

Rabbit care sheet

Rabbits are now the third most popular pet in the U.K. Increasing numbers are being kept by adults, often as house pets. They can become litter trained and are intelligent animals. Life expectancy is commonly documented to be between 5-8y but rabbits that are 10y and over are now becoming more common. They are not simple pets to keep though. Please think carefully before getting one, especially as a pet for a small child. They do need very careful attention to their feeding and health and can prove expensive pets. Consider insurance to help with bills.

Here are a few tips on keeping them happy and healthy:

Rabbits have a few requirements:

- Space
- Exercise
- Companionship
- Stimulation

Space and exercise

Rabbits are very active animals and as such need plenty of space and exercise. Keeping two or more rabbits together outside in an enclosure including a shelter and permanent access to a run is a great way of encouraging exercise and natural behaviour patterns. Alternatively rabbits can be kept in a hutch overnight with access to an enclosure or run during the day for exercise.

Rabbits are normally most active at dawn and dusk. Ideally rabbits should have 8 hours of exercise a day in a large run or garden. Rabbits kept in a hutch all day are more prone to bone disease and obesity.

For an average size rabbit the minimum size hutch should be 6ft x 2ft x 2ft. The hutch should be high enough for your rabbit to stand up on his back legs, and enough floor space for a minimum of 3-4 hops in any direction.

There should be separate eating and toilet areas within the hutch. The floor of the hutch can be lined with old newspapers, and then bedding of hay (to further encourage hay intake), or straw. You can try to litter train your rabbit, and many rabbits have litter trays in the corner of their hutch, which also makes cleaning easier!

A hutch should be kept in a dry, well ventilated area, and kept cool in the summer. If outdoors, avoid placing hutches on south-facing walls in direct sunlight. Indoors avoid putting the hutch next to a radiator. In the winter add extra bedding to keep your rabbit warm, and if it is really cold, you can move your bunny indoors.

Companionship

Rabbits are very social animals, so like to be kept together. Male/female pairs work best, but don't forget both will need to be neutered to prevent a rabbit population explosion! Un-neutered females generally tolerate each other given enough space, but may still fight. There is a much increased risk of uterine (womb) cancer in un-neutered female rabbits

which is why we recommend neutering. Unrelated males will almost certainly fight and can inflict some nasty injuries, neutering may improve the situation.

Stimulation

Rabbits in the wild spend hours foraging for food, so we need to keep them occupied if we have them in our houses and gardens! Tunnels for them to run in and out of, toys to chew such as willow bark toys, and trays of hay will help keep them occupied – be imaginative and find new ways for your bunny to keep busy! Try stuffing old toilet roll tubes with hay and herbage to keep your rabbit busy.

Diet

Most health problems in rabbits stem from a poor diet – feeding your rabbit correctly can help prevent a lot of future problems.

In the wild rabbits eat rough grass and vegetation, so they are designed to be chewing for most of the day.

Good quality hay is the best foundation of a good diet for your rabbit; it means they are chewing and nibbling for a large portion of the day, keeping them busy and preventing boredom. Chewing hay also helps them wear their teeth properly as rabbits teeth continually grow throughout life, so need a good high fibre diet to keep their teeth healthy. Sweet smelling, Timothy hay (a grass type) is great, avoid excessive alfalfa. Hay should not be mouldy and or excessively dusty. You can use hayracks in the run to avoid it getting trampled on. Try scattering bits of food in the hay to encourage hay intake too. A high fibre diet also helps keep your rabbits gut healthy and working properly to ferment their food.

In addition to hay, rabbits should have access to a large selection of leafy greens and vegetables as this provides their vitamins. Many pet shops tell new rabbit owners not to feed too many greens as it will give the rabbit diarrhoea, but this is not true! As long as any new food or diet is introduced gradually, it is healthy for a rabbit to feed on greens. Keep your new bunny on the same diet for the first few weeks you have them to avoid gut upsets, and then gradually change onto your new diet regime over several weeks. Start with very small amounts of greens at a time and increase this gradually over the next few months. If the food is changed too suddenly, the bacteria balance in the gut can change and this can lead to gut upsets and even death.

Iceberg lettuce and celery stalks in large quantities are not ideal as they are composed of mainly water, but may be given in small amounts, leafy celery tops are better. Broccoli, Cauliflower and Brussel Sprouts can also lead to gas production causing digestive upsets and are best used in small amounts.

Pelleted rabbit mix or rabbit muesli should only be fed as a very small component of a rabbit's diet. Muesli mixes look more attractive, but this allows your bunny to pick and choose their favourite bits, so they may not be getting all the nutrients the diet provides. A single pelleted diet (pellets that all look the same) avoids this problem, and we would recommend this in preference to a muesli style diet.

Pelleted mixes are all very high in calories, and disintegrate when your bunny chews them, so rabbits just fed on this tend to be overweight and have dental problems. They are fine as a small portion of the diet, but think of them more as a treat and just feed a small handful.

Water

Rabbits drink lots of water, so should always have a fresh supply readily available, particularly in hot weather. You can provide water in either a water bowl or a sipper bottle, or ideally both. Remember to change their water daily.

Treats

Rabbits all like treats just like us – but too much sugary and starchy food can lead to potentially fatal gut upsets. Stick to healthy options like carrot, broccoli, swede or turnip peelings, and cauliflower stalks. See below for a list of safe herbs and vegetation that can be fed as treats, as well as a list of plants to avoid.

Healthy Greens/Treats:

Vegetables:

Asparagus, Baby Sweetcorn, Beetroot (not the tops), Broccoli, Brussel Sprouts, Cabbage, Carrots and Carrot Tops (in moderation as carrots are high in sugar), Cauliflower, Celeriac, Celery, Chicory, Courgette, Cucumber, Curly Kale, Green Beans, Parsnip, Peas (leaves, pods and seeds), Peppers, Pumpkin, Swede, Turnip, Squash, Radish Tops, Rocket, Romaine Lettuce (not Iceberg or other very light leaved varieties), Spinach, Spring Greens, Watercress.

Herbs – may take some getting used to as very strong flavours!

Basil, Coriander, Dill, Fennel, Mint, Parsley, Oregano, Rosemary.

Wild herbs/Flowers:

Alfalfa, Beech, Beechnuts, Borage, Calendula, Camomile, Chickweed (Astringent), Clover (leaves and flowers), Coltsfoot, Comfrey, Corn Marigold, Corn Spurry, Cow Parsley, Daisy, Dandelion, Fruit Trees, Groundsel, Goosegrass (Cleavers), Hawthorn Berries, Hazel, Hogweed, Knotted Persicaria, Lady's Thumb, Lavender, Lucerne, Mallow, Meadow Horsetail, Nettle, Nasturtium (leaves and flowers), Oxeye, Plantain, Shepherds Purse, Sow Thistle, Sunflower, Thistle, Vetch, Wheat and Barley, Willow, Yarrow.

Fruits – up to a maximum of 2 tablespoons a day

Apple (no pips), Apricot, Banana, Blackberries, Blueberries, Cherries, Grapes, Kiwi, Mango, Melon, Nectarines, Oranges (not the peel), Papaya, Peaches, Pears, Pineapple, Plums, Raspberries, Strawberries, Tomatoes (not the leaves).

Dangerous Plants:

These plants are harmful, and should be avoided – if you have these in your garden and are letting your rabbit run loose then you need to take these out or fence them off.

Anemone, Azalea, Bluebells, Bittersweet, Bryony, Buttercups, Caladium, Columbine, Cyclamen, Daffodils, Dog Mercury, Deadly Nightshade, Elder, Figwort, Fools Parsley, Foxglove, Hellebore, Hemlock, Henbane, Kingcup, Leyland Cypress, Marsh Marigold, Meadow Saffron, Mistletoe, Monkshood, Ragwort, Spurges, St. Johns Wort and Woody Nightshade.

Your garden may also contain cultivated plants that may cause illness such as: Antirrhinums, Chrysanthemums, Clematis, Dahlias, Delphinium, Fig, Holly, Hyacinth, Irises, Ivy, Jerusalem Cherry, Juniper, Laburnum, Larkspur, Lobelia, Lords and Ladies, Lupins, Lily of the Valley, Morning Glory, Philodendron, Poppies, Potato Tops, Privet, Rhododendron, Rhubarb, Tulips, Wisteria, Yew and most evergreen trees. All plants that grow from bulbs are potentially toxic.

Coprophagy

Rabbits produce two different types of faeces. The first type, caecotrophs, are passed early in the morning and eaten. This is vital for the rabbit's digestive system to gain the most out of their food. Most rabbit owners do not see the first type of faeces. The second type is a hard, dry pellet, and this is the one you usually see when you clean out your rabbit. If your rabbit is producing diarrhoea or sticky faeces, seek veterinary advice. Diarrhoea often occurs when your rabbits diet does not contain enough fibre. Rabbits with dirty bottoms are at risk of fly-strike. Dirty bottoms are more common in overweight rabbits and those fed on incorrect diets. Overweight rabbits are also often the ones fed incorrect diets.

Flystrike

Dirty bottoms attract flies, especially in hot or humid weather. Flies lay their eggs in the rabbit's fur and the eggs hatch into maggots that then burrow into the skin. This can happen within hours. Check your rabbit's bottom and underneath at least once a day and in the risk season, twice a day. If you see maggots call us. Rabbits can die a nasty death from this. Every year we euthanase the worst cases that we cannot save. A product called Rearguard can be used to help prevent fly strike, this should be applied twice a year in the risk season which is May to October. It protects your rabbit from maggots for 10 weeks after application.

Handling

Rabbit bones are very fragile. Inactivity, poor diets and lack of sunlight can cause osteoporosis. Rabbits can thump with their hind legs or kick out, breaking their pelvis, spine or leg bones. It is essential to support their hind quarters at all times when handling them. Handle your rabbit daily and supervise smaller or inexperienced children. Dropped bunnies or scared rabbits that jump out of your arms can have serious injuries. Never pick up rabbits by their ears – they are very sensitive organs and can be damaged easily by doing this.

Vaccinations

Rabbits can be vaccinated against 2 major diseases, and we can now vaccinate against both with one injection once a year.

1) Myxomatosis: this disease causes lumps and puffiness around the head and genitals. Rabbits will be listless, lose their appetite and develop a fever. They often end up with pneumonia.

Vaccination can be given from 5 weeks of age and lasts a year. Pregnant rabbits should not be vaccinated.

2) Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (strains 1 and 2)– this is also known as Rabbit Haemorrhagic disease and is caused by a virus called calicivirus. Symptoms include loss of appetite, lethargy, fever and spasms. Unfortunately sometimes rapid death is the only symptom.

Spaying or Castrating

We advise that females are spayed any time from 4 months of age. Cancer of the uterus is extremely common in rabbits and occurs in up to 60% of females over 3 years old. Spaying will remove the risk of uterus cancer or other uterus diseases in later life. It also makes some grumpy females more docile and easier to handle.

Males can be castrated usually from 5-6 months of age. We recommend this to prevent unwanted litters, also neutered males are less likely to fight.

Teeth

Many rabbits have dental problems. Good diet can help prevent these (lots of hay to chew, correct dry diet, high fibre) but look out for symptoms of trouble e.g. dribbling, leaving food, not eating hard foods, losing weight, smaller size faecal pellets or less overall faecal pellets. Rabbits teeth are continually growing so if they are not worn down properly they cause problems.

Fur

Rabbits need grooming regularly- this is a good way to check over your rabbit for any signs of problems. Rabbits moult twice a year (spring and autumn). Moulting starts in a wave from the head towards the tail. All rabbits should groom themselves and keep themselves clean. There should be no faecal staining on the genital area. If there is, seek advice as the rabbit may have a problem e.g. being overweight, teeth problems.

Veterinary Care:

If you are worried about your rabbit then seek veterinary advice. We run a range of appointment based surgeries throughout the normal working week and also on Saturdays. We have an emergency veterinary surgeon on call at all other times.