

CARING FOR YOUR RABBIT

Rabbits can make delightful pets with the right care and attention. They are very sociable animals and enjoy lots of attention from their owner. As well as being rather cute and undeniably lovable, they are also very intelligent creatures and can be easily toilet trained so can live indoors. If you are thinking about making a rabbit part of your family it's important to remember it will rely on you for it's every need and will require daily care and attention 365 days of the year. The average lifespan of a rabbit is 5 to 10 years, but they may live as long as 15 years.

Parents

Your children may well become bored with their pet after a few months. You will then become responsible for all its daily needs.

Choosing your pet

Some breeds of rabbit are too large for children to handle. The smaller and dwarf varieties are more suitable. The long haired Angora rabbit requires a great deal of grooming on a daily basis.

Male or female?

Rabbits are social animals and in their natural state will be found in family groups. One lone rabbit may not thrive. Two or three young female rabbits could be a good choice, or a desexed female and a desexed male. Two male rabbits may occasionally live happily together, provided they are from the same litter and are neutered. Un-neutered male rabbits over the age of three months will almost certainly fight. Either way, be sure to have your rabbit desexed.

Housing

Most ready built hutches are too small. In its natural habitat, the wild rabbit moves swiftly and may cover several miles in a day. To confine the domesticated pet rabbit to a small hutch with little opportunity for freedom is unnatural and may cause unnecessary suffering. A good roomy hutch, a minimum of 1.5m in length X 0.6m X 0.6m with two connecting compartments is essential. One third of the hutch should be enclosed for cosy, draught-free sleeping quarters. The other two-thirds is for day time and should have a strong wire-mesh front and sides to let in light and air and mesh floor to prevent escapes by digging. Each compartment should have a separate door, well fitting with good hinges and catches, to facilitate with easy cleaning. The roof should be sloping and covered with roofing felt or tiles for good

weatherproofing and should overhang the hutch to keep its sides dry and prevent driving rain from saturating the interior. The hutch should be on raised legs to give protection from predators and should be in a well ventilated, but not draughty position, out of strong sunlight. Facing the morning sun is best.

Bedding

A warm, comfortable bed is of the utmost importance to animals that have to spend a good deal of their time in a hutch. The sleeping compartment needs a layer of untreated wood shavings or paper shred with a layer of hay to provide warmth, insulation and the opportunity for burrowing. Avoid wood chippings that may have been treated as these can be poisonous. Avoid artificial fiber bedding which can cause severe digestive problems or even death. Rabbits urinate heavily and tend to use one area for toilet purposes, you can place a litter tray in this area for them to use. Be sure to clean this out daily.

Exercise

A ramp or steps leading from the day compartment of the hutch to the ground of a strongly fenced enclosure will provide a more natural environment for your rabbit. Sink the perimeter fence approximately 40cm below ground level or cover the floor area with mesh to prevent your rabbits burrowing out. An alternative is a portable enclosure approximately 2m long X 1.5m wide which will enable your rabbits to have access to grass and an opportunity to run about. This enclosure should be moved to a different area of grass each day. Part of the enclosure should be covered to provide shelter from rain or hot sun and water should always be available. To prevent your rabbit burrowing out the base should be covered with wire mesh.

At night your rabbit should always be shut safely in its hutch.

Litter Tray Training

As rabbits usually soil only in one corner of their living area, it is possible to litter tray train them. This is handy for owners who enjoy having them indoors for exercise. By keeping their litter tray or newspaper in the same spot this can be achieved inside too. The rabbit will generally let you know where that is however! Do not expect your rabbit to be house trained unless you have it indoors on a regular basis. Also ensure when inside that doors are left closed and cats and dogs are supervised.

Feeding

Rabbits need a diet consisting almost entirely of vegetable matter. Variety is essential and the food offered must be fresh. Special pellets are available from pet shops and form a good base for the diet which must include hay, green vegetables and grass. The green vegetables can include dandelions, puha, doc leaves, cabbage (in small amounts) and other green leafy vegetables. Iceberg lettuce is not good for rabbits as it causes diarrhoea. Vegetables such as carrots, swede and turnips and small amounts of fresh fruit such as pears and apples are also good fresh food for rabbits.

- Fresh clean water should always be available – ideally in a dripper bottle. Remember to check this often in summer.
- Good quality hay is important and should be kept in a rack to avoid soiling.
- Use heavy containers for food to avoid spillage.
- Sudden change in diet can cause digestive problems.
- Do not feed rhubarb leaves, raw potatoes, potato tops, roots or seeds of dock or grasses from roadsides where there is any possibility they have been sprayed with herbicides or pesticides.

Handling

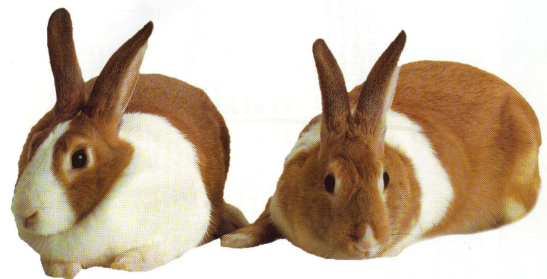
Rabbits need firm but gentle handling from an early age. They should never be picked up by their ears. Place one hand under the chest, the forelegs gripped between two fingers, with the hind-quarters supported with the other hand, and then cradle the rabbit against your body. Never allow a rabbit to struggle violently as it may injure its spine. Remember rabbits have powerful hind legs with strong claws and can kick and scratch if frightened because of mishandling.

Health

Rabbits pass two types of droppings. Hard fibrous pellets (usually excreted during the day) and soft caecal pellets (usually excrete during the night) which

are eaten again. This is normal part of the rabbit's digestive process and is in no way indicative of ill health.

- Parasites/discharge – daily handling will give you a chance to check for mites, sores, wounds, discharge from eyes, ears and nose. If anything unusual is evident contact your veterinarian.
- Diarrhoea – if a rabbit has diarrhoea for more than 24 hours, consult a veterinarian as there are a number of serious issues which can cause diarrhoea in rabbits.
- Nails – if your rabbit does not have the opportunity to wear it's nails down, get professional advice on how to trim them correctly. Care must be taken not to cut the blood and nerve supply. A paving stone or a flat river stone placed in an area the rabbit regularly travels over may help reduce the need to trim nails as often though.
- Teeth – a rabbit's front teeth (or incisors) continue to grow throughout its life. Overlong teeth must be cut back regularly by your veterinary surgeon or the rabbit will not be able to eat. Try to avoid the problem by ensuring your rabbit has sufficient hard food, as well as a 'gnawing block' such as a piece of untreated wood permanently in its hutch – a willow or apple branch is a good choice.
- Vaccination – Our rabbits are vaccinated against the calici virus. This should be continued as an annual vaccination and your own vet will be able to do this for you at your rabbit's yearly health check.



**We wish you and your
chosen companion animal
friend a lifetime of joy!**