

How to care for your rabbit



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Hopefully this information will answer some of the questions you may have about your new rabbit.

Housing

Rabbits need plenty of room to hop around and stand up on their back legs, and this can only be provided with a suitably sized hutch and run. This breed will grow into medium-sized rabbits, weighing around 3 kg (6-7 lb). As adults, the hutch should allow them to be able to take three hops lengthways, be wide enough for them to stretch out and tall enough to stand up on the hind legs.

Most hutches sold in pet shops are meant for guinea pigs or dwarf rabbits weighing 1-2kg (2-4 lb), and will be completely unsuitable for this breed. A single rabbit will need a minimum hutch size of 150 cm long by 60 cm wide by 60 cm tall, as well as access to a daily run. The run should be at least 150 cm long by 120 cm wide by 60 cm tall to allow your rabbit to get plenty of exercise, you may need to put wire on the bottom of the run if he/she starts to burrow! You should invest in the largest hutch and run you can afford, cheap and poor quality hutches will only work out more expensive in the long run as they will not last for the rabbit's lifetime, which can be ten years or more. Two rabbits will require a hutch of 180 cm by 60 cm by 60 cm, plus a run of course.

Two-storey hutches are very popular, however it is important to make sure that they have a minimum 60 cm height on each level so that your rabbit can stand up on its hind legs, you should also check that the hole where the ramp is positioned does not take up a large proportion of the floor space as that will then be area that the rabbit cannot use. They are also not as good when your rabbit gets older as he or she will not be as active and may not be able to use the ramp.

If rabbits are kept in cramped conditions, they suffer chronic stress resulting in serious debilitating skeletal, respiratory, eye and skin conditions. Access to a large run that can be moved around is essential. Rabbits can be kept outside all year round if given adequate bedding and housing. Provision of a blanket or tarpaulin over the hutch on really cold nights in winter, and a sheet over the hutch for shade on hot days is a good idea. Rabbits can be allowed out into their run throughout the year, but as the grass will become too wet in the winter, the run should be moved onto a patio or other hard-standing area. They can cope with cold weather, but not damp or draughts, so ensure the hutch has a sloping roof and an overhang at the front and sides to prevent rain from getting inside.

Caution! When you put your rabbit onto the grass in its run for the first time each year, make sure that you only let him/her out for a short time to allow his/her digestive system to get used to eating a lot of grass again - even adult rabbits can suffer with diarrhoea if allowed to suddenly eat a lot of grass. We do this by moving the run gradually off the patio so that just a small amount of grass is available to them at first, and if there are no digestive problems moving it on a bit more until the run is eventually completely on the grass.

Free range and house rabbits

If you decide to allow your rabbit the free range of your garden they will still need a hutch/pen to go into should they wish, and should always be shut away at night to protect them from foxes and other predators. If you have a free-range garden rabbit, there are undoubtedly more risks with regards to predation, toxic plants and escape, but organised carefully it can provide an excellent quality of life, although I would never recommend that they are allowed the free run of your garden without constant supervision.

Alternatively it is becoming increasingly popular to keep rabbits as house pets as they can be easily house trained, especially once they have been neutered. House rabbits often receive more exercise and stimulation than one kept outside, and they can even co-habit well with cats and dogs. It may take a long time for you to train your dog to get used to your rabbit, and certain breeds, e.g. terriers would probably never learn that they are not food!

Company – keeping your rabbit with a guinea pig or another rabbit

Do not be tempted to buy a guinea pig as company for your rabbit, as the rabbit will grow to be much bigger than a guinea pig and could seriously hurt the guinea pig with his/her back legs or teeth! Also, guinea pigs cannot be fed rabbit food as they need Vitamin C added to their food, and although guinea pig food can be fed to rabbits, it will not be as good for them. Rabbits also carry a respiratory infection which may show no symptoms but which is fatal to guinea pigs.

Rabbits will only live with another rabbit if they have both been neutered, even if they are litter sisters or mother and daughter, as once female rabbits reach puberty they will invariably start fighting. Neutering is a much more routine operation for rabbits nowadays, and also has health and behavioural benefits, please refer to the section on Neutering on page 9.

Bedding and cleaning out the hutch

Wood shavings should be used on the floor of the hutch, with hay provided for bedding in the sleeping compartment. Plenty of fresh hay should always be available as this is an essential part of your rabbit's diet. We do not use straw as it is of little nutritional value and because it is very coarse it can injure the rabbit's eyes, etc. Rabbits are naturally very clean animals and will usually choose one corner of the hutch to use as their toilet area. It is then possible to provide a tray in this place and empty it regularly. Some of our rabbits use a tray in the run and don't mess in the hutch at all! It is possible to house train a rabbit if you want to keep it indoors.

Regular cleaning of the dirty areas of the hutch and replacement of soiled bedding will be necessary at least twice a week (particularly in the summer months to keep flies away which can lead to flystrike), with the whole hutch cleaned out once a fortnight. Hutch cleaning sprays are available to kill germs and keep the hutch smelling fresh.

Toys

Rabbits like to play - we give our rabbits plastic balls and plastic flower pots to throw around and balls which you can fill with pellets which have a small opening to allow them to fall out when the rabbit nudges the ball around - they soon learn how to get the food out! We also put hay and carrots into empty toilet rolls so that they have to work to get the food out. You can also buy willow rings and balls for them to chew. Many pet shops sell a wide range of toys designed for rabbits.

Handling

It is very important to handle your rabbit as much as possible in order for it to remain tame. Your rabbit has been handled regularly since birth. Rabbits should be lifted and carried carefully, making sure the back legs are supported. If a rabbit does not feel secure, it will struggle. Never pick them up by the ears or scruff of the neck!

Rabbits often do not appreciate being restrained and may not be suitable for small children to handle, often inflicting scratches. It is better to sit on the floor with the rabbit and let it come to you rather than force it to be held still as many do not like it. Children should only be allowed to pick rabbits up under close supervision and guidance, as rabbit bones are delicate and easily broken - it is far better to let the child stroke but not pick up the rabbit until they are old enough to do so safely.

A daily inspection of your rabbit is vital, as many illnesses are treatable only in the early stages and handling will enable you to detect early symptoms such as flystrike, sore hocks, diarrhoea, skin problems, etc.

On bringing your rabbit to his/her new home it is best to leave them to settle into their new surroundings without further disturbance until the following morning, making sure there is plenty of food and water available. This will help your rabbit to adjust to its new environment and help prevent the move from being too stressful.

Feeding

Young rabbits are extremely vulnerable to digestive upsets and need careful, consistent feeding. Rabbits should be excited and hungry at feeding time; a withdrawn rabbit which does not eat when you feed it is ill and needs to see a vet straight away!

Hay

This is the most important part of your rabbit's diet, and should account for 80% of your rabbit's daily food intake. Fibre (in the form of hay or grass) is extremely important in a rabbit's diet in order to keep the teeth worn down and to prevent digestive problems. You should aim for them to be eating their own body size in hay every day. Make sure that hay is available all the time (ideally in a hay rack to keep it fresh and clean).

Like horses, rabbits need hay that is not too fresh - around six months old, otherwise you will encounter digestive problems. However you should not feed very old or musty hay as it will be of no nutritional benefit.

The most economical way of buying hay is to purchase it by the bale from a local farmer, making sure it is of good quality, i.e. damp and mildew free and does not come from an area where myxomatosis is abundant in the wild rabbit population.

There are also many other grass-based products which it is possible to feed such as: Burgess Herbage / Forage, Friendship Estates Readigrass or Dodson and Horrell Just Grass - these are chopped dry grass and are most economical to buy in large bags from a horse feed supplier, as long as you can store them somewhere dry and free from rodents. We feed a handful of Readigrass twice a day in addition to having hay available.

Dry food / pellets

Your rabbit is fed on Burgess Excel Rabbit pellets. These are available in 2, 4 or 10kg bags from most good pet shops. There are a range of more colourful rabbit foods available that contain a muesli-type mix of food. We do not feed these as rabbits tend to pick out their favourite bits and leave what they do not like, meaning that they are not getting a balanced diet, may develop teeth problems and food will also be wasted.

While they are growing they should receive a small handful (half a standard yogurt pot full) of pellets twice a day, this will be until they are around six months old (fully grown). From then on the amount of food should be reduced to a small handful (half a yogurt pot full) of pellets once a day. Although this may not seem like very much, feeding too many pellets will lead to a very fat / unhealthy rabbit and you will find that they will not eat enough hay if they have too much dry food! Provide dry food in heavy bowls which the rabbit cannot easily tip over.

If you do decide to give a different dry food from the one we use, this must be done very gradually over a 10 day period, mixing 10% of the new food to 90% of the pellets we have provided on day one, increasing the amount of new food by 10% each day until the diet has been changed over.

Green food

I believe in feeding a varied diet, so your rabbit has been gradually introduced to fresh-cut grass, spring greens, apple and carrots, receiving small quantities of some of these each day. Feed hand cut grass rather than that from lawn cutting (from a lawn mower) as it may contain oil. Make sure that if you collect grass from fields, etc. that it has not been contaminated by dogs or other animals and that there are no poisonous plants in the grass, as rabbits are unable to tell what is poisonous and what is not.

It is possible to introduce a wider range of green food, e.g. dandelions, celery, broccoli, etc. but as he/she will never have had these before, only give a very small portion to begin with. It is a good idea to wash green food before feeding it to your rabbit.

Be aware that when you first put a rabbit out in its run on the lawn, you will need to limit the time it spends eating grass, otherwise you could get problems with diarrhoea, which can be fatal. This will also be true when you put your adult rabbit out on the lawn for the first time each year.

Poisonous plants and food to avoid

Foodstuffs to avoid include:

- lettuce (will give your rabbit bad diarrhoea),
- ivy
- buttercups and celandines
- honeysuckle
- potato leaves and tomato leaves,
- rhubarb
- live fruit tree material
- too much spinach
- lawn mowings (hand cut grass is fine),
- foxgloves, plants which grow from bulbs, e.g. bluebells, daffodils, tulips, crocuses
- sugary treats
- mouldy or frozen food

I recommend that you buy a book which will give further information on both safe and poisonous foodstuffs for your rabbit.

Water

Your rabbit is used to drinking from a water bottle rather than a bowl. The water should be changed regularly and in winter you will need to check that it doesn't freeze - make sure that you check the nozzle is not frozen as well, as the water may appear to be fine but ice in the nozzle will mean that the rabbit cannot drink. If your rabbit suddenly stops drinking or starts to drink excessively, it can indicate a health problem. This is also true for food as well of course.

If you are going away overnight, it is possible to leave the rabbit behind as long as the hutch is well stocked with hay, pellets and green food as well as extra water. In winter you will need to get someone to come and check that the water bottle is not frozen.

Health

Routine care

Your rabbit should be handled regularly to ensure it is healthy, things to keep a check on are:

- Ears - any waxy deposit, head shaking, etc.
- Eyes - discharge or inflammation
- Mouth - dribbling, overgrown teeth
- Nose - discharge, sneezing
- Fur - scratching, signs of parasites such as fur mites or fleas
- Tail area - should be clean, dry without any droppings stuck to it- beware fly strike!

If you notice any of the above problems or anything out of the ordinary about your rabbit, it needs to see a vet as soon as possible – rabbits are prey animals and disguise pain very well, if you leave it too long before getting professional help it may be too late.

Claws - these will need to be trimmed as they grow continuously. I will have cut them just before you pick your rabbit up, but they will need trimming every few months. It is possible to do this yourself with a pair of nail clippers. Cut the top of the claw off, taking great care not to cut the quick as it will be very painful and bleed a lot. It is easy to see the pink coloured quick in rabbits with white claws, more difficult with dark claws. We can show you how to do this rather than you having to pay for it to be done at the vet!

Common Diseases

Diarrhoea

This may be caused by a sudden dietary change, a low fibre diet, many infectious organisms and stress. The normal gut flora has a delicate balance and the smallest dietary change can allow the wrong type of bacteria to gain advantage and take over, producing toxins which can lead to flystrike, dehydration and death. All new food should be very gradually introduced and a high fibre diet should be provided, through an ample supply of good quality hay. If your rabbit has diarrhoea it needs to see a vet as soon as possible.

Gastro-Intestinal Stasis (GI Stasis)

If your rabbit stops eating or shows little interest in its food, this is a warning sign that it may have GI Stasis, you may also notice that it is producing no droppings or ones that are either very small or soft and runny. It may also sit in a hunched up position and be grinding its teeth in pain.

GI Stasis means that the passage of food through the intestines has slowed down or even stopped altogether. It can be caused by stress, dehydration, pain from other problems (such as dental trouble, kidney problems and other infections), an intestinal blockage or insufficient fibre in the diet. If it is left untreated, it can result in a painful death in a relatively short period of time.

If your rabbit stops eating or produces no faeces for 12 hours or more, you should consider the condition an emergency and take your rabbit to the vet IMMEDIATELY, or it may be too late.

Dental Problems

This is one of the most common problems and can occur at any age. It is particularly prevalent in breeds with shortened faces such as the Netherland Dwarf and lop breeds. The signs to watch for include dribbling, fur loss under the chin, weight loss, and difficulty eating hard foods. There are many different causes, the most common being poor breeding and lack of constant fibre and good quality dry food in the diet.

This condition may only affect the front teeth initially, and can be easily seen as brittle, curly teeth growing at an abnormal angle. However in more advanced cases the back teeth also become affected, developing sharp spurs that grow into the side of the tongue or cheeks. This cannot be easily seen but the other symptoms may be recognised instead. It is relatively straightforward for your vet to keep trimming the front teeth if they alone are affected, but if the back teeth are involved this may require repeated general anaesthetics. In the most severely affected individuals the back tooth roots can start to grow up into the eye sockets or down through the bottom jaw giving rise to eye problems or abscesses, and these animals have a very guarded outlook. It is important to choose a baby rabbit carefully from a reputable breeder who is aware of tooth problems and has not had a problem with this. You should look for someone giving good dietary advice and ensure that you provide a diet high in fibre as detailed above, to try to prevent this distressing problem.

Flystrike

This is a distressing problem of the summer months. Any soiling of the rabbit's rear will attract blowflies to lay their eggs in the fur. These can hatch into maggots within 12 hours, which will then burrow into the skin and begin to eat the flesh of the rabbit, causing your pet great distress and potentially life threatening damage.

It is therefore particularly important to check your rabbit over **AT LEAST ONCE A DAY**, especially in summer - this means looking underneath and around the tail area and even up onto the back for any evidence of diarrhoea. Any soiling **MUST** be quickly washed away and the fur dried again. If you observe little white eggs stuck to the fur or any maggots it is essential that you take your rabbit to the vet immediately.

It is a good idea to consider draping mosquito netting over the enclosure in the summer to keep flies out, as well as cleaning out more regularly so that flies are not attracted to the hutch. You can also purchase a product called Rearguard from your vet which will deter flies from laying their eggs on your rabbit.

Pasteurellosis

Known as 'snuffles', this often has symptoms such as conjunctivitis or breathing problems but may also show as sudden balance problems or abscesses. The bacterium responsible lives in the respiratory tract of most healthy rabbits anyway and only causes disease in some individuals. As the organism is impossible to eradicate, the only prevention is to ensure that everything about the rabbit's care and environment is as good as it can be, particularly with regards to hygiene.

Encephalitozoon cuniculi (EC)

This is a relatively newly discovered rabbit illness, caused by a protozoan that affects the brain. Symptoms include loss of balance, head tilt, excessive drinking and urination. There is conflicting advice on the prevention and treatment of this illness - it used to be a 9 day course of a wormer called Panacur, but recent advice seems to indicate that only a 28 day course is effective, along with a thorough cleaning of the rabbit's hutch, bowls, etc on days 21 and 28 of treatment. Some people also give the 28 day course routinely as a preventative, others say only to use Panacur if you suspect that your rabbit has it, although apparently as many as half of all rabbits may carry it without showing any symptoms, with problems only arising at times of stress such as other illnesses, after operations, etc. It is best to discuss this with your vet who should have up to date information.

Vaccinations

Myxomatosis

This is a viral infection spread by rabbit fleas (and not therefore requiring direct contact with wild rabbits) which, after an incubation period of 1 - 2 weeks produces puffy swellings of the eyelids and genitalia, a discharge from the eyes and nose, blindness and pneumonia. It sometimes mimics other diseases such as conjunctivitis in the early stages. Recovery is extremely rare and the rabbit will nearly always suffer an extremely painful death.

This disease is preventable by vaccination which can be done from five weeks of age onwards, and requires a booster injection annually. The best time of year for the injection would ideally be in the spring, giving the best protection over the summer months when the disease is at its worst.

Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD)

This viral disease is relatively new in Britain. It is spread by direct contact with infected rabbits but also indirectly via food, hands, insects etc. The signs of illness include bleeding, convulsions, coma and death, although a rabbit which dies suddenly with no symptoms may also have contracted VHD. The incubation period is 12 hours to three days and it is virtually always fatal.

This disease is preventable by vaccination from five weeks of age, and requires an annual booster.

There is now a new combined myxomatosis and VHD vaccine, which became available in March 2012, and offers twelve months of protection for your rabbit.

PLEASE NOTE - several of my rabbits had a severe reaction when injected with the Cylap VHD vaccination in 2008, with hair loss, weeping sores and infection, some still showing symptoms a year later! I would therefore strongly recommend that you do not ask for the Cylap vaccination (manufactured by Pfizer) but insist on the Lapinject or Anivac vaccination which does not report these side effects. I would not want your rabbit to go through what mine did.

The new combined myxomatosis and VHD vaccine should mean that the single vaccines will be withdrawn, but please do check with your vet which type they are using, and make sure that you do not use Cylap!

Neutering

Neutering has many benefits for both your rabbit's health and behaviour.

Reasons for neutering does (females):

- Prevention of uterine cancer (some statistics suggest that as many as 80% of un-neutered does will develop uterine cancer in later life)
- To eliminate aggression which may develop at puberty
- To eliminate false pregnancy
- Prevention of pregnancy if kept with a male and fighting if kept with another female

The best age is at about six months old.

Having lost three does to uterine cancer myself I would recommend that all does are neutered.

Reasons for neutering bucks (males):

- To prevent pregnancy if kept with a doe and fighting if kept with another male
- To reduce aggression
- To prevent spraying if kept indoors

The best age is at around four months old. Remember that bucks may still be fertile for up to six weeks after castration so will need to be kept apart from any un-neutered does until then!

Anaesthetic considerations:

It is generally appreciated that rabbits are more problematical to anaesthetise than many other animals, and unfortunately have a higher anaesthetic death rate (around 3.5 - 4.0%) compared to dogs and cats (0.25%). Although this risk is still very small it does need to be considered.

The reasons for this increased risk are as follows:

- There may be pre-existing pneumonia without the rabbit ever having shown any signs. In combination with the rabbit's narrow airways this can produce breathing issues under anaesthesia.
- Rabbits may be over or underweight when presented for surgery.
- Rabbits are highly susceptible to stress and this can affect the heart when under anaesthesia.

Having said this, rabbit anaesthesia is safer than it has ever been before, with improved knowledge and skill and state-of-the-art anaesthetics. We had a male rabbit castrated when he was around 10 months old with no problems - he was eating and acting as normal within a day. We have also had several higher-risk does spayed at the age of four to five years with no complications.

It is important to ensure that your vet is experienced in carrying out neutering operations on rabbits and is aware of the risks above.

Recommended books

Rabbitlopaedia by Virginia Richardson and Meg Brown
Mini Encyclopaedia of Rabbit Breeds and Care by Geoff Russell
The Really Useful Bunny Guide by Carolina James
All About your Rabbit by Bradley Viner
The Domestic Rabbit by J.C. Sandford

Useful Addresses

Fur and Feather Magazine (Printing for Pleasure Ltd)
Elder House
Chattisham
Ipswich
Suffolk
IP8 3QE
Tel: 01473 652 789
www.furandfeather.co.uk

Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund
PO Box 603
Horsham
West Sussex
RH13 5WL
Tel: 0870 046 5249
www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk

The House Rabbit Association www.rabbit.org

British Rabbit Council
Purefoy House
7 Kirkgate
Newark
Nottinghamshire
NG24 1AD
Tel: 01636 76042
www.thebrc.org

If you have any further questions, we would be happy to help!

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(If you email me pictures of your rabbit in their new home, I can put them on my website!)

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