

Hay, Hay, Hay

Hay is the most critical element of a healthy bunny diet. It is the best source of fiber and thus the most important element in keeping your bunny's GI tract moving. Hay should be available to your rabbit at all times. Because rabbits often munch while in their litter-box, many of us put a handful of hay in the litter-box to encourage both use of the box and eating of hay.



Rabbits under one year can be fed alfalfa hay. When your rabbit is roughly a year old, you should change to Timothy Hay. Brome, oat, orchard grass, and other **grass** hays may be provided for variety. Alfalfa hay should be considered a “treat” for rabbits over one year old because it causes weight gain and is higher in calcium. For geriatric rabbits, overweight rabbits, or rabbits with renal disease, alfalfa should be avoided altogether.

When shopping for hay, avoid the packages sold in pet stores. These usually look brown because they are not fresh and therefore do not appeal to your rabbit. If there are rural areas near you, you may be able to buy hay from a farmer (especially one with horses) or a local feed store. Many rabbit caretakers order from companies such as Busy Bunny, Oxbow, or American Pet Diner. These companies deliver to your door and have hay available in a variety of quantities. Their hay is fresh, green, and has a wonderful smell.

You can usually request first- or second-cutting hay. If possible, start with a small amount of each to see how your rabbit reacts. First cutting has a higher stem-to-leaf ratio and is coarser. Many people feel first cutting is more fibrous and, therefore, is better for your bunny — **if** he will eat it. Second cutting is leafier with finer stems and thus has a lower stem to leaf ratio. Many bunnies who turn their nose up at first cutting hay **love** second cutting. Buy what your bunny likes best!

Hay will keep for several months as long as it is kept dry. If you notice mold in your hay, discard it immediately regardless of how old it is. Mold contains toxins that can kill your rabbit.

Many caretakers resist providing hay for their rabbit because it is “messy” or because of family allergies. If someone in your home has allergies, put the hay only in your bunny's litter-box or cage and don't have the litter-box/cage in that person's bedroom. Have a household member who is not allergic handle the hay. Unless allergies are severe, this approach should keep allergies manageable. **Remember, there is no substitute for hay!**