



The Essential Components of a Small Herbivore's Diet

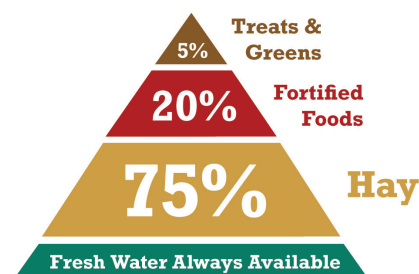
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As any pet owner of a small herbivore will tell you, animals such as rabbits, guinea pigs and chinchillas make exceptional companions with personalities full of warmth and constant surprises. Once considered “throw away” pets, a concerted, collective effort by leading manufacturers and top veterinarians to educate consumers has led to exponential increases in the lifespan of these animals. When properly cared for, animals such as rabbits can live many years, bringing endless joy into the lives of those who care for them.

There are some basic, yet important nutritional guidelines to follow in order to ensure the long term health and wellbeing of your herbivore. We recommend the following nutritional percentages for a healthy daily diet:

Hay

All day, every day



Due to their unique digestive systems, small herbivores require the constant motion of high fiber food through their gastrointestinal tracts for optimum health. High fiber grass hays help animals such as rabbits, guinea pigs, and chinchillas maintain intestinal balance, helping to prevent digestive problems common among small herbivores. Additional benefits of hay include proper dental wear on your pet's teeth, which continuously grow and can easily become problematic during the adult years.

For these reasons, small herbivores should have unlimited access to quality grass hay. Hay should be fed “free choice” (available at all times) and should make up at least 75 percent of a small herbivore's daily diet. As a general recommendation, rabbits should eat a pile of hay approximately the size of their body every day. Guinea pigs, meanwhile, should consume a pile of hay approximately twice the size of their body. In reality, a pet owner cannot offer too much hay to their pet herbivore. Hay that is not immediately eaten will be used to for foraging, burrowing and general enrichment.

Alfalfa vs. Grass Hay

Young pets (one year or under) require more energy than their adult counterparts. This energy should come primarily in the form of alfalfa - a legume hay with the same long-strand fiber found in grass hays, but with more protein, energy and calcium. Pregnant or nursing pets will also benefit from the inclusion of alfalfa in their diets. When animals reach adulthood, they should be transitioned to grass hays with lower protein and calcium. Popular grass hay options for adult herbivores include Western Timothy, Oat Hay, Orchard Grass, USDA Organic Meadow Hay, hay blended with fragrant herbs, and others.

While young animals and animals which are pregnant or nursing require the added energy offered through alfalfa hay and an alfalfa-based pellet, animals of all ages can benefit from the inclusion of grass hay in their daily diet. Offering grass hay to young pets encourages variety and makes the eventual alfalfa to grass hay transition easier when the time comes.



Alfalfa (a legume hay) is ideal for young pets, as well as those pets which may be pregnant or nursing.



Purchasing hay through a trusted manufacturer is the first step toward assuring a pet is receiving “the best of the best.” Because hay is a product of Mother Nature, a certain level of variability is inevitable from one crop to the next. For this reason, it’s important to understand your hay supplier’s quality assurance measures. While purchasing bulk hay in bale form can provide a good value up front, assuring the quality of such hay is not entirely possible. A branded, packaged hay is more likely to have been inspected to meet high quality standards.

Variety

The Spice of Life

Much like their human caretakers, small herbivores can benefit from a certain amount of variety in their daily diet. Every animal is unique, and many will develop favorites when it comes to different varieties of hay. Because all grass hays are nutritionally similar (alfalfa hay is excluded here, as it has a different nutritional make up), it’s safe to mix and match amongst grass hay varieties. Pet owners are encouraged to experiment to find out which combinations of hay their companion enjoys best. By keeping a pet’s mealtime interesting, owners can help ensure the necessary intake of hay, thereby helping prevent potential health problems (such as gastric stasis and dental disease) which may arise as a result of decreased consumption.

When offering hay to your small herbivore, you may notice a tendency by your pet to eat the tenderest parts of the plant first, leaving behind the stems. Avoid the temptation to remove the stems from your pet’s cage. Instead, mix the stems in with new hay to encourage your pet to eat them and thereby consume the valuable fiber contained within.

Fortified Foods

Valuable vitamins and minerals in pellet form

While unlimited hay provides the fiber necessary to keep a small herbivore’s digestive system moving properly, vitamins and minerals are supplied in the form of a complete fortified food. Approximately 20 percent of a small herbivore’s diet should come from a measured amount of a high quality fortified food.

As with hay, it’s important to keep in mind a pet’s physiology when choosing a fortified food. Many conventional feeds contain fats, sugars, starches in the form of nuts, corn, seeds, and fruit. Pet owners should avoid these items, as small herbivores such as rabbits, guinea pigs and chinchillas are not designed to digest them. Instead, choose an all natural food which contains an ideal amount of fiber, carbohydrates and proteins. A uniform feed will help avoid selective eating habits associated with mixes. An alfalfa-based pellet is appropriate for young, pregnant and nursing pets, while a timothy hay-based pellet is best for adults.



Treats and Veggies

Tasty enrichment in moderation

Offering your pet treats is a great way to bond with your companion. What's most important to remember when shopping for treats is that they should never make up a significant part of a pet's diet—less than 5 percent. Offering too many treats can lead to your pet refusing basic foods.



Oxbow's Simple Rewards line of treats is made with wholesome, all-natural ingredients, including freeze-dried fruits and veggies, as well as fragrant herbs.

When choosing treats, look for all-natural options that don't include any added sugar. Instead, opt for healthy treats made with high fiber hay, herbs and freeze-dried fruits and veggies rather than fat, added sugars, or starches. Making a healthy choice in the treat aisle ensures that you can always offer your pet a healthy, fun option you can feel good about.

Many pet owners enjoy offering their companions fresh veggies as a part of their daily diet. Appropriate veggies are a great addition to a pet's diet, but should be given in only a specific amount each day. Good options include greens such as romaine, bib and red leaf lettuces. Iceberg lettuce should be avoided, as it might cause digestive upset. For an extensive list of healthy, appropriate greens, visit the House Rabbit Society's webpage (www.rabbit.org).

Supplements

Focused support where it's needed the most

Supplements are designed to do just as their name implies – to supplement a pet's diet with beneficial nutritional components. While some supplements (such as stabilized Vitamin C for guinea pigs) are essential to a pet's daily health, others are designed to support wellness in pets. Pet owners should always consult with their veterinarian prior to introducing a supplement into their pet's diet. When feeding a supplement, it is important to always follow feeding instructions.



For more information about appropriate nutrition for small herbivores, visit www.oxbowanimalhealth.com.