



TYPES OF HAY FOR SMALL HERBIVORES

RABBITS – GUINEA PIGS – CHINCHILLAS – DEGUS

In this factsheet, which is an addition to *The Importance of Hay for Small Herbivores* factsheet, the different types of hay, their quality and choosing the right one for your pet are explained.

GRASS HAY

Timothy hay and meadow hay are popular and nutritionally appropriate choices of grass hay for feeding to small herbivores. Nutritional value varies according to several factors including growth stage at the time of harvesting, storage conditions, and hay species.

TIMOTHY HAY

Timothy hay is a premium quality perennial grass hay. Rich in indigestible fibre, it helps to stimulate gut motility, while its abrasive texture helps support correct dental attrition.

Timothy hay is naturally low in calcium. Rabbits absorb nearly all the calcium they ingest which means that levels may vary widely depending on dietary content. Excess calcium is excreted in the urine, and if dietary levels are too high, rabbits will be at increased risk of forming bladder stones (uroliths). Being naturally low in calcium, Timothy hay can be fed safely in unlimited quantities.

MEADOW HAY

Meadow hay is a generic term for hay harvested from permanent pasture and it may include other plants and flowers as well as grass. It is often softer than Timothy hay and nutrient content depends on the combination of grasses and other plants in the hay.

ALFALFA HAY

Alfalfa hay is a legume crop. It is high in fibre but also has higher protein and calcium levels than grass hay. Higher levels of calcium (one to two percent) are good for supporting growth and development so make it suitable for young growing animals as well as lactating does. However, alfalfa hay should not be fed to adult rabbits, but it may be used as an ingredient in nugget diets, when the recipe is formulated so overall calcium and protein levels meet exact nutritional requirements.

HAY QUALITY

Poor quality hay will lack the right balance of nutrients that small herbivores need. It may also contain particles of dust or mould that can cause health issues as well as affecting nutrient content. Hay quality varies according to hay type plus other factors, including:

GROWTH STAGE AT THE TIME OF HARVEST

First cut Timothy hay has the highest fibre levels, while second cut is leafier and less stemmy. Third cut has an even higher leaf content, with relatively less fibre. First cut Timothy hay, with its higher fibre content, generally meets the nutrient requirements of small herbivores better than later cuts.

HANDLING AND STORAGE

A significant deterioration in quality may result if hay is not handled or stored appropriately. After harvest, hay should be dried as quickly as possible in sunny weather. Once moisture content is optimum, it should be stored off the ground, away from moisture and in a well-ventilated area.

IDENTIFYING GOOD QUALITY HAY

There are two main methods of analysing hay quality – visual inspection and forage analysis. The former method is fairly reliable if done well. Visual inspection should include assessment of:

- **Colour:** Good quality hay should be green or green-gold in colour and feel dry to the touch. Loss of colour may be due to sun-bleaching, rain, or fermentation in the bale, all of which reduces nutritional value. Pale colour may also be indicative of hay that was at a late stage of maturity when cut.
- **Odour:** Good quality hay should have the classic aroma of new mown hay. Any mustiness is likely to signify lower quality, and is indicative of hay that may have been damp when stored.
- **Presence of dust or mould:** Good quality hay will be free of dust particles and mould. Some hays may also be dust-extracted to further reduce the risk of respiratory disease.
- **Presence of foreign material:** Good quality hay should be free of any foreign objects.

While visual inspection can give an excellent indicator of hay quality and therefore nutritional value, forage analysis is necessary to get accurate values for individual nutrient levels.

UK Pet Food's posters are suitable for displaying at pet shops, veterinary practices and re-homing centres to encourage a conversation about diet between pet professionals and pet owners.

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