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Proper diet is important when raising rabbits

Q: My grandson just adopted a pet rabbit. He has been searching the Internet for information, and he is confused about what he should be feeding the rabbit. Also, he does not think the rabbit needs vaccines. Is this true?

A: Adopting a new pet is very exciting. Along with this excitement usually come feelings of concern about how to properly take care of the pet so that it stays healthy.

We all face an unprecedented access to information since the development of the Internet. Recognizing what information is true versus false is challenging with potential dangerous effects for your pet. Your grandson is correct that we do not vaccinate pet rabbits. My best advice is to make your first step contacting your veterinarian to schedule an examination for your rabbit, including a fecal parasite test.

The fact that rabbits originated as a prey animal makes your observations of your rabbit's daily activity and appetite especially important. A prey animal survives by hiding any sign of weakness.

However, this characteristic is detrimental to pet rabbits because many early signs of illness are hidden and may be easily missed, allowing the illness to advance.

It is very important to note any changes in your rabbit's body or behavior and to be proactive so that illness can be treated early when the likelihood of success is greater.

The most common illnesses in pet rabbits involve diet and living conditions. Food choices represent the most conflicting topic that you may read about in the lay press. Most confusion surrounds pelleted diets because they are readily available, and they offer convenience that appeals to people.

Consider that pellets made from alfalfa were developed long ago as a controlled diet for rabbits used in laboratory studies. Also, consider that grains like oatmeal are often fed to rabbits intended for meat production. Neither laboratory rabbits nor meat rabbits are intended to live in your home for the complete duration of their life span.

I will offer you some specifics for feeding and caring for your new pet rabbit and, also, a reliable reference for your grandson to study using the Internet.

Feed pet rabbits for a long healthy life by making sure grass hay and clean water are available 24 hours a day. Rabbits need to chew on the stems of grass hay to wear down their continually growing teeth and to help regulate normal bacterial flora and motility in their GI tracts; pelleted diets do not offer these important benefits.

Timothy hay is preferred. Legume hay such as alfalfa should be avoided unless the rabbit is less than 6 months old or pregnant.

Feeding alfalfa hay or alfalfa pellets can lead to sludgy urine due to its high mineral content. Pellets, if given at all, should be limited to 1/8 cup per 5 to 7 pounds body weight per day. The preferred pellets to use are made from timothy hay. Treats such as carrots, sweet potatoes, fruits (apples), and sweet peppers should be limited to 1 to 2 tablespoons per day.

One to two handfuls of a mixture of three or more types of fresh leafy greens should be offered two to three times a day to provide required vitamins and micro-nutrients. These should be cleaned as if for your own table.

A variety of greens are good choices including beet or carrot tops, spinach leaves, Romaine lettuce, dandelion, parsley, basil, mustard or collard greens, celery, orchard grass and fresh clover.

Allowing your rabbit to graze on grasses outside in an area safe from predators, herbicides and pesticides provides an opportunity for exercise, too.

Consistent exercise helps to increase bone strength and decreases the risk of bone fractures -- another common disease of pet rabbits.

One more point to add that is somewhat unique compared to other pet animals is that rabbits need to eat a product of fermentation in their GI tract, which is passed like a bowel movement during the night. This material is called a cecotroph, which appears like a soft bowel movement and provides B vitamins to the rabbit. Normally, this process occurs rapidly and is not seen.

Rabbits need a nesting area that has a solid surface, not a wire cage bottom, to rest on to provide them with comfort and to make eating their cecotrophs easier.

Your grandson may like reading the information provided by the House Rabbit Society, which was created to educate pet rabbit owners, at www.rabbit.org.

Be sure to ask your veterinarian about parasite control, grooming and your own rabbit's diet as he/she may have special needs. If a diet change is needed, your veterinarian will help guide you to make this change gradually and safely.