain body condition. Activity can contribute markedly to the energy requirements of an individual, so rabbits with more space and ability to roam and forage will be less likely to gain weight.

TREATMENT OF OBESITY:

A gradual steady decrease in bodyweight is ideal. It may take several months for your rabbit to reach its ideal Body Condition Score (BCS). We advise regular weight checks and monitoring of your rabbit's BCS to ensure the weight loss is progressive and on track.

Rabbit Size-O-Meter	
Size-O-Meter Score:	Characteristics:
1 Very Thin More than 20% below ideal body weight	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hip bones, ribs and spine are very sharp to the touch • Loss of muscle and no fat cover • The rump area curves in
2 Thin Between 10-20% below ideal body weight	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hip bones, ribs and spine are easily felt • Lack of muscle and very little fat cover • Rump area is flat
3 Ideal	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hip bones, ribs and spine easily felt but are rounded, not sharp - Ribs feel like a pocket full of pebbles • No abdominal bulge • Rump area is flat
4 Overweight 10-15% above ideal body weight	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pressure is needed to feel the ribs, spine and hip bones • Some fat layers • The rump is rounded
5 Obese More than 15% above ideal body weight	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very hard to feel the spine and hip bones - Ribs can't be felt • Some fat layers • Tummy sags with obvious fat padding • Rump bulges out

Rabbits are herbivores and the bulk of their diet should be made up of good quality hay or fresh grass. This should make up approximately 80-90% of your rabbit's diet. Leafy greens are recommended as around 7-10% of the diet. Avoid

fruits, as they are high in sugars. Likewise avoid carrots which should only be given as treats no more than once or twice a week. Instead try feeding the leafy growths from the top of carrots. No more than 5% of the diet should include concentrate feed and avoid pellet mixes which result in selective feeding. A maximum of 25g/kg/day should be given

EXERCISE:

Getting your rabbit moving more will greatly increase their chances of successful weight loss and can be a great way of providing great stimulation. Here are some of our top tips to keep your rabbit moving:

OUR TOP TIPS TO KEEP YOUR RABBIT MOVING:

- USE WILLOW BALLS AND OTHER TOY FEEDERS SCATTERED AROUND ENCLOSURE TO ENCOURAGE PLAY
- REMEMBER TO SWITCH YOUR TOYS AROUND ON A REGULAR BASIS TO KEEP THEM INTERESTED
- USE TUNNELS AND HIDES TO ENCOURAGE EXPLORING - REMEMBER RABBITS ARE PREY SPECIES AND IF THERE ARE NO HIDES OR PLACES TO ESCAPE TO THEY MAY NOT EXERCISE AS MUCH
- RABBITS LOVE TO DIG - IF INDOORS USE A LARGE LITTER TRAY TO ENCOURAGE THIS BEHAVIOUR
- USE PLATFORMS SO YOUR RABBIT CAN AND STRETCH OR JUMP UP. JUST REMEMBER TO MAKE SURE IT IS SECURE

Talk to a veterinary surgeon or nurse at the practice today to discuss in more detail how to tackle rabbit obesity. We are able to help check your rabbit's body condition score and weight on a regular basis to help reach and maintain their ideal weight.