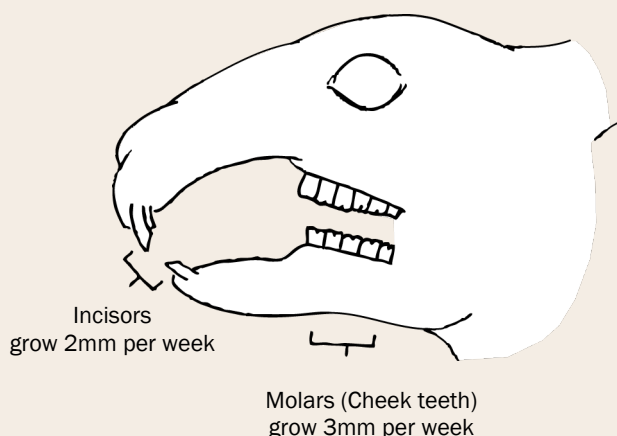


Behaviour: Eating Grass (or Hay)

By Tamsin Stone

www.theRabbitHouse.com

The behaviour that rabbits spend most time engaged in is eating grass (or hay). In fact a normal healthy rabbit will spend about half of the time they are awake just on feeding. It's very important that this behaviour is supported and encouraged as it plays a vital role in their physical and mental health. When rabbits don't spend enough time eating grass hay they end up with too much free time and get bored and frustrated, they are more prone to digestive problems, and their teeth can overgrow and cause painful mouth sores.



How Rabbits Eat

Rabbits have two sets of teeth. The incisors, at the front, chop through grass and the molars, at the back of the mouth, grind it up. Both sets of teeth grow continually throughout a rabbit's life. To stop the teeth growing too long and cutting into the tongue and cheeks they need to be worn down at the same rate they grow. Whilst other foods may contribute some degree of wear, there is something very special about grass and this makes the number one thing for wearing rabbit's teeth at just the right rate.



Why Grass?

Grass is different from other foods because it's covered in tiny spikes too small to see with the naked eye. You can feel them though; run your fingers down a piece of grass and they will catch on the surface. Think of grass as sand paper - it isn't hard, it's flexible and you can tear it easily, but if you rub it against something it will wear away the surface. Pellets are hard and veggies are crunchy, but neither is rough enough to act like sandpaper on rabbits teeth. For the same reason, grass is just as good as hay for wear, even though hay seems harder because it's dry and crunchy.

Why don't rabbits eat their hay?

Eating habits are shaped when a rabbit is young, and sometimes when they haven't been brought up eating hay they can be reluctant to try it - even though it's natural and healthy for them to eat it. Like any well established habit, it can take time and effort to encourage a rabbit to change. Hay needs to be made as tempting as possible, so try different varieties to see what your rabbit likes best, sprinkle it with their favourite herbs and add it to toys to make it fun. Try fresh grass as well as hay, as some rabbits find that more tempting to eat.

Rabbits naturally choose higher calorie foods when they are available. In the wild the availability of foods like seeds are limited to spring and autumn (the time of year when rabbits need the extra calories for breeding or preparing for winter). If higher calorie foods like pellets are always available they'll choose to eat these over hay. Rabbits won't manage their own diet so you have to do it for them by limiting pellets so they eat hay.

If your rabbit is still reluctant to eat hay or suddenly stops eating hay then get them checked by a vet, as they could have teeth issues effecting their food choices.

