



## Rabbit Care

Caring for a rabbit is a big responsibility and extends to the whole life of the rabbit, which can be from seven to ten years. Rabbits make excellent family pets but require more care and attention than most people expect! Here is some information on how to keep your rabbit in a safe and stimulating environment so you can get the most out of your pet.

**Rabbits need company**, so the best option is to keep a compatible pair of rabbits or a group. Before introducing two rabbits, it is advisable to have them both neutered to reduce fighting and aggressive behaviour and to prevent unwanted litters. Introduce rabbits on neutral territory where neither rabbit has been before. The easiest introductions are between a mixed pair (neutered of course) and two spayed females, but the most stable pairing is a neutered buck (male) and a neutered doe (female).

It is not recommended that rabbits be kept with guinea pigs, as bullying by both species, but especially by the rabbit, can occur.

If your rabbit needs to travel to either the vets or a boarding home it is advised it is accompanied by its bonded companion. This will help to reduce the stress levels of both bunnies.

**A hutch is not enough!** Both indoor and outdoor bunnies will need enough room to exercise and exhibit natural behaviours, so for this they will need an enclosed housed area and an exercise area. The size of the hutch should be at least 120cm x 60cm x 60cm for a single medium-sized rabbit and allow sufficient room for the animal to sit upright on its hindquarters. EACH rabbit needs this amount of room so a bonded pair will need double this area. It is also important to provide a run area of at least the same area to allow the rabbit to get enough exercise.

The hutch should be weatherproof and escape-proof, and located in a sheltered area. The hutch should be covered with a layer of sawdust or shavings with straw provided for bedding material. The garden run should have a roof and a sheltered area. Hide boxes should be provided for each rabbit so they can seek refuge. Rabbits are prey animals so can become stressed by cats and dogs, so ensuring that the garden is well fenced and your rabbit has plenty of places to hide will help to reduce stress. Rabbits love to burrow, so the run should have a mesh floor or deeply sunk fencing to prevent escape.

The indoor rabbit also needs a quiet area and somewhere you can enclose it safely. Large dog cages with plastic floor trays are ideal, but ensure that your rabbit can stand up on its hind legs in them. Add a straw filled cardboard box as a private place. Rabbits are naturally clean animals and it is possible to train any rabbit to use a litter tray containing organic litter. Offer a digging box, which is a cardboard box full of hay, straw or shredded paper for the rabbit to dig in. Telephone and electric cables should be encased in plastic piping from a DIY shop. Most evergreens are toxic to rabbits so take care to remove houseplants from the rabbit's chewing range. Neutering the rabbit and providing interesting activities will help to reduce destructive behaviour.

Ideally the rabbit's hutch and run should be permanently linked so that your rabbit has a choice where it would like to spend its time.

Always keep the hutch clean and dry and ensure good ventilation. Rabbits usually use one place as a toilet and this area will require cleaning daily.

In cold weather, the hutch should be moved to a shed or outhouse. A garage that is still in use is not suitable, as the petrol and exhaust fumes produced by a car are poisonous and could kill the rabbit.

Never use slug pellets, insecticides and other chemicals on garden plants or grass that a rabbit has access to and ensure that the rabbit has no access to poisonous plants in the garden.

Rabbits' teeth and claws grow continuously so they need to chew and dig to keep them in trim. All rabbits need daily exercise, so offer playthings to encourage the rabbit to practise its natural behaviour. Rabbits enjoy going through pipes in hutches as if they were burrows and gnawing on pieces of edible wood, such as apple or willow. A cardboard box with an entrance and an exit is a useful plaything. Filling the box with shredded paper, hay or straw offers the rabbit something to dig into.

**Rabbits are herbivores.** Everyday a rabbits should eat approximately their body size in good quality hay, a variety of leafy fibrous greens (a bunch about the size of the rabbits head) and a small quantity of good quality rabbit pellets (about 25g). Vegetables should be washed thoroughly before feeding. Grass, carrots, spinach, watercress, broccoli and dandelion leaves are all suitable foods. Never feed your rabbit mouldy or frosted food, grass clippings or potatoes as these can cause digestive and intestinal problems. If you have a garden, let the rabbit graze on grass, clover and dandelions. You may see your rabbit eating his soft droppings (caecotrophs). These are rich in valuable nutrients the rabbit needs to stay healthy. This process is known as coprophagy and is a normal activity in all rabbits.

**Rabbits can be easily frightened and require careful handling.** The animal should be approached slowly and can be picked up by placing one hand over the back and the other underneath the belly. Once held firmly with both hands it can be lifted up and held securely against the handler's chest. Always put a rabbit down gently on a non-slip surface. Rabbits must never be held or picked up by the ears as this is extremely painful and distressing for the animal. Children should always be supervised when handling rabbits.

Daily grooming is essential for long-haired rabbits and especially for the Angora breeds, but all benefit from regular combing and short-coated rabbits should be groomed at least once weekly.

**Neutering** your rabbit will allow more than one rabbit to be kept together without them fighting or producing unwanted litters. Neutered rabbits can also be easier to house train.

Neutering males helps to stop urine spraying. Castration can be performed as soon as the testicles descend (ten to twelve weeks). Most female rabbits become territorial and aggressive from sexual maturity (four to six months) onwards. They often have repeated false pregnancies and up to 80% of unspayed females develop uterine cancer by the age of five years. Neutering can reduce these problems and can be performed when the rabbit is four to six months old.

As rabbits are relatively small animals they are a more risky candidate for a general anaesthetic (required for neutering). However if the operation is performed on young, fit animals it will minimise the risks.

**It is strongly advised to vaccinate your rabbit** against Myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD). Both of these viruses can be fatal. Healthy rabbits can be vaccinated from 5 weeks of age with a combined vaccine which will require an annual booster.

Rabbits do not require regular worming but are commonly affected by fleas and mites. Spot on products are available to prevent these. If you notice your rabbit has a lot of dandruff or inflamed skin it might require treatment.

Rabbits get rid of excess calcium in their diet in their urine so have a sludgy urine as normal. If there is too much calcium in the diet, this can sometimes lead to problems preventing the rabbit passing urine normally. If you notice your rabbit always has a wet bottom and back legs you should seek advice and potentially change the diet.

Diarrhoea is often caused by a change in diet, or as a symptom of illness. The animal should be offered some additional hay in its diet. This should not be confused with a failure to eat its caecotrophs, in true diarrhoea there will be no normal pellets produced and in this case you should always call the vet for treatment.

Overgrown teeth can cause constant dribbling, weight loss and a loss of appetite. The rabbit's teeth grow continuously throughout its life and are kept in shape by eating a high fibre diet. If the rabbit's front teeth do not wear against each other these may need regular attention to prevent overgrowth. If you notice your rabbit stops eating or has watery eyes or a swollen face it is important that you bring them for a dental check-up.

Fly strike is a condition that requires **immediate** veterinary treatment. Fly strike is an extremely unpleasant condition which can occur if flies lay their eggs on an ill rabbit, a rabbit with a dirty bottom or in a dirty hutch. The fly eggs very quickly hatch into maggots that feed on the living tissue of the rabbit. Make sure that your rabbit's hutch is clean and dry and that you handle and check your rabbit at least twice daily. If your rabbit is unwell or has diarrhoea, contact the practice immediately. There are spot-on products available to help keep flies away.