



RABBIT CARE

Rabbits make wonderful pets and can live 8-15 years if looked after correctly. Their teeth grow continuously throughout their life, so they must wear them down by eating hay & grass. Their intestines are designed to ferment hay & grass so they must be fed mainly this. All rabbit breeds have evolved from the European wild rabbit.

ACCOMMODATION

- It is recommended that hutches should ideally be 2metres x 0.5m x 0.5m and preferably with an attached run to allow the rabbits to exercise at will. The run should be 2metres x 1m x 1m as a minimum. Hutch size and runs can never be too big so don't skimp!
- Outdoor hutches should be raised off the ground (approx. 20cm).
- Ideally, the hutch should be placed in a sheltered area away from direct sunlight/wind/rain.
- Temperature – rabbits can get heat stroke if they are kept above 22C so shade is important in the summer.
- As well as a dry draught-free separate nest area rabbits should also have access to a separate exercise area in the hutch.
- All hutches must be well ventilated. Drill holes in the back, just under the eaves of the hutch, to encourage airflow but prevent your rabbit sitting in a draught. This will help prevent pneumonia.
- Protection from predators is essential.
- Always provide bedding of newspaper/wood shavings (not sawdust) and straw/hay. The amount of bedding provided should be increased in colder weather. Provided your rabbit has enough bedding it can cope very well with our winter so you don't need to cover the front of the hutch as this will reduce ventilation.
- The hutch should be cleaned out at least once a week to help prevent disease. Using a litter tray at the latrine area of the hutch can make cleaning easier. You can use paper or wood-chip based cat litter and change the litter tray daily. Do not use clay or fullers earth.

COMPANIONS

- In general most rabbits are social animals and ideally should be paired up with another rabbit for lifetime companionship. Siblings are the easiest to bond, but with enough space

and patience most rabbits will bond. Entire (un-neutered) males will fight. Females will tolerate each other if sufficient space is provided.

- Neuter rabbits if opposite sexes are kept together.
- Guinea pigs often do not make good companions for rabbits.

WHAT TO FEED

- In the wild, rabbits will predominantly feed on grasses. In captivity, hay or grass should make up the majority (>70%) of the diet, being essential to maintain gastrointestinal & dental health. A rabbit should eat its own body size in good quality hay a day.
- Commercial pellets may also be fed as a small part of the diet. (Pellets are better than mixes to avoid selective feeding and obesity!) – feed dwarf and standard rabbits 1 tablespoon daily and Giant breeds 2 tablespoons of pellets daily **MAXIMUM**.
- Vegetables and small amounts of fruit (not fruit high in simple sugar) may be fed twice daily. Please avoid avocado.
- Never make any sudden changes to your rabbit's diet as this could upset its digestive system.
- If the rabbit's eating habits change, the number of droppings gets less or stops, or there are soft droppings sticking to its back end, the owner must talk to a vet straight away as it could be seriously ill.
- Water should always be available for drinking from a water bottle or bowl. This should be changed daily and care should be taken to ensure this doesn't freeze if your rabbit is outdoors in winter.

VACCINATIONS

- Calicivirus (Viral Haemorrhagic Disease) vaccinations are carried out annually, from 10-12 weeks of age.

NEUTERING

- All female rabbits not used for breeding should be neutered, as 60-80% **WILL** develop uterine cancer by the age of 5 years. This can only be prevented by neutering before this age.
- Neutering of male rabbits will prevent testicular cancer and reduce prostatic disease.
- If carried out in young male rabbits it will also reduce unwanted sexual behaviour and prevent the fighting that occurs between two entire males.

PARASITES

- Flystrike is a horrible condition where flies lay their eggs on your pet. Once these hatch the maggots will eat your rabbit alive! Urine and faeces attached or around your rabbit will attract the flies to lay their eggs on your pet – so keep your pet and its environment clean.
- Check your rabbit's bottom daily throughout the year and, if it is dirty, clean it to prevent flies laying their eggs on your pet. If your rabbit has several episodes of 'mucky bottom' bring it in to see the vet – this is a sign of ill health.

- Overweight rabbits are unable to eat their caecotrophs (soft faecal pellets) which are produced 6 hours after eating, so they will be more at risk of fly-strike.
- Use fly screens and preventative fly repellents available from your vet.

Thank you to the Exotic Animal and Wildlife Service, Hospital for Small Animals, University of Edinburgh for the above information.