

Serve up the right advice on small pet nutrition

There are big differences between small pets, explains **Nicole Paley** from the PFMA

Small animals, such as rabbits, guinea pigs and hamsters, are an important proportion of the pet population and account for approximately 10% of European pets (21.25-28.5 million small mammals). UK homes have a large number of these and, according to the latest PFMA pet population data, these amount to 800,000 rabbits, 700,000 guinea pigs and 400,000 hamsters.

The pet food industry tends to refer to this group collectively as “small furries” but this term encompasses a broad range of species also including ferrets, degus, gerbils, rats and mice.

When speaking to pet owners, it can be tempting to group all these pets together. However, it's important to clarify that each pet type is different and has its own distinctive nutritional and behavioural needs.

These small mammals can make excellent companions but it's important owners research their individual needs beforehand to make sure they can provide a suitable home.

NEEDS AND PREFERENCES

There is a range of nutritional needs and preferences within this group, from herbivorous rabbits and guinea pigs to the pets that are predominantly granivorous (diet consisting mainly of seeds and grain) such as hamsters. At the other end of the spectrum, ferrets are obligate carnivores.

SCIENTIFIC ADVANCES

In terms of science, the field of small animal nutrition is well advanced for cats and dogs but sadly it is more limited for the small furries. This is something



industry is addressing and areas of current investigation include:

- Looking at feeding behaviours and delivering nutrition through enrichment. Nutrients are an important part of the equation but industry is also looking at the physical structure of the ingredients and the food itself and how this can impact on enrichment and wellbeing. This includes issues around selective feeding and how this can be prevented.

- Over nutrition and obesity. PFMA has developed rabbit and guinea pig ‘size-o-meters’ to help owners keep an eye on their pet's weight and build awareness of what is a healthy size. The size-o-meters are user-friendly charts based on the body condition score chart used by vets.

- Nutritional guidelines – the FEDIAF (European Pet Food Federation) Nutritional Guidelines for Cats and Dogs are well established and respected. They detail the nutritional needs of cats and dogs at their

varying life stages and are peer reviewed by independent veterinary nutrition experts throughout Europe. To build on this work, FEDIAF has now developed a set of guidelines for rabbits.

We'll be looking at the nutritional needs of different groups and, in this issue, start with rabbits.

NUTRITIONAL NEEDS OF RABBITS

There are a few characteristics of the rabbit's physiology which really affect their daily dietary needs. Rabbits, guinea pigs and chinchillas have teeth which grow continually. If fed unsuitable foods, they fail to wear the teeth sufficiently and this leads to painful dental conditions such as malocclusions (misalignment of the teeth).

The rabbit requires high levels of fibre in its diet for efficient and normal gut function and to encourage chewing to keep their continually growing teeth trim. Good quality hay

and grass should make up the majority of the diet and should always be available. As well as providing an essential source of fibre for healthy digestion and teeth, grazing on hay and grass promotes natural behaviour, vital for enrichment and wellbeing.

Rabbits absorb calcium at a level that directly relates to the level offered in their food – so even if they do not require any more calcium, they will still continue to absorb it. As a result, both the calcium content (between 0.5 and 1%) and the calcium:phosphorus ratio (between 1.5:1 and 2:1) are important.

An imbalance of calcium, together with limited opportunities for chewing, can result in dental problems, such as overgrown teeth and even dental abscesses. A commercially prepared rabbit food will have the right calcium:phosphorus balance for healthy body function.

There are several commercially prepared foods for

rabbits, including life stage diets and ‘light’ products for adult pets that are inactive or prone to weight gain. Always follow the feeding guidelines on pack for the correct amount to feed.

Occasional treats can include a piece of fruit or root vegetable. However, these are high in sugar and need to be limited to avoid obesity and dental problems.

Greens/leafy vegetables provide additional nutrients and moisture in a rabbit's diet as well as offering a variety of textures and tastes, providing stimulation and enrichment.

Fresh, clean water should always be available

USEFUL RESOURCES

PFMA has developed a range of posters and factsheets which can be downloaded and shared with your customers. You can also link to them from your website or share via your social media channels.

For more information, visit www.pfma.org.uk