

Rabbit Weight Management

Pamela Nock ARBA Judge



Just as it is important for humans to maintain a healthy weight, it is also important for rabbits to be maintained at a proper weight to promote health, vigor and an extended life span. Unfortunately, it can often be difficult for some owners to determine if their rabbit is at a healthy weight for its bone structure and size.

A common misconception is that rabbits should fall within the ideal show weight for their breed. However, many rabbits are not “show type” and may be built larger or smaller than normal for their breed. A rabbit should not be starved nor fattened to meet a standard that they are not built for.

The general state of healthy condition can also vary by breed. Some breeds such as lops are more likely to feel rough, have thin flesh covering over the bones, and have loose skin. Other breeds, such as New Zealands, are more likely to have a smooth, firm, tight flesh.



The Belgian Hare is a naturally thin, fine boned breed.



The rabbit shown in the photo above is severely emaciated due to illness. Although not readily noticed when glancing at the rabbit due to its thick coat, its alarming physical state is easily determined by a tactile examination. Because the condition of a rabbit can deteriorate so rapidly, it is important to handle rabbits daily and weigh them weekly so that any health problems can be immediately addressed.

A rabbit that is too thin will feel very rough over the spine and the individual vertebrae can be easily felt. The rabbit will feel very light for its size when picked up and the body will appear very narrow with the spine protruding. Rabbits do not have a wide sprung rib cage, so ribs are not easily visible when a rabbit is too thin. However, an emaciated rabbit’s individual ribs can be easily felt, where a well fed rabbit will generally feel smooth over the ribcage. Under weight rabbits may be more prone to illness and skin problems when their body is not receiving the proper nutrients to maintain normal bodily functions. The underweight rabbit may also have a difficult time maintaining its body temperature in cold weather.

To increase weight in thin rabbits, calories should be slowly increased and low calorie foods such as hay should be decreased. Increase the pellet ration as well as offering foods such as black oil sunflower seeds or oats. Nutri Cal, a high calorie supplement for dogs and cats, can also be administered.

A rabbit that is overweight will feel very heavy for its size. It will be very wide in body and may develop a dewlap (although a

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dewlap does not necessarily indicate that a rabbit is overweight). The obese rabbit will often develop a roll of loose flesh over the shoulder and flabby skin as well as being very large throughout the abdominal area. Bones may not be easily felt, although in some cases, the spine may be felt rough due to lack of condition or a diet too high in protein. It is generally difficult to feel the ribs.

Excess cecotropes (vitamin rich feces eaten by the rabbit) and mushy droppings are common in the overweight rabbit due to overfeeding. The obese rabbit will also have difficulty positioning itself to eat cecotropes (coprophagy).

An obese rabbit will have difficulty grooming itself which can lead to coat matting, poor skin condition as well as the serious condition of flystrike. The obese rabbit will also become easily tired during exercise and will be more sensitive to the heat. Over weight rabbits are more susceptible to heart problems, GI stasis, bladder sludge and sore hocks. Does are more likely to suffer from distocia (birthing difficulty) and toxemia.

Overweight rabbits should have their pellet feed ration gradually decreased while increasing lower calorie, high fiber foods such as hay.



The photos above show different views of an obese Dutch rabbit. Note the excessive width of the body.

It is important to know the amount of feed your rabbit is eating. This can be difficult to determine if more than one rabbit is housed together, so monitoring the weight of each individual rabbit is important. For pellet diets, a small rabbit should receive approximately 1 – 1 ½ oz. per pound of body weight. Large rabbits require less feed per pound and eat approximately 1 cup of feed per day. Rabbits will also benefit from a diet including plenty of hay, dark, leafy greens and mixed vegetables.

As well as a healthy diet, exercise is paramount in regulating weight and maintaining a healthy rabbit. Some individuals may be more prone to gaining weight and may also have a pre-disposition to succumbing to medical problems when overweight. It is especially important to monitor the diet of these individuals.

Do not overlook the possibility of an underlying health problem if your rabbit has become too thin or too heavy. If your rabbit experiences a sudden change in weight, a veterinarian should be consulted.

A Sad Ending



“Merry” was an extremely obese Mini Rex, weighing over 11 lbs. She suffered a number of health problems and eventually died of liver failure.

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“Snuggly” - A Weight Loss Success Story



Before & After

A veterinarian advised that Snuggly be put on a diet when noting that she was obese, weighing in at a whopping 11 lbs. due to being free-fed a diet including pellets, cereals, nuts and large quantities of carrots.

Snuggly's diet was modified to ¼ cup of Oxbow Timothy Pellets per day and treats were eliminated. She also received unlimited timothy hay and a cup of leafy greens each evening.

Over the course of a year, Snuggly trimmed down to a healthy 6.9 lbs.

References

McNitt/Patton/Lukefahr/Cheeke (2000).
"Rabbit Production", Interstate
Publishers, Inc.

The American Rabbit Breeders Association,
Inc. Official Guide Book: Raising
Better Rabbits & Cavies
www.arba.net

Additional Resources

Obesity-Related Health Problems in Rabbits
Holly Nash, DVM, MS
www.peteducation.com

Obese Rabbits at Risk
Dr. Jackie Schulman, DVM
<http://www.rabbitsinthehouse.org/newsletter/obesity.pdf>

The Rabbit Welfare Fund
Guide to Feeding Your Pet Rabbit
<http://www.houserabbit.co.uk/rwf/articles/feeding.htm>

General Guide to Breed Weights

(Due to individual variation in body conformation, not all healthy rabbits will fall within the desired weigh limit for their breed.)

Britannia Petite: Under 2 ½ lbs.
Netherland Dwarf: Under 2 ½ lbs.
Himalayan: 2 ½ - 4 ½ lbs.
Dwarf Hotot: Under 3 lbs.
Polish: Under 3 ½ lbs.
Mini Rex: 3 - 4 ½ lbs.
Mini Satin: 3 ¼ - 4 ¾ lbs.
Jersey Woolly - Under 3 ½ lbs.
Dutch: 3 ½ - 5 ½ lbs.
Americian Fuzzy Lop: Under 4 lbs.
Holland Lop: Under 4 lbs.
Thrianta: 4 - 6 lbs.
Florida White: 4 - 6 lbs.
Tan: 4 - 6 lbs.
Silver: 4 - 7 lbs.
Havana: 4 ½ - 6 ½ lbs.
Mini Lop: 4 ½ to 6 ½ lbs.
English Angora: 5 - 7 ½ lbs.
Standard Chinchilla: 5 - 7 ½ lbs.
English Spot: 5 - 8 lbs.
Lilac: 5 ½ - 8 lbs.
French Angora: 7 ½ - 10 ½ lbs.
Belgian Hare: 6 - 9 ½ lbs.
Silver Marten: 6 - 9 ½ lbs.
Harlequin: 6 ½ - 9 ½ lbs.
Satin Angora: 6 ½ - 9 ½ lbs.
Rhinelander: 6 ½ - 10 lbs.
American Sable: 7-10 lbs.
Rex: 7 ½ - 10 ½ lbs.
Californian: 8 - 10 ½ lbs.
Creme D'Argent: 8 - 11 lbs.
Blanc de Hotot: 8 - 11 lbs.
Palomino: 8 - 11 lbs.
Beveren: 8 - 12 lbs.
Satin: 8 ½ - 11 lbs.
Cinnamon: 8 ½ - 11 lbs.
Silver Fox: 9 - 12 lbs.
New Zealand: 9 - 12 lbs.
American Chinchilla: 9 - 12 lbs.
Champagne D'Argent: 9 - 12 lbs.
English Lop: 9 lbs. and over
Giant Angora: 9 ½ lbs. and over
French Lop: 10 ½ lbs. and over
Checkered Giant: 11 lbs. and over
Giant Chinchilla: 12 - 16 lbs.
Flemish Giant: 13 lbs. and over