World Rabbit Sci. 2022, 30: 13-34
doi:10.4995/wrs.2022.15562
WRSA, UPV, 2003

CHALLENGES IN RABBIT DOE FEEDING, INCLUDING THE YOUNG DOE

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Abstract: This review summarises the latest knowledge on rabbit doe nutrition, to complement the current nutritional requirements and strategies for young and adult rabbit does, considering production and health issues. The rabbit doe must reach an adequate maturity level (body condition) at first artificial insemination (AI) to face its productive life with minimal guarantees (around 7.0 mm of perirenal fat thickness, 2.8 ng/mL of plasma leptin concentration and around 18% and 15-20% of body protein and fat, respectively). This goal can be achieved by restricting feed intake from 12 wk of age until first AI or feeding *ad libitum* with a fibrous diet (<10.5 MJ digestible energy/kg) from 60 d of age to first parturition. Once the doe is reproducing, the increase in the n-3 fatty acids (or reduction of the n-6/n-3 ratio), soluble fibre (under epizootic enteropathy) and the arginine/lysine and glutamine/lysine ratios may help to improve the reproductive traits of rabbit does, although their optimal inclusion level remains to be identified. It is recommendable to limit an excessive negative energy balance before parturition, and the supplementation of glucose precursors to reduce the ketosis incidence could be useful. The formulation of different diets for the doe and the litter to better fit their requirements and assuring their health would be an option to consider when it would be applicable on the farm. The influence of the mother on the litter microbiota and immune status and its potential modulation through the diet open a new research area that will merit further studies in the near future.

Key Words: body condition, lactation, nutritional requirements, rabbit does, rearing.

INTRODUCTION

Feed is the greatest cost in rabbit production. It accounts for almost 45% of the total costs of a rabbit farm in Spain (72.5% of the variable costs) and between 55 and 60% in France (Cartuche *et al.*, 2014; Coutelet *et al.*, 2015). Rabbit doe feeding only makes up around one third of the total feed cost (3.7 and 31.7% for the replacement and reproductive does, respectively; Cartuche *et al.*, 2014). In spite of the lower incidence in the total feed cost compared to fattening rabbits, the nutrition of the rabbit doe is highly relevant to the final farm profit. In fact, according to these authors, the traits with a higher economic weight were the feed conversion rate during fattening and the number of kits born alive, the latter being influenced by the genetics and management (Huneau-Salaün *et al.*, 2015), but also by the feeding of rabbit does.

In this way, the feeding of the rabbit doe can directly affect the number of kits born alive, but also the milk yield and composition, and therefore the survival and growth of the kits during lactation (Pascual *et al.,* 2013). In fact, some studies indicated that rabbit feeding and genetics can affect the immune status of the kits at weaning, and even the

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https://doi.org/10.4995/wrs.2022.15562

This work has been presented as guest talk at the 12th World Rabbit Congress (Nov 3rd-5th, 2021, Nantes, France).

Cite as: Martínez-Paredes E., Nicodemus N., Pascual J.J., García J. 2022. Challenges in rabbit doe feeding, including the young doe. *World Rabbit Sci., 30: 13-34. https://doi.org/10.4995/wrs.2022.15562*

incidence of digestive disorders during the growth period (García-Quirós *et al.,* 2014). This indicates that the feeding of rabbit does not only has a direct effect on the feeding and productivity costs during the reproductive period, but also on the performance we will obtain during the fattening period.

In consequence, research on rabbit does nutrition and management has focused on the reproductive period, because the nutritional requirements are more demanding (lactation, overlapping between cycles, resources recovery…). However, focusing our efforts only on this period is not enough to maximise the potential of our reproductive rabbit does. A large number of works carried out during the rearing period (Xiccato *et al.,* 1999; Pascual *et al.,* 2002; Rebollar *et al.,* 2011; Martínez-Paredes *et al.,* 2012, 2018 and 2019) have demonstrated the relevance of adequate management and feeding strategies in this period on the future performance of rabbit does.

The present work aimed to review the current knowledge available on rabbit doe nutrition, to establish nutritional requirements and strategies for both young and adult rabbit does, which take into account the production and health of rabbit does, and that allows us to progress to a rational rabbit production system.

NUTRITIONAL REQUIREMENTS AND STRATEGIES FOR REARING THE FUTURE RABBIT DOE

Rearing development and body status

Regarding how the growth of the young rabbit doe should be, we must consider the existence of different growth patterns according to the genetic type, the environment and/or the individual itself. Nevertheless, regardless of these factors, gradual growth seems the best option for rabbit females during the rearing period. Some studies have observed that a controlled growth of young rabbit does, by quantitative or qualitative feeding restriction, allows gradual development during the rearing period and better performance during the first reproductive cycles (Xiccato *et al.,* 1999; Pascual *et al.,* 2002). Recently, Martínez-Paredes *et al.* (2018) obtained worse results both in the first parturition (on av. –1.3 liveborn) and in the whole productive period (–6.1 liveborn and –4.8 weaned) for those young rabbit does that showed faster growth patterns during the rearing period (reaching the maximum weight during rearing 31 d sooner).

On the other hand, the different works that evaluated the evolution of body resources and metabolic profile help to reinforce the idea that a deviation from the adequate body condition pattern during rearing can be harmful to the future performance of rabbit does. In this sense, Friggens (2003) suggests that reserves mobilisation could have negative consequences on reproduction when it is far from its optimal level. The development of methods to determine *in vivo* body condition in rabbit does (Pascual *et al.,* 2004; Pereda *et al.,* 2009; Pereda, 2010) has been very useful to evaluate the evolution of body reserves of young rabbit does during the rearing and reproductive periods, reaching similar conclusions.

Martínez-Paredes *et al.* (2018) observed that rabbit does with a high perirenal fat thickness (PFT) at the first artificial insemination (AI) also had a lower reproductive performance at the first parturition and throughout the productive period (–3.2 liveborn and –3.0 weaned for each mm of increment in the PFT value). This worse reproductive performance of thick young females may be related to an increased number of prenatal losses during gestation (Vicente *et al.,* 2012), and/or to an increased culling risk among females with excessive PFT (Theilgaard *et al.,* 2006; Martínez-Paredes *et al.,* 2018). Regarding the risk of death or culling of females during the rearing period, high PFT at first AI followed by a high pre-partum mobilisation of reserves, low pre-partum digestible energy (DE) intake, as well as high non-esterified fatty acids and low glucose levels in the blood at first parturition, are all factors associated with pregnancy toxaemia (Martínez-Paredes *et al.,* 2012). In addition, the rabbit does that had a high PFT at the first AI showed a PFT evolution pattern different from the rest of the females until the second parturition, not being able to recover the body condition that they had at the time of the first parturition (Martínez-Paredes *et al.,* 2019). In contrast, the body composition (body protein, fat and energy estimated by bioelectrical impedance) at first AI did not influence the fertility rate at the first parturition, but did so at the second one (Taghouti *et al.,* 2021). These authors reported that the increase in body protein and fat combined with a low body protein/energy ratio at first AI improved the fertility rate at the second parturition. They also found an increase in the percentage of kits born alive over the total born in the first parturition when the body protein and energy content increased at first AI. Similarly, in a rabbit line selected for growth rate, Naturil-Alfonso *et al.* (2016) observed better performance results in the first and third cycles of the rabbit does with a higher PFT value at the first AI (+0.5 mm compared to lean ones). These studies suggest that more mature nulliparous does (but not overfat ones) with a body protein content near 18% might present better performance, probably due to the lower competition between growth and pregnancy that may exist. The maturity level depends on the age, diet and genetic type. It is also important to consider that the variability of the body condition at the beginning of productive life is a key point and may account for some of the differences observed among studies.

Some of the blood metabolic parameters controlled during the rearing period can also help us evaluate the body status and future performance of the rabbit does. One of them is leptin, a metabolic indicator of body reserves that helps regulate energy balance by modulating feed intake and fat storage in adipocytes. After reviewing the different studies that measured leptin during the rearing period (Brecchia *et al.,* 2006; Arias-Álvarez *et al.,* 2009; Rebollar *et al.,* 2011, and Martínez-Paredes *et al.,* 2012), it was observed that to be successful at first mating, a minimum threshold of leptin must be reached (2.8 ng/mL), as a sign that the female is ready to begin reproductive life. Another good metabolic indicator, in this case of body reserves mobilisation, is the non-esterified fatty acids (NEFA) level in the blood. Rebollar *et al.* (2011) observed that a lower concentration of NEFA in the blood of rabbit does at first parturition was correlated with better fertility at 11 d post-partum, and with lower mortality of females and their litters at birth.

In brief, proper management of physiological development of young rabbit does during the rearing period maximises both their productivity and lifespan. During the rearing period, the animal's growth pattern should be progressive (Figure 1), allowing the achievement of an adequate maturity degree at the onset of its productive life, avoiding excessive fatness, to favour long-term reproductive performance and lifespan. In addition, *in vivo* tools to evaluate body condition could be useful to evaluate the management and feeding strategies to adjust growth patterns in the future.

Rearing feeding programmes: concentrate diets

To achieve the aforementioned goals, feeding and management programmes during rearing must allow the doe to achieve adequate body condition and physiological development (both digestive and reproductive) to optimise future resource utilisation. It will enable reproductive rabbit does to face the usual environmental and reproductive challenges successfully. The definition of the type of feeding programme, the period of application and age at first mating will be key to achieving these objectives.

Ad libitum programmes. The *ad libitum* supply of reproductive or fattening diets at the onset of rearing was a feeding programme widely used for many years in rabbit farms, designed to achieve sexual maturity as soon as possible to

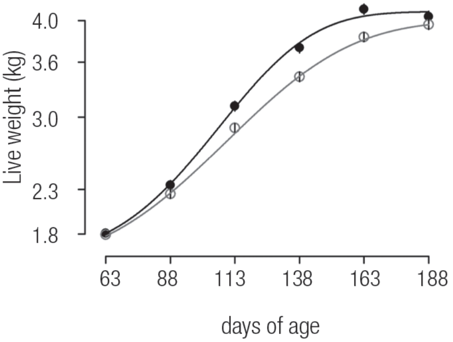

Figure 1: Evolution of live weight of young rabbit does with an uncontrolled feeding programme (●) or another programmed for a progressive development (⦶). Both programmes allowed a similar live weight at first parturition, but the uncontrolled one led to an overweighing of females around first mating, which had negative consequences on further reproductive performance and lifespan. Adapted from Martínez-Paredes *et al.* (2018).

reduce rearing costs. This is the opposite of the gradual development that we mentioned previously. In fact, the results obtained in *ad libitum* programmes were increased risk of digestive problems in the first weeks of the rearing period (Rommers *et al.,* 2004a; Martínez-Paredes *et al.* 2012), greater fatness and higher prenatal mortality (Viudes-de-Castro *et al.,* 1991), lower fertility at second parturition (Rebollar *et al.,* 2011), gestational toxaemia and lower feed intake at the start of lactation (Martínez-Paredes *et al.,* 2012), and reduced lifespan of rabbit does (Rosell, 2000; Martínez-Paredes *et al.,* 2018).

Restriction programmes. Some authors (Partridge, 1986; Maertens, 1992) proposed the use of feed restriction of the reproductive or fattening diets as an alternative to the traditional *ad libitum* rearing programmes. However, several studies indicated that some rearing programmes based on feed restriction could delay growth and sexual maturity at first mating (Rommers *et al.,* 2004b), impairing fertility (Szendrő *et al.,* 2006, Rebollar *et al.,* 2011) and prolificacy (Rommers *et al.,* 2001 and 2002, Naturil-Alfonso *et al.,* 2016). Such a strategy may also affect milk yield of lactating does (Menchetti *et al.,* 2015). These downsides could be the result of improper management of the restriction, as there are many variables that can influence the programme's success (the application period, restriction level, deficiency of some micronutrients, genetic type…). In fact, results from feed restriction trials have not provided conclusive results.

Suitable age to start and finish restriction. It seems appropriate not to start the restriction before 12 wk of age in order to ensure the proper development of the main physiological structures of the female (Deltoro and López, 1985). Pascual *et al.* (2002) started the restriction at 10 wk of age (140 g/d) and the first insemination had to be delayed for the females to reach 3 kg of live weight. However, Martínez-Paredes *et al.* (2012 and 2019), with a similar restriction programme that began at 9 wk of age, reported a lower body weight of restricted females at the first insemination, but differences disappeared at parturition, with dose presenting better performance during the first two reproductive cycles. In other studies, restriction or undernutrition after the first AI has been evaluated. Manal *et al.* (2010) restricted mature females (5 months old) for 15 or 20 d after first mating, showing an improvement of doe kindling performance and kit and litter traits from birth till weaning without adversely affecting progesterone level and embryonic mortality. However, Menchetti *et al.* (2015) observed that a severe restriction (90 g/d) of primiparous rabbit does at mid-late pregnancy (19-28 d of gestation) led to a negative balance and increased perinatal and pre-weaning mortality. The success of the use of quantitative feed restriction during the rearing period depends on the future rabbit female reaching an adequate physiological maturity at the first insemination to be able to cope with the first pregnancy with sufficient energy body reserves. In either case, the feed restriction should end at kindling.

Restriction level. Eiben *et al.* (2001) compared young females fed at 100% (full-fasting one day in a week), 82% (9 h of daily access to feed) and 76% (fixed daily maintenance provision) of *ad libitum* feeding, and only observed a delay in reaching the adequate body weight at first mating in the last two groups, without negative consequences on reproductive performance. Although there are not many studies with different genotypes, Matics *et al.* (2008) described a longer delay in achieving the targeted weight (between 4.5 to 5 kg) when the restriction was applied in females with a larger format (around 6 kg of adult age). Similarly, in a rabbit line selected for growth rate, Naturil-Alfonso *et al.* (2016) observed worse reproductive performance results (–0.2 kindling rate, +0.18 and +0.29 gestational and foetal losses and –1.6 kits during the first three reproductive cycles) when rabbit does were restricted (130 g/d) for a month before being mated. However, in other studies done with the same scheme and line, the differences in reproductive performance disappeared (Naturil-Alfonso *et al.,* 2017). In maternal crossbreed females, Martínez-Paredes *et al.* (2012) observed that a restriction of 140 g/d from 12 wk of age, with a flushing 4 d before mating (18 wk of age), led young rabbit does to show an energy intake below to the recommendations (Xiccato and Trocino, 2010), causing a delay in body development compared to those fed *ad libitum.* However, these restricted females with flushing reached the first AI with a desirable lower PFT level, without consequences on fertility and reproductive performance.

Long-term effects of restriction. There is practically no information on the long-term effects of restriction during the rearing period, but Martínez-Paredes (2008) did not find differences in lifespan or in reproduction parameters (born alive and weaned per year) compared to other *ad libitum* feeding systems over nine reproductive cycles.

The results seem to indicate that the restriction does not produce negative effects if applied at the beginning of the reproductive life of the rabbit females if they assure sufficient physiological maturity at first AI. However, more studies in the long-term must be done to corroborate these results and understand the implications of this management system. With the results discussed above, we could conclude that moderate restriction during the rearing period can let young rabbit does achieve reproductive success. However, the conditioning factors are many, which makes it difficult to define a clear management and restriction programme during the rearing period.

Rearing feeding programmes: high-fibre diets

Another alternative could be the *ad libitum* use of high-fibre or low-energy diets during rearing, formulated to fit the requirements of young rabbit does. Theoretically, their use could prevent over-fattening and promote digestive tract development to improve feed intake capacity before and after the first parturition, thus helping to reduce possible energy imbalances that usually affect primiparous rabbit does. The results obtained from this feed strategy seem to depend on several factors, such as the chemical composition of the diet, the management system of the females, the genotype and the environmental conditions on the farm.

Suitable age to introduce high-fibre diets. As the success of this strategy is partially given by the greater development of the female digestive tract (Fernández-Carmona *et al.*, 1998), it would be advisable to begin the administration of fibrous diets before 12 wk of age, when digestive tract development is almost completed (Deltoro and López, 1985). For this reason, Pascual *et al.* (2013) proposed the application of fibrous diets as early as 60 d of life, because if these diets are included later the expected benefits are limited, regardless of the dietary amount of fibre [360-500 g neutral detergent fibre (NDF) per kg DM; Quevedo *et al.*, 2005; Verdelhan *et al.*, 2005; Pereda, 2010; Martínez-Paredes *et al.,* 2012]. Regarding the effect on body condition, an early introduction of this type of diets allows us to reach the recommended leptin levels to ensure reproduction (Martínez-Paredes *et al.,* 2012), and lower the level of NEFA in blood during pregnancy or parturition (Rebollar *et al.,* 2011). Moreover, no differences in body energy content (Xiccato *et al.,* 1999), or similar or lower PFT values (Martínez-Paredes *et al.,* 2012 and 2018, respectively) were observed at first AI when their use was compared with the other feeding strategies during rearing. The high-fibre diets were usually offered until the first parturition without negative consequences on the performance.

Nutrient recommendations. Another important aspect of high-fibre diets is the level and nature of the fibre they contain. If the lignin levels are excessive [above 150 g of acid detergent lignin (ADL) per kg of dry matter (DM)], puberty is delayed and fertility is impaired compared to normal lignin values (50 g ADL/kg DM; Arias-Álvarez *et al.,* 2009). However, lower values (107 g of ADL per kg DM) promote a higher feed intake in young females, resulting in young females able to take enough energy in to overcome gestation, lactation and growth, and at the same time also being able to conceive again (Rebollar *et al.,* 2011). These results are similar to those obtained with moderated ADL levels (59-75 g of ADL per kg DM) in multiparous does (Nicodemus *et al.*, 1999a and 2007). On the other hand, the largest increases in rabbit doe intake during lactation (+11 to +18%) were observed with rearing diets that showed an NDF content of over 400 g/kg DM, although Rebollar *et al.* (2011) did not observe any change in lactating feed intake of females receiving a diet with 505 g NDF/kg DM during rearing. The reduced digestible energy content of high-fibre diets does not seem to be a limiting factor, even when animals are subjected to fibrous diets containing 8 to 9 MJ DE/kg DM. In fact, when female is fed with such low levels, they could reach an adequate live weight between 18 to 19 wk of age (Pascual *et al.,* 2002), and improve the resources acquisition during the first lactation (Nizza *et al.*, 1997; Pascual *et al.,* 2002; Quevedo *et al.*, 2006a,b; Rebollar *et al.,* 2011; Martínez-Paredes *et al.,* 2019). Even the combination of these fibrous diets with others of higher energy content can be an alternative to adjust to the development objectives discussed in the previous section. Martínez-Paredes *et al.* (2012 and 2019) used a fibrous diet (8.7 MJ DE/kg DM) throughout the whole rearing period, but allowed the access of young females to a higher energy concentration diet (11.0 MJ DE/kg DM) around mating (from 16 to 20 wk of age). When compared to other rearing feeding programmes, this management achieved the best performance results during the first reproductive cycle. Finally, Saidj *et al.* (2019) observed that, when increasing the crude protein (CP) content from 150 to 170 g/kg in diets with 10.9 MJ DE/kg, no significant differences were observed at metabolic level (glucose, urea, triglycerides total protein and blood cells counts) and in reproductive performance (female feed intake and live weight, as well as litter performance).

However, if we perform a small meta-analysis with the limited data available in the literature we can draw some conclusions about the possible effect of the chemical composition of rearing diets on primiparous rabbit does' performance (Figure 2). It seems that an excess of ADF reduces the rate of conception at first mating, an excess of CP can increase the rate of stillbirths at first parturition and reducing DE can increase feed intake during the first lactation.

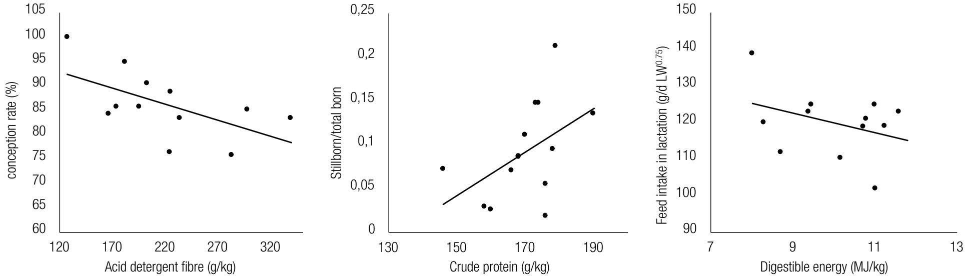

Figure 2: Meta-analysis on the effect of composition of the feed received during the rearing period on the conception rate in the first artificial insemination, stillborn ratio and feed intake during lactation of primiparous rabbit does. Built from literature (Xiccato *et al.,* 1995; Nizza *et al.*, 1997; Pascual *et al.,* 2002; Quevedo *et al.*, 2005; Arias-Álvarez *et al.,* 2009; Rebollar *et al.,* 2011; Martínez-Paredes *et al.,* 2012*,* 2018; Saidj *et al.,* 2019). LW: liveweight.

Long-term effects of high-fibre diets. Usually, reproductive and physiological differences observed between the different rearing feeding programmes disappear as of the second parturition. In this sense, Martínez-Paredes (2008) did not find long-term differences associated with the use of high-fibre diets during the rearing period. However, some authors have described some positive long-term effects of the use of high-fibre rearing diets: Nizza *et al.* (1997) obtained a higher litter size and heavier kits at weaning during the first four reproductive cycles; Pascual *et al.* (2002) observed increased number of weaned kits, a lower interval between parturitions and longer lifespan of females for 2 yr; and Martínez-Paredes *et al.* (2018) described a higher total number of born and weaned rabbits (+6 and +5, respectively) over 3 yr, compared with young rabbit does fed with a reproduction diet. Although lifespan depends on a large number of factors, one of the most important particularities of rabbit females characterised by a higher lifespan is their lower dependence on fat mobilisation to ensure reproduction (Savietto *et al.,* 2015), as body reserves are used as a safety factor. In fact, Theilgaard *et al.* (2006) observed that rabbit females with a low body condition (with less than one standard deviation from the population mean) or showing higher mobilisations (between 10 and 21 d of lactation) had an increased risk of culling (twice the probability of dying). Martínez-Paredes *et al.* (2018) observed that rabbit does fed with fibrous diet during rearing (+55 g NDF/kg DM) showed a +13% of life expectancy than others fed with reproduction diet in a population observed for three years. In contrast, Delgado *et al.* (2017a), for rabbit does reared on a fibrous diet fed *ad libitum* until one week before the first AI, observed that those with reproductive success throughout the first five AI had a greater fat mobilisation between the second AI and the first weaning than those that failed in at least one cycle. This successful group of females had a lower body fat content (15.7 *vs.* 17.2%) and liveweight at first AI compared with the other rabbit does. These results might indicate the different individual capacity to manage body reserves in critical periods, which might be linked to the individual genetic variability.

Therefore, theoretically, rearing feeding programmes allowing the gradual provision of resources, proportional development of young breeding animals and proper mobilisation at reproductive challenge events should provide breeding animals with a lower risk of culling throughout their reproductive life.

Rearing feeding programmes: polyunsaturated fatty acids

In recent years, other complementary and interesting nutritional proposals have been tested to improve the reproductive performance of young rabbit females, such as the use of diets enriched with polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA) during the rearing period. Rebollar *et al.* (2014) observed that kits born of rabbit does fed with a diet enriched with n-3 PUFA (+3.2 g/kg) weighed more and were longer, as well as having a lower number of stillborn (–0.8) in the second parturition. This could be related to the ability of n-3 PUFA supplements from fish products to reduce 2-series prostaglandin secretion by the endometrium, preventing early embryonic death. The same research team used the same n-3 PUFA supplement but in a dose fourfold higher (+14.3 g/kg), and the young females fed with this supplement presented greater physiometric parameters, an improvement in fertility rate (+13%) at the second parturition and higher PUFA profile in milk compared to a non-enriched control diet (Rodríguez *et al.,* 2018).

Other studies (Mattioli *et al.,* 2019) have observed similar improvement in fertility rate in the first cycle and from second to fourth cycle (+16 and +13%, respectively) as a consequence of dietary PUFA supplementation from different sources (extruded flaxseed or fish oil) during the rearing and reproductive period.

Table 1 shows our recommendations for a rearing diet. This rearing diet should be ad libitum used from young female selection (63-75 d of age) until the first parturition. Flushing around first insemination is also recommended.

Table 1: Nutritional recommendations (g/kg) for young rabbit females during the rearing period (from 63-75 d of age to first parturition).

Digestible energy (MJ/kg)	8.5-9.5
Crude protein	130-155
Digestible protein	91-109
Starch	<120
Neutral detergent fibre	370-430
Acid detergent fibre	250-350
Acid detergent lignin	70-80
n-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids	5-16
Lysine	7.2
Methionine + Cysteine	5.9
Threonine	6.3
Calcium	10
Phosphorous	5
Sodium	2
Chlorine	2.5

NUTRITIONAL REQUIREMENTS AND STRATEGIES FOR RABBIT DOES

The current nutritional requirements standards for rabbit does were developed in the last century, and the differentiated role of energy sources (fat and starch) in these diets was clarified (Xiccato, 1996; Pascual *et al.*, 2003; Xiccato and Trocino, 2010; De Blas and Mateos, 2010). Since then, there has been no update, despite the increase in rabbit doe productivity and possibly of its nutrient requirements. Nowadays, rabbit does have even higher prolificacy —which poses management difficulties for farmers— showing an important productive difference between primiparous and multiparous dams, and pregnant or not, and they maintain a relatively high replacement rate (Rosell and de la Fuente, 2009), suggesting potential unbalances in the productive system. Regarding the feeding strategy, there is a lack of studies evaluating nutritional requirements in rabbit does in the long term, as well as throughout the different physiologic states. In this section, we review whether new recommendations can be derived based on the results obtained with highly productive rabbits does in this century.

Arginine and glutamine supplementation

The interest in these amino acids derives from their potential influence on placental, embryonic and foetal growth during pregnancy. The economic impact of litter size in rabbit farms is well known (Cartuche *et al.*, 2014), and is affected mainly by ovulation and prenatal survival rates, the latter being around 0.35 both in rabbit does and sows (Blasco *et al.*, 1993). In rabbit does, when the number of foetuses increases, the vascular supply to each implantation site is reduced (Duncan, 1969). This limited blood supply may lead to smaller foetuses and a higher foetal mortality rate, reducing litter weight and size at birth (Argente *et al.*, 2003). In this context, arginine (Arg) is used as a precursor for the synthesis of nitric oxide, polyamines and other compounds (Wu and Morris, 1998), with nitric oxide playing an important role in vasodilatation, regulating the uterine blood flow promoting the transference of nutrients to the foetus (Moncada and Higgs, 1995; Bird *et al.*, 2003). Regarding glutamine (Gln), free gln is abundant in plasma, milk and foetal fluids (Wu, 2009), with the uterine uptake of gln in pregnant gilts being the highest compared to other amino acids (Wu *et al.*, 1999). Nevertheless, the gln uptake by porcine mammary glands is not adequate for milk protein synthesis (Li *et al.*, 2009).

In standard diets for rabbit does, the Arg/lysine (Lys) and Gln/Lys ratio is around 1.45 and 3.51, respectively (Nicodemus *et al.,* 1999b). When low Arg and gln diets for rabbit does were supplemented with 4 g Arg/kg (1.23 *vs.* 1.66 total Arg/Lys ratio, or 1.33 *vs.* 1.85 apparent ileal digestible Arg/Lys ratio) or 4 g Gln/kg (3.30 *vs.* 3.80 total Gln/Lys ratio, or 3.75 *vs.* 4.29 apparent ileal digestible Gln/Lys ratio) tended to increase the number of kits born per litter (+0.8), and the litter size once the adoptions were carried out (+0.6), with no impairment of the rabbit doe body condition during the first three cycles (Delgado *et al.*, 2017b, 2019a). This effect was reflected at weaning in a tendency to increase the litter size (+0.7), and consequently the litter weight. The possible positive effect of Arg might be associated with an increase in uterine blood flow. In fact, in rabbit does the probability of foetus mortality is three times higher if they receive a single vein than if they receive two or more veins (Damico *et al.*, 2013). Otherwise, the effect of Gln might be related to better development of oocytes, an effect already observed *in vitro* in hamsters, rabbits (Gwatkin and Haidri, 1973; Bae and Foote, 1975) and embryos (in hamsters and pigs; Carney and Bavister, 1987; Petters *et al.*, 1990), which might be linked to the use of Gln as an energy source. Curiously, there was no additive effect of the simultaneous supplementation of Arg and Gln. These results suggest that the physiological period to supplement these amino acids might be different if a synergistic effect is desired, and possibly with a higher dose than the one used in this study (total Arg/Lys ratio of 2.64 in sows, Mateo *et al.*, 2007, 2008, and 2.07 in rats, Zeng *et al.*, 2008). The different ways of action of Arg and Gln to promote prolificacy might recommend supplementing Gln a few days before insemination, at least until embryo implantation (7-8 d after insemination), when fertilisation and implantation occurs (Harper, 1961; Denker, 1977), whereas Arg supplementation could be done from a few days before implantation until the end of pregnancy. Currently, it is not possible to supplement these amino acids in rabbit diets due to their price/availability. Using ingredients rich in Arg and Gln (such as wheat gluten or groundnut meal) might be a solution, although it should be evaluated whether they exert similar effects.

Enrichment in n-3 fatty acids

The requirements of essential fatty acids n-3 and n-6 and the optimal n-6/n-3 ratio are unknown in rabbits, and there are still no clear recommendations, probably due to the variability of the results obtained. The n-6/n-3 ratio in diets with no added fat ranges between 4 and 15, whereas it is usually below 4 in diets enriched in n-3 fatty acids. The reduction of the n-6/n-3 ratio (from 7.3 to 2.2, and 34 g fat/kg DM) using fish oil (7.5 g/kg) lowered the number of stillborn in the second parturition and increased the weight and size of newborn kits (Rebollar *et al.*, 2014; Rodríguez *et al.*, 2017). Using similar diets, reducing the n-6/n-3 ratio (from 8.7 to 1.0) with a higher dose of fish oil (30 g/kg), Rodríguez *et al.* (2018) again found a greater size of newborn kits, better embryo quality and higher fertility at the second insemination, although a tendency to reduce litter size at weaning (–0.6) was also observed. According to these authors, these results might be associated with hormonal changes due to the increase in oestradiol and leptin during lactation, and progesterone around the implantation phase of pregnancy. It might be related to the influence of these PUFA on both prostaglandin and steroid metabolism (Wathes *et al.*, 2007). The reduction of the n-6/n-3 ratio (from 13.4 to 3.5) using linseed oil rendered different results, increasing the number of kits per litter once homogenised (+0.6) with no other effect on rabbit doe productivity and body condition throughout the first four cycles (Delgado *et al.*, 2018a), but a reduction in the replacement rate of rabbit does when high n-6/n-3 ratio and high soluble fibre levels were combined (Figure 3).

The benefits of the n-6/n-3 ratio reduction do not seem to be derived from the n-3 source. In fact, the partial substitution of soybean oil with extruded linseed or fish oil (dietary n-6/n-3 ratio: 1.7, 1.1, 1.1, and different fat contents: 3.0, 5.6 and 4.0 respectively) both improved fertility (on av. +13% percentage units; without oestrus synchronisation), the number of kits born alive (on av. +0.6) and weaned (on av. +0.3; without homogenisation),

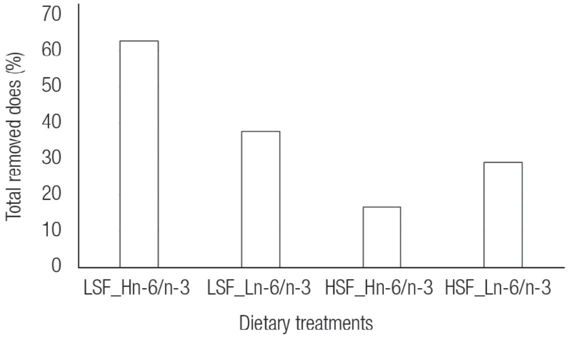

Figure 3: Effect of level of dietary soluble fibre and n-6/n-3 fatty acids profile on the proportion of total does removed over four cycles (HSF and LSF: high and low soluble fibre; Ln-6/n-3 and Hn-6/n-3: high and low n-6/n-3 fatty acid ratio. $P_{\text{Soluble fibre}}$=0.005; $P_{\text{Soluble fibre} \times \text{n-6/n-3 ratio}}$=0.056) (Delgado *et al.*, 2018a)

milk production and perirenal fat at insemination in rabbit does throughout the first four cycles (Mattioli *et al.,* 2019). They also reported a reduction of the n-6/n-3 ratio in the ovaries due to the enrichment with n-3 long-chain PUFA. The influence of n-3 fatty acids on the hormonal status, as mentioned above, might be behind these positive effects. Nevertheless, using very similar diets, Menchetti *et al.* (2018) found no improvement in reproductive traits considering two cycles in multiparous rabbit does. Similarly, the enrichment of the diet with n-3 fatty acids from extruded linseed (n-6/n-3 ratio: 4.8 *vs.* 1.0) did not modify fertility or prolificacy (Maertens *et al.*, 2005). There are authors even reporting negative results when marine algae PUFA was supplemented in the diet, such as the impairment of kit weight at birth and at weaning in nulliparous does (1 cycle; Mordenti *et al.*, 2010). A consistent effect among different studies is that modification of the dietary n-6/n-3 ratio led to parallel changes in the milk fatty acid profile (Pascual *et al.*, 1999; Maertens *et al.*, 2005; Delgado *et al.*, 2018a; Rodríguez *et al.,* 2018; Mattioli *et al.,* 2019). Nevertheless, most authors did not find any influence of the n-6/n-3 ratio before weaning on litter performance and survival after weaning (Rodríguez *et al.,* 2018; Delgado *et al.*, 2019b; Mattioli *et al.,* 2019). However, Maertens *et al.* (2005) reported a reduction in fattening mortality when n-6/n-3 ratio decreased from 4.3 to 1.0 during the growing period. The lack of agreement among studies suggests that other factors may be influencing the response to n-3 fatty acids enrichment.

These heterogeneous results (both for rabbit does and kits) may be accounted for by the different content of single PUFA (which could compete for the desaturase/elongase enzymes), the potential oxidation of these fatty acids that depends on the dietary antioxidant capacity, the different interaction with the intestinal microbiota or differences in the experimental procedure (oestrous synchronisation, the period of supplementation or age of does). Anyway, in most studies, no negative effects on reproductive traits of rabbit does were reported for the dietary n-3 enrichment.

Particle size

The range of dietary level of insoluble fibre for rabbit does is known, but the relevance of particle size had not been evaluated, considering that fibrous diets with coarse fibre or low fibre diets with fine fibre may penalise rabbit doe performance, although it is not easy to produce this type of diets. Its importance is related to its influence on the mean retention time of the digesta (Gidenne, 1993) and thus possibly on voluntary feed intake, although the difficulty of quantifying the large fibrous particles (>0.3 mm) may have limited the available information. The quantification of large particles has to be done using wet sieving, to 'dissolve' the pellet. The main problem is the swelling capacity of particles rich in starch and soluble fibre (such as grain cereals and sugar beet pulp), that produce very bulky particles being quantified as large particles when they do not stimulate the rate of passage. This can be partially corrected by determining the insoluble fibre content (NDF) in the residue collected in each sieve. The inclusion of a very low proportion of large particles (<20% in diets with around 360 g NDF/kg DM) obtained mainly by substituting alfalfa with paprika meal impaired feed and DE intake, as well as reproductive traits (average of two cycles with multiparous does Nicodemus *et al.*, 2006), although other specific characteristics of paprika meal cannot be ruled out. Nevertheless, it is difficult to achieve such low levels of large particles except by increasing the content of some unusual by-products. Dietary particle size may be also modified by using different grinding sizes for fibrous sources. This way, the inclusion of alfalfa and straw coarsely ground (9 *vs.* 1 mm) in standard or low fibrous diets (containing 35 to 20% particles >0.3 mm, 23 to 14% NDF >0.3 mm, and 10 to 1% NDF >1.25 mm, on DM basis) reduced the proportion of culled rabbit does during the experiment (3 *vs.* 22%. Nicodemus *et al.*, 2010). These authors did not find any other benefit, but an increase in feed and DE intake in the weaning-parturition period and the fertility when coarsely ground fibres were included in low fibrous diets (270 g NDF/kg DM). The opposite occurred in rabbit does fed diets with 340 g NDF/kg DM where the inclusion of coarse ingredients impaired feed and DE intake (in the same period) and fertility. These results are in agreement with those of Fortun-Lamothe (1998), who reported that an energy restriction of multiparous rabbit does in late pregnancy had a detrimental effect on receptivity and could suggest that the pre-partum DE intake might be more relevant to reproduction than pre-mating DE intake (Quevedo *et al.*, 2016a,b), probably due to the great mobilisation of body reserves at the end of pregnancy (Fortun-Lamothe, 2006; Savietto *et al.*, 2016). Finally, when highly fibrous diets are used, it might be interesting to reduce the particle size to improve the digestibility. This way, the reduction in grinding size of alfalfa and barley (from 4.5 to 1.5 mm, and from 16 to 11% NDF>1.25 mm) in a high-fibre diet (420 g NDF/kg DM) impaired the feed intake in the first lactation, but increased it in the second one, with no influence on reproductive traits and body composition of rabbit does during the first three parturitions (Romero *et al.*, 2011). The broad differences observed in the proportion of NDF >1.25 mm obtained by Nicodemus *et al.* (2010) and Romero *et al.* (2011) derive from the different level of fibre, but also from the different type of fibre used. The latter authors used a significant amount of sugar beet pulp, which increases the amount of large fibrous particles (due to its high-water holding capacity), although this fibre source does not seem to stimulate the rate of passage compared to hay (Gidenne *et al.*, 1987). This is a shortcoming of this methodology that makes it difficult to establish a more robust value of minimal large fibre requirements.

Accordingly, there is no advantage in reducing grinding size in high-fibre diets, but it may be worth increasing it in very low fibrous ones, always preserving the pellet quality. Further evaluation of diets with coarse particle size might be also of interest to confirm its potential effect on limiting feed intake in rearing does fed high-fibre diets, and its positive effect on the culling rate of does in production.

Soluble fibre

This fibre fraction was not taken into account for a long time. In the last 15 yr its utility in growing rabbits was observed because of its positive influence on the health status of young rabbits after weaning in a context of epizootic rabbit enteropathy, probably through its effects on the intestinal mucosa and microbiota (Gómez-Conde *et al.*, 2007; Trocino *et al.*, 2013). In rabbit does, the increase in soluble fibre (80 *vs.* 130 g/kg DM and 330 g NDF/kg DM) reduced the replacement rate in rabbit does over the first four cycles, especially when combined with n-6 than with n-3 fatty acids (Figure 3; Delgado *et al.*, 2018a). The positive effect of soluble fibre on the replacement rate might be related to the changes exerted in the intestinal microbiota (Delgado *et al.*, 2015). Soluble fibre might also explain the reduction in mortality around parturition, which would be related to the slower starch digestion *in vitro* in high soluble fibre diets that might extend the glucose availability over time (Farías-Kovac *et al.*, unpublished), or to the longer fermentation time of sugar beet pulp observed *in vitro* (Abad-Guamán *et al.*, 2018), which might both contribute to limit the ketosis incidence. In fact, in nulliparous pregnant rabbit does, a higher soluble fibre level has been associated with both lower pre-partum mortality and number of stillborn, with females showing lower NEFA and higher glucose concentration in blood at parturition (Martínez-Paredes *et al.,* 2012). No other positive effects of soluble fibre have been recorded, and DE and DP intake during lactation, milk production and litter weight at weaning tended to reduce with the high soluble fibre level. Similarly, the increase in soluble fibre (106 to 126 g/kg DM, and 320 g NDF/kg DM) in late lactation (21-35 d) obtained by the partial substitution of alfalfa and wheat straw for apple pulp also reduced feed intake and kit weight at weaning (Álvarez *et al.*, 2007). These negative effects of soluble fibre were more clearly observed in high-fibre diets (on av. 460 g NDF/kg) with a high soluble fibre content (140 *vs.* 180 g/kg) only offered to rabbit does in late lactation (Martínez-Vallespín *et al.*, 2011). Further research is required to confirm the interest of a minimal soluble fibre level in diets for rabbit does.

Flushing

An adequate energy supply before insemination seems to be important to achieve good fertility rates in most species and also in rabbits. In fact, rabbit doe receptivity was impaired when they were restricted from weaning to parturition, while the stimulation of energy intake from parturition to mating seemed to improve the conception rate (Fortun-Lamothe, 1998). Nowadays, it has still not been clarified which of these two periods is more important, if not both equally, and what we can do to limit the negative energy balance before parturition, which might be associated with a higher ketosis incidence. The selection of the main energy source to increase the DE intake might depend on the period, as starch might be preferable before parturition and fat after parturition. One option is to feed rabbit does with a more energetic diet (using fat) than the recommended one (11.5 *vs.* 10.6 g DP/kJ DE). However, in the long term (6 cycles), despite the increase in DE intake during pregnancy and lactation observed (and accordingly of milk production), a reduction in prolificacy (–0.7), and higher litter mortality after weaning (+4 percentage units) were found (Quevedo *et al.*, 2006a,b). In contrast, when rabbit does were fed a diet to stimulate milk production (302 g NDF, 161 g starch and 49 g fat/kg as fed, with 11.6 g DP/kJ DE) the first 25 d of lactation combined with a standard diet (343 g NDF, 161 g starch and 24 g fat/kg, with 11.3 g DP/kJ DE) from 25 to 42 d (next parturition) no impairment was reported (to rabbit does and their litters), but no benefit either (including fertility), compared to offering to rabbit does the standard diet as sole diet (Read *et al.*, 2016). It would be interesting to evaluate whether a specific diet in the weaning-parturition period might be of interest.

Glucose precursors for rabbit does. In the last days of pregnancy, the feed intake of rabbit does is sharply reduced (Oger *et al.*, 1978), although the foetuses still demand a high amount of nutrients, which results in an important mobilisation of the body reserves (Savietto *et al.*, 2016) and an increase in the plasma non-esterified fatty acid and β-hydroxybutyrate (Minuti *et al.,* 2015). In this period, the increase in the number of foetuses reduced the plasmatic glucose concentration and changed its amino acid profile (Minuti *et al.*, 2020). Possibly, a glucose deficit may lead to ketosis and to higher mortality around parturition, especially if the dietary starch is low, similar to that reported in cows (Nielsen and Ingvartsen, 2004), or impair fertility. This situation might be counterbalanced by an increase in the dietary energy increasing the starch or other glucose precursors in this period. However, the optimal starch level was 200 g/kg DM (with 355 g NDF and 35 g fat/kg DM), and both higher or lower starch levels (combined with a reduction or increase in NDF+fat, respectively), impaired the productive traits of rabbit does (De Blas *et al.*, 1995). Using a different approach, Nicodemus *et al.* (2005) compared three dietary strategies with a similar DP/DE ratio (12.4 g/MJ) during the first three cycles. A control diet high in starch (191 g/kg DM) and 39 g fat/kg DM, a diet with less starch and more fat (106 and 58 g/kg DM, respectively), and a third treatment in which the latter diet was supplied in the first 21 d of lactation, and from this moment to parturition rabbit does were fed a diet with 163 g starch, 38 g fat and 25 g propylene glycol/kg DM. In this work, the combination of these two diets compared with the enriched fat group reduced mortality of rabbit does (17.4 *vs.* 0%) and improved fertility (81.3 *vs.* 88.2%), and also reduced kit mortality at birth compared to the high starch group (with no effect on feed intake). Similarly, the use of a diet containing a supplement of glucose precursors combined with minerals-vitamins around parturition (from –7 to +7 d) compared to the same diet but with no supplement improved their body fat content, fertility (84.7 *vs.* 75.0%) and litter size at birth, with no effect on rabbit doe mortality (Alfonso *et al.*, 2014). These effects might be associated with a reduction in ketosis incidence. The glucose supply of propylene glycol also has the potential to increase plasma insulin that might inhibit the fat mobilisation, as in cows (Nielsen and Ingvartsen, 2004). Propylene glycol can be also provided in drinking water in order to increase the energy supply. In this way, its supplementation (2% in water) for 4 d before insemination improved fertility by 10 percentage units (64 *vs.* 53%; Luzi *et al.*, 2001). In contrast, the supplementation of propylene glycol (2.5% in water) from mid-pregnancy to the end of lactation or only during lactation showed no benefits for the doe or the litter, and even its supplementation in pregnancy-lactation impaired the body fat reduction at the onset of lactation, and increased litter mortality after weaning (García-García *et al.*, 2010; Sakr *et al.*, 2011; Arias-Álvarez *et al.*, 2013). According to these results, more information about the dose, the form and the period of supplementation of propylene glycol is required to optimise its use.

Feeding and body condition

The evolution of the body condition, and especially of energy balance, of rabbit does has been extensively studied and reviewed due to the interest in limiting the negative energy balance at specific points of the productive cycle (Parigi-Bini and Xiccato, 1993; Fortun-Lamothe, 2006; Pascual *et al.*, 2006, 2013). These traits are mainly influenced by non-nutritional factors such as the genetic type, physiological state, reproductive rhythm, reproductive success, litter size and weaning age. Nutrition also plays a role in the variations in body condition and energy balance, the most relevant factor being the level and source of energy (starch, animal fat or vegetal oil), as reviewed by Pascual *et al.* (2003) or reported by Fortun-Lamothe *et al.* (2005). In addition, the effect of the energy source on the use of body reserves depends on the genetic type and priorities of the rabbit female (Arnau-Bonachera *et al.*, 2018a). In lines selected for growth rate, females are characterised by a high dependence on their body reserves to cope with the high demand of the current lactation, obtaining better results when using diets that promote milk production (animal fat). However, in lines selected for hyper-prolificity, the foundation criteria have promoted a pattern based on the body reserves accretion during lactation to cope with future reproduction, achieving better results when using diets that promote body condition (starch).

Besides nutrition, other factors such as particle size, arginine/glutamine supplementation, level of soluble fibre and n-6/n-3 fatty acid ratio failed to exert any influence on the body condition of rabbit does during at least three cycles (Romero *et al.*, 2011; Delgado *et al.*, 2017b, 2018a). This might suggest that rabbit does have an important adaptability to the diet, as long as the diet does not deviate much from the nutritional standards (De Blas and Mateos, 2010; Xiccato and Trocino, 2010). In addition, we must bear in mind that reproductive rabbit does naturally show positive and negative balances in their body condition, genetically driven by their homeorhetic system, both throughout the reproductive cycle and life. We should not fight against these natural trajectories, but rather find a feeding programme that avoids an excessive deviation of the body condition from this normal trajectory, which could put the animal at risk. These deviations occur frequently (a complicated parturition, seasonal environmental variations, presence of some pathogen...) and the diet must facilitate the female's homeostatic ability to resume her trajectory (Pascual *et al.,* 2013).

Feed for the doe or for the litter

Considering the difficulties involved in providing different diets to the rabbit doe and the litter in the current productive systems, and assuming their different nutritional requirements (Xiccato *et al.*, 2006), although roughly defined, especially to minimise digestive troubles in the litter after weaning, several attempts have tried to adapt the diet of the rabbit doe to the litter. In this context, the substitution from 18 d of lactation to weaning of the rabbit doe diet, increasing the NDF and fat level (from 276 to 305 and from 30 to 55 g/kg as fed, respectively) and decreasing the starch content (from 190 to 95 g/kg) made it possible both to maintain the body condition and fertility of rabbit does and reduce litter mortality after weaning (Fortun-Lamothe *et al.*, 2005). When the substitution was done increasing the NDF (up to 329 g NDF/kg) but reducing both the starch and fat content (95 and 32 g/kg, respectively), litter mortality after weaning was also reduced, but the body condition and fertility of the rabbit does was impaired. These results suggest the importance of meeting the energy requirements of rabbit does, but also the minimal fibre requirements of suckling rabbits at the onset of feed intake. Using a similar design, Álvarez *et al.* (2007) increased the dietary soluble fibre (from 106 to 126 g/kg DM, with 322 g NDF/kg DM) from 21 to 35 d of lactation, but it reduced kit weight at weaning, with minor effects on rabbit does, and the influence on litter health status was not observed due to the very low mortality rate. Martínez-Vallespín *et al.* (2011) followed a similar strategy and substituted at 17-d of lactation a standard breeding diet for another one in which starch was partially substituted with insoluble (acid detergent fibre, ADF) and soluble fibre, and with a low dietary protein content (and which was also offered to the litter after weaning). The latter diet reduced the litter mortality after weaning, but impaired feed and DE intake, milk production and body condition of rabbit does and litter weight at weaning. These effects observed in rabbit does might be related to the caecal filling effect produced by the combination of a high dietary NDF and sugar beet pulp level (Carabaño *et al.*, 1997) that might limit both feed and DE intake (García *et al.*, 2002). Using a similar approach, Gerencsér *et al.* (2011) changed the rabbit doe (and litter) from a breeding (136 g crude fibre, 46 g fat and 185 g starch/kg as fed) to a growing diet (172 g crude fibre, 31 g fat, 151 g starch/kg) at late lactation (21-35 d), although no positive effect was achieved either in the litter (medicated after weaning) or the rabbit does over five reproductive cycles. However, this type of strategy reduced litter mortality after weaning with no negative effects on rabbit does over three reproductive cycles (Read *et al.*, 2016). These authors fed rabbit does from kindling to 25 d and from 35 (weaning) to 42 d a standard diet (343 g NDF and 161 g starch/kg as fed, and 11.6 g DP/kJ DE), while from 25 to 35 d they offered a fattening diet (415 g NDF and 70 g starch/kg, and 9.7 g DP/kJ DE) compared with a standard reproduction diet throughout the cycle or the combination of a reproduction and a milk enhancer diet. These results enhance the interest in providing different diets to the mother and the litter, mainly to optimise litter health after weaning while avoiding any impairment of rabbit doe traits.

New ingredients for rabbit does

Fibrous sources, legumes, glycerol. Non-usual ingredients, mainly industry by-products, are included in rabbit diets with caution due to the limited information regarding the effect on feed intake and nutritive value. However, there are few studies testing 'new' ingredients in rabbit does. Nicodemus *et al.* (2007) reported that soybean hulls and defatted grape seed meal can be included up to a 220 and 50 g/kg level in substitution of alfalfa, straw and sunflower hulls, with no impairment in performance. A higher level of soybean hull reduced feed intake despite the high lignin level of the diet. Regarding the protein sources, the replacement of soybean and sunflower meals by rapeseed meal (100 g/kg) and white lupin seeds (140 g/kg; Volek *et al.*, 2018), by white lupin seeds (250 g/kg; Volek *et al.*, 2014) or by hulled white lupin seeds (180 g/kg; Uhrilova and Volek, 2019) did not modify the productive traits of rabbit does, but enriched their milk in n-3 fatty acids. Similarly, the inclusion up to 50 g/kg of glycerol for starch had no influence on the productive traits of rabbit does (Iñigo *et al.*, 2011).

Probiotics. The interest in studying the effects of probiotics in rabbit does is scarce, considering the low number of publications. The use of *Bacillus cereus* var. toyoi in rabbit does (2×10^8 spores/kg feed) reduced the parturition interval and increased feed efficiency and numerical productivity (Nicodemus *et al.*, 2004). The same probiotic and dose produced different results, reducing kit mortality in the first 18 d of lactation (in the second lactation), increasing the feed intake of rabbit does in the second part of lactation and the litter growth rate during lactation (Pinheiro *et al.*, 2007). These results were similar to those obtained with Bacillus CIP 5832 (2×10^9 colony forming units/kg feed. Maertens *et al.,* 1994). Another probiotic with positive results is *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*. In rabbit does, it improved fertility and reduced mortality of does and suckling rabbits (6.5×10^9 colony forming units/kg feed. Belhasen *et al.,* 2016). Nevertheless, the precise mechanisms behind these effects of probiotics are not clearly understood.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES IN NUTRITION FOR RABBIT DOES

Effect of diet on the rabbit doe microbiota and its transmission to the litter

The main inheritances left by the rabbit doe to its litter are its genetics and microbiota, the latter being the only factors that can be influenced by the diet. The microbiota might play a relevant role in rabbit doe longevity, but also in the future litter health and performance. The transfer of intestinal microbiota from the mother to the litter was shown when the similarity of caecal microbiota was studied at 26 d of lactation in rabbit does (fed no antibiotic) and their litters with different cross-fostering policies (Abecia *et al.*, 2007). These authors reported that the caecal microbial profile of kits from the same litter clustered together, regardless of whether they shared their biological mother or not. The biological mother seemed to have an influence on the intestinal microbiota, albeit weaker than the effect of the mother who finally suckled them. But how does the dam transfer its microbiota to the litter? Apparently, there are two periods to do that, during the short passage of the kits through the birth canal, and in lactation through the bacteria present in the milk, in the faeces, which present in the skin around the nipples and in the hair used as nest material. If we assume the absence of bacteria in the placenta of mammals, which is not completely ruled out (Jiménez *et al.*, 2008; Willyard, 2018), the first maternal bacteria to come into contact with the kits would be those present in the birth canal. This microbiota comes from the digestive tract and would reach the reproductive tract (and the mammary gland) by translocation, as observed in mice and cows (Donnet-Hughes *et al.*, 2010; de Andrés *et al.*, 2018; Klein-Jöbstl *et al.*, 2019), although there is no data in rabbits.

The second contact with the maternal microbiota would be with that present in the nest material (hair combined with the 'foreign' microbiota in wood shavings or straw), that around the nipples (no data for either), in the milk, as in other mammals (Martín *et al.*, 2004), and that present in hard faeces excreted in the nest (Kovács *et al.*, 2006). The intake of faecal pellets was observed even two days after birth, although it is more frequent from 7 d after birth onwards (Combes *et al.*, 2014; Nicodemus *et al.*, 2015). The increase in faecal pellet intake (supplementing the nest with additional pellets) accelerated the microbiota implantation in kits' caecum and improved their health status after weaning (Combes *et al*, 2014), although this is not always observed (Nicodemus *et al.*, 2015). It might depend on the faecal pellet composition (microbial and chemical), which in turns depends on the diet, and anyway, it seems that no benefit is obtained from removing the maternal faeces from the nest. In this way, the separation of rabbit does from the litter, only joined for nursing (2 times/d, and all maternal faeces were removed), decreased the number of caecal bacteria, the villus height/crypt depth ratio and the development of the appendix in the kits (Zhang *et al.*, 2018). The supply of selected faeces in the nest might be of interest to modify the microbiota profile of the litter when trying to avoid antibiotic-resistant genes (Achard *et al.*, 2019).

Another source of bacteria is maternal milk. Milk intake begins just after birth, and its endogenous microbial content in mammals is now well known, confirmed both by DNA detection and bacterial isolation (Fernández *et al.*, 2013). The sequencing of 16s DNA in milk of 6-d lactating rabbit does revealed the main operational transfer units (OTUs) (Table 2; Delgado *et al.*, 2015 and unpublished), and some of the most abundant are also present in the milk of sows and humans (Fernández *et al.,* 2013; Chen *et al.,* 2018). It seems that at least some bacteria could translocate during pregnancy from the maternal digestive tract to the mammary gland and milk (de Andrés *et al.*, 2018). However, the key question is what role these bacteria play and whether the composition can be manipulated through the diet. Previous studies described in kits in the first week of age that once the small intestine is colonised there is bacterial translocation to the mesenteric lymph nodes (Urao *et al.,* 1995, 1996). The supplementation of Gln in rabbit does

Table 2: The first twenty operational transfer units (OTUs) more abundant in in mesenteric lymph nodes (MLN) of 6-d-old kits and their relevance order in milk and faeces of rabbit does at the same time. Values represent the order for each type of sample (values in grey indicate OTUs within the 20 most abundant in milk or faeces that are also abundant in MLN) (Delgado *et al.,* unpublished).

Operational transfer units	Milk	MLN	Faeces
k__Bacteria; p__Proteobacteria; c__Betaproteobacteria; o__Burkholderiales; f__Comamonadaceae	1	1	65
k__Bacteria; p__Bacteroidetes; c__Bacteroidia; o__Bacteroidales; f__Bacteroidaceae; g__Bacteroides; s__	126	2	9
k__Bacteria; p__Proteobacteria; c__Gammaproteobacteria; o__Xanthomonadales; f__Xanthomonadaceae; g__Stenotrophomonas; s__maltophilia	6	3	92
k__Bacteria; p__Bacteroidetes; c__Bacteroidia; o__Bacteroidales; f__Bacteroidaceae; g__Bacteroides; s__ovatus	143	4	28
k__Bacteria; p__Firmicutes; c__Bacilli; o__Lactobacillales; f__Streptococcaceae; g__Streptococcus; s__	2	5	84
k__Bacteria; p__Bacteroidetes; c__Bacteroidia; o__Bacteroidales; f__[Odoribacteraceae]; g__Odoribacter; s__	230	6	34
k__Bacteria; p__Firmicutes; c__Bacilli; o__Bacillales; f__Staphylococcaceae; g__Staphylococcus; s__	3	7	85
k__Bacteria; p__Firmicutes; c__Clostridia; o__Clostridiales; f__Ruminococcaceae; g__Oscillospira; s__	30	8	6
k__Bacteria; p__Proteobacteria; c__Betaproteobacteria; o__Burkholderiales; f__Comamonadaceae; g__Tepidimonas; s__	5	9	93
k__Bacteria; p__Firmicutes; c__Bacilli; o__Lactobacillales; f__Lactobacillaceae; g__Lactobacillus; s__	7	10	103
k__Bacteria; p__Bacteroidetes; c__Bacteroidia; o__Bacteroidales; f__Rikenellaceae; g__; s__	181	11	12
k__Bacteria; p__Bacteroidetes; c__Bacteroidia; o__Bacteroidales; f__Porphyromonadaceae; g__Parabacteroides; s__distasonis	232	12	19
k__Bacteria; p__Bacteroidetes; c__Bacteroidia; o__Bacteroidales; f__[Odoribacteraceae]; g__Butyricimonas; s__	227	13	68
k__Bacteria; p__[Thermi]; c__Deinococci; o__Deinococcales; f__Deinococcaceae; g__Deinococcus; s__geothermalis	82	14	120
k__Bacteria; p__Firmicutes; c__Clostridia; o__Clostridiales; f__Lachnospiraceae; g__; s__	100	15	8
k__Bacteria; p__Bacteroidetes; c__Flavobacteriia; o__Flavobacteriales; f__[Weeksellaceae]; g__; s__	4	16	104
k__Bacteria; p__Bacteroidetes; c__Bacteroidia; o__Bacteroidales; f__Bacteroidaceae; g__Bacteroides	169	17	37
k__Bacteria; p__Firmicutes; c__Clostridia; o__Clostridiales; f__Ruminococcaceae; g__; s__	13	18	4
k__Bacteria; p__Bacteroidetes; c__Bacteroidia; o__Bacteroidales; f__Bacteroidaceae; g__Bacteroides; s__fragilis	209	19	66
k__Bacteria; p__Firmicutes; c__Clostridia; o__Clostridiales; f__; g__; s__	26	20	1

k: kingdom, p: phylum, c: class, o: order, f: family, g: genus, s: specie. MLN: mesenteric lymph nodes of 6 d-old kits. Milk and faeces of does in 6-d of lactation.

tended to reduce the bacterial translocation to mesenteric lymph nodes in their 6-d-old kits (aerobes and facultative aerobes) which showed a lower mortality after weaning (Delgado *et al.*, 2019a,c). This might be associated with an increase of Gln in milk (Santos de Aquino *et al.*, 2014) and in agreement with the decreased intestinal permeability and bacterial translocation in mice supplemented with Gln (Santos *et al.*, 2010). Thus, Delgado *et al.* (2015 and unpublished) studied the microbiota in the milk and faeces of rabbit does (6-d lactation) and mesenteric lymph nodes of 6-d-old kits when rabbit does were fed a combination of two dietary levels of soluble fibre (8 *vs.* 13% on DM basis) and two n-6/n-3 fatty acids ratios (13.5 *vs.* 3.5). One of the main surprises was the identification of several species of Lactobacillus in the milk and mesenteric lymph nodes (Figure 4), as it was considered absent in rabbit. They also reported that most of the bacteria detected in the mesenteric lymph nodes were also present in the maternal milk and/or in the faeces. The microbiota of mesenteric lymph nodes clustered according to the n-6/n-3 fatty acid ratio, which also affected the milk fatty acid composition (Delgado *et al.*, 2015, 2018a), and was closer to the milk than to the faecal microbiota, which instead clustered according to the soluble fibre level (although it also affected some important OTUs in the mesenteric lymph nodes; Figure 4). Consequently, the bacteria found in the mesenteric lymph nodes of kits probably came from the milk, the faeces or from both (Table 2; Figure 4). Curiously, only the level of soluble fibre exerted a positive influence on the rabbit health status after weaning (in an epizootic rabbit enteropathy context) when fed the same diets as before weaning (Delgado *et al.*, 2018b). However, when these weaned rabbits were fed a common standard diet, no effect on health status was observed (Delgado *et al.*, 2019b), indicating that these changes before weaning are not enough to improve rabbit health after weaning.

These results indicate that this microbiota can be at least partially modified by the diet, although the question remains about what role this initial microbial colonisation plays. At present, the role of the microbiota found in the mesenteric lymph nodes on the colonisation process or in the immune system development is still unknown, as is the potential influence of its manipulation on the future litter health. It is not clear whether this initial microbiota might be behind the influence of the litter on the rabbit health, and the relevance of the maternal influence on the kit intestinal microbiota compared with that of the post-weaning diet.

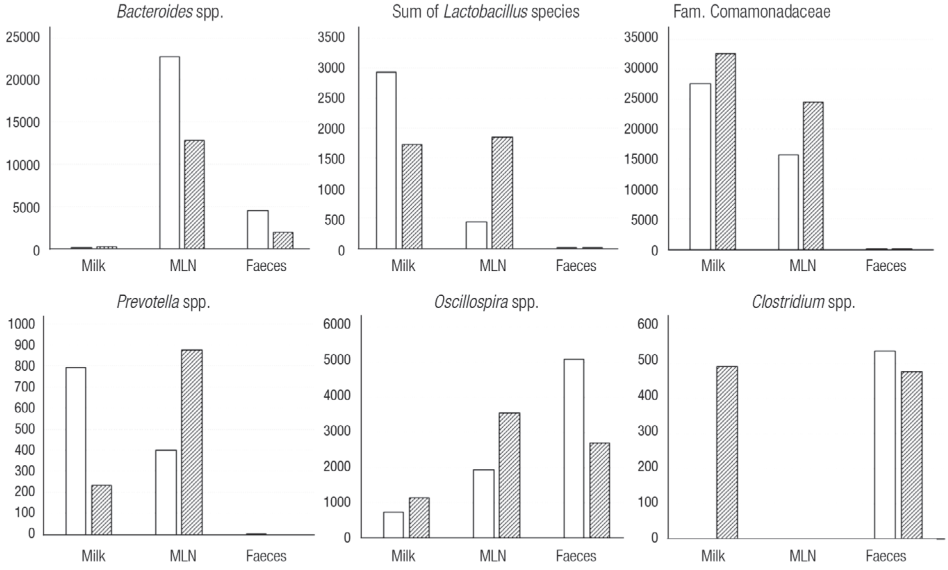

Figure 4: Abundance of different OTUs (number of 16s DNA sequences in 400 mg of fresh sample) in mesenteric lymph nodes (MLN) of 6-d-old kits and maternal milk and faeces at 6-d of lactation (Delgado *et al.*, unpublished). [☐high soluble fibre diet ▨ low soluble fibre diet].

The influence of the diet on milk microbiota suggests that it might modify the microbiota of the mammary gland, which is a relevant issue considering the increasing mastitis incidence and *Staphylococcus aureus* strains resistant to antibiotics (Moreno-Grua *et al.*, 2018). In fact, in humans, the supplementation for the last 9 weeks of pregnancy of *Lactobacillus salivarius PS2* reduced the mastitis incidence (Fernández *et al*., 2016). What bacteria may limit the mastitis development, when and how should it be supplied and whether the type of diet can contribute to promoting udder health are new challenges to be explored in rabbit does in the near future.

Effect of diet on the rabbit doe immune system

In this same context, taking into account that the health of the rabbit doe and its litter is one of the most determining issues of the current farms' profitability, it is also important to evaluate the possible effect of the feeding system on the immune status and microbiota of the rabbits and their litters. Although there are not many works on the relationship between female's microbiota and the health of the own female and their litters, recently Savietto *et al.* (2020) have carried out a study in this line. In this study, although the authors observed an evolution of the maternal microbiota with age (observing a reduction in the alpha-and beta-diversity indexes of the faecal microbiota), no correlation was observed between these indexes and the annual mean offspring survival or female survival.

The immune system of animals, and among them rabbits, develops with age. Jeklova *et al.* (2009) observed that the count of the different populations of leukocytes in the blood of rabbits increases with age up to six weeks of life. However, after that age, the counts are already quite similar to those of an adult rabbit. However, Guerrero *et al.* (2011) and Penades *et al.* (2018) observed that the count of the different populations of lymphocytes in the blood of breeding rabbits changes significantly throughout the reproductive cycle, and that these counts could be influenced by the availability of resources and/or the reproductive effort of these animals. In fact, they observed that the counts of major blood lymphocyte populations were generally lower in those rabbit does with weaning at 42 compared to 28 d postpartum, probably due to their greater lactational effort.

The immune status of rabbit does and their evolution throughout their reproductive life can be essential to help improve their health and lifespan. In this sense, Ferrian *et al.* (2012) observed that the evolution of the lymphocyte populations of rabbit does belonging to a genetic line characterised by greater robustness and survival was significantly different from a line selected by reproductive criteria, especially when they were subjected to a challenge with heat stress. But could the rabbit does' diet affect the immune status of the females and the development of the immune status of their litter? We know that a diet rich in fat favours the production of milk, while another rich in starch favours the recovery of body reserves, regardless of the genetic type used (Arnau-Bonachera, *et al.,* 2018b). This could affect the productive effort and recovery capacity of the rabbits, and therefore their immune status. Penades *et al.* (2018) studied the evolution of the immune status of rabbit does of three different genetic types fed with two different isoenergetic diets, differing in their main energy source (starch or fat). In general, the type of diet given during reproductive life did not affect the leukocyte population counts. However, females from a specialised line (selected for litter size) had lower total lymphocytes (–21%) and those from a robust line had higher granulocytes counts (+38%) with the starch-enriched diet (+132 g starch/kg DM) than with a fat-enriched diet (+61 g ether extract/kg DM). The authors concluded that diet could affect the immune system of rabbit does according to the way of managing their body resources, and it could have consequences in the health of the females and its litter, as there is a correlation between the immune status of the mother and its litter at weaning (Guerrero *et al.,* 2011). In fact, with the animals and diets of this same trial, García-Quirós *et al.* (2014) observed that the animal fat-enriched diet led to higher milk yield in females, resulting in greater development of kits during the lactation period. Moreover, these young rabbits reached weaning with higher live weight and increased B lymphocyte counts. Bienertova-Vasku *et al.* (2012) described that the B-cell activating factor (BAFF) expression was closely related to adipose tissue, and its plasma level was also correlated with the energy derived from the diet. Therefore, the higher milk energy output of dams fed the fat-enriched diet could be responsible for the greater B lymphocytes counts in weaned rabbits.

CONCLUSIONS

The rabbit doe requires a minimal maturity (body condition) at first AI to face its productive life with minimal guarantees (around 7.0 mm PFT, 2.8 ng/mL of plasma leptin concentration and around 18% and 15-20% of body protein and fat, respectively). This goal can be achieved by restricting feed intake from 12 wk of age until first AI or feeding *ad libitum* with a fibrous diet (<10.5 MJ DE/kg) from 60 d of age to first parturition. Once the doe is lactating, the increase in the n-3 fatty acids (or reduction of the n-6/n-3 ratio), the soluble fibre (under epizootic enteropathy) and the Arg/Lys and Gln/Lys ratios may help to improve the reproductive traits of rabbit does, although their optimal level of inclusion remain to be identified. In this period, it is important to limit the negative energy balance before parturition, and the supplementation of glucose precursors reduces the ketosis incidence. The formulation of different diets for the doe and the litter to better fit their requirements and assuring their health would be an option to consider when it would be applicable in the farm. The influence of the mother on the litter microbiota and immune status and its potential modulation through the diet will merit more studies in the next future.

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