

## HOW MUCH DO I FEED?

I believe one of the toughest livestock management principles, is learning to feed an animal. Rabbits may be one of the more difficult animals to feed to achieve maximum performance.

Each development stage of a rabbit has different nutrient requirements, including maintenance, growth, fitting, lactation and reproduction. The different stages must receive sufficient feed to furnish the necessary quantity of energy (carbohydrates & fats), protein, minerals and vitamins.

All animals will fulfill their nutrient requirement for maintenance before all other stages of development. Maintenance requirements may be defined as the combination of nutrients which are needed by the animal to keep its body functioning without any gain or loss in body weight or any productive activity. These requirements are essential for life itself. A mature animal must have (1) heat to maintain body temperature, (2) sufficient energy to keep vital body processes functional, (3) energy for minimal movement, and (4) the necessary nutrients to repair damaged cells and tissues and to replace those which have become nonfunctional.

There are several Factors affecting maintenance requirements, among them, (1) exercise (2) weather (3) stress (4) health (5) body size (6) age (7) temperament (8) individual variation (9) level of production, and (10) lactation.

So how do we put this in practical terms for our rabbits? Rabbits require about .5 ounces of feed for every one pound of body weight. So, a four pound fryer will need approximately 2 ounces of feed per day to meet its maintenance requirement. This young rabbit also has a nutrient requirement for growth on top of its maintenance requirement. So a four pound fryer will need an additional .5 ounces of feed per pound of body weight to meet its' growth requirement.

Gestating and lactating rabbit's nutrient requirements go well beyond their maintenance requirements. How do I know if my rabbits are getting enough feed to eat? The best management tool available to us is to evaluate the body condition of the animal in addition to weight gain. Body condition refers to the amount of external fat cover or bloom an animal carries on its body. If an animal is thin, then additional feed is necessary to correct the problem or if an animal is too fat then a reduction in calories is necessary to maintain production.

Conditioning rabbits for show is more of an art than science. The most successful breeders have worked out systems of their own through years of past experience and close observation – they do not follow rules. The beginner will profit by the experience of successful fitters (conditioners). The basics of nutrition are still relevant but the process and management are very unique. During the conditioning process, how fast an animal

grows is not as important as how well an animal grows. Conditioning rabbits for show begins prior to weaning. Establishing the right eating habits in young rabbits is essential for successful conditioning. Hand feeding only what the rabbit will consume from one feeding to the next is preferred over full feeding. A well conditioned rabbit is trim, firm in flesh with just enough bloom (finish) to give it that smooth touch and appearance. **DO NOT GET THE RABBIT FAT!** Once a rabbit gets fat and soft to the touch, it is impossible to regroup and start over. When conditioning rabbits for show, they must be fed on an individual basis. Just like people, every rabbit is different each responding a little differently to the conditioning process. You may ask yourself, how I remember from one day to the next what to feed. I have found, using different color clothes pins to mark each pen, allows me to keep track of my feeding regiment and maintain consistency in my conditioning program. Write down in a notebook what color clothes pin corresponds to the amount or kind of feed you are feeding. Finally, feeding small amounts multiple times each day is better than feeding one time each day. Establish a daily routine but allow flexibility in your conditioning program to meet the individual requirements of your rabbits.

How much do I feed my rabbit? Keep the basics in mind, (1) feed a balanced diet (2) identify the stage of development (3) recognize factors affecting maintenance requirements, and (4) use body condition as a guide to determine how much to feed your rabbit.

David A. Mangione  
Associate Professor  
The Ohio State University