

Thinking About Getting a Rabbit?

How long will my rabbit live

7-10 years, so Rabbits are a long-term commitment!

Male or female? One or two?

Females, even after neutering can be more aggressive than males. Rabbits are sociable animals and should have a friend for emotional enrichment; the happiest pairs are a neutered male and female. A littermate is ideal although make sure that they are neutered as soon as possible! Rabbits should not live with guinea pigs for company as not only do they have different dietary requirements but rabbits are the carriers of bacteria which can lead to pneumonia in guinea pigs.

Neutering

We recommend that all rabbits are neutered; this is for health and behavioural reasons. As with all animals neutered rabbits are more relaxed, and, consequently happier. Neutering prevents territorial and sexual behaviours such as urine spraying and aggression. Aggression and spraying will escalate every time the rabbit comes into season and suffers extreme PMT! Female rabbits that are not spayed are at risk of life threatening false pregnancies, uterine infections and uterine cancer (80% by the age of 5 (RWAf, 2009)), similarly unneutered males are at risk of testicular cancers.

Males can be neutered from 3 months; females spayed from 4 months old. Male rabbits will remain fertile for a month after castration.

How much space?

Rabbits need a lot of exercise and need a lot of space.

A medium bunny can cover 6 feet with 3 normal hops. The **minimum** recommended hutch size is 3 times length when laid down and high enough to allow the rabbit to stand on its back legs, or, 6 feet long x 2 feet wide x 2 feet high The **minimum** recommended exercise run size is 8 feet long x 4 feet wide x 2 feet high.

An integrated hutch and exercise area is a good idea if there is a shortage of outside space available. The hutch must be raised off the floor to prevent damp and have a sloped waterproof roof. It must be strong enough to prevent predators getting in and prevent escapees. The rabbit will need a partitioned sheltered area for sleeping. The hutch must have adequate ventilation and not be in direct sunlight to prevent overheating.

If you are buying a second hand hutch ensure the previous occupant did not die of diagnosed VHD, or died suddenly, see below.

How much exercise does my rabbit need?

As much as possible! Ideally a domesticated rabbit should mirror its wild cousins and be able to run around freely for 8 hours a day. Not only for enrichment purposes, but movement increases the blood flow and is essential for keeping the rabbit healthy and preventing pododermatitis, painful pressure sores of the hocks.

Toys can be provided to encourage activity such as balls and digging pits.

Rabbits can also be taught tricks, see the internet for inspiration!

What bedding?

Rabbits need plenty of bedding; in cold weather extra bedding is necessary for the rabbit to snuggle into and prevent it from getting too cold. A thick layer must be on the base of the housing to provide padding for the rabbits hind legs. Inappropriate bedding can lead to a serious condition known as pododermatitis. Newspaper lining and a thick surface layer of hay or straw makes good flooring, and hay is a good bedding material. The bedding needs to be changed frequently to keep it dry, clean and prevent odours that will attract flies.

Which food?

Rabbits are fibrevores which means they need a diet filled with fibre. This should be provided with ad lib hay or grass. Fresh food should also be provided as green vegetables such as Curly Kale, Spring Greens, or herbs; some root vegetables such as carrots or parsnips can also be provided. A dried diet should be fed in small amounts to provide required nutrients. Pellets are ideal to use as rabbits choose their favourite bits of mixed diets, like humans choosing their favourite pick and mix sweets, and this can lead to them not getting balanced nutrition. As fibre is the most important part of a rabbit's diet it is important that the right proportions of the various types of food are given to prevent upsetting the digestive system and leading to health problems. The balance can

be provided as proportions of the rabbit: hay/grass the size of the body, fresh vegetables the size of the head, and dried food the size of the ears.

Introduce new foods very slowly, over the course of a few weeks to prevent upsetting the rabbit's delicate tummy.

There are many snacks now available commercially, but these must be given in moderation. A small amount of fresh fruit can be given, but ideally anything watery such as lettuce or berries should not be fed in quantities that may affect the digestive system.

Fresh water must be available at all times, which means changing it daily. Rabbits actually prefer drinking from a bowl as it is more natural; use a heavy bowl such as ceramic or a metal bowl fixed to the side to prevent the rabbit from tipping it over.

Urine and faeces

Rabbits produce two types of faeces: the first type of faeces produced is known as a caecotroph; the second type is the hard dry pellets that we know as rabbit poo, and these are 'true' poo. Fibre is very hard to digest, and by the time the food has been processed by the gut there is still more fibre and nutrients to be extracted. The rabbit produces then eats the caecotroph directly from the anus in order to maximise the nutrition, it then travels through the digestive system again to become pellets once all available nutrition has been extracted. Caecotrophs are much wetter and covered in mucus. As they are eaten immediately they should never be seen; to find caecotrophs signifies that the rabbit is not well for some reason and must be taken to a vet; this is a time to be extra vigilant for fly strike (see following).

If there is no poo being produced at all then the rabbit needs to be seen by a vet as this is an emergency.

Rabbits' urine can vary in colour and it contains lots of calcium so appears quite cloudy. If there are a lot of dark green vegetables in the diet the pigments tend to make the urine appear red; this is normal. If blood is seen in urine (seen as a red patch surrounded by normal urine) then the rabbit should go to the veterinary surgery immediately.

Indoors or outdoors?

Outdoor living is more natural to rabbits and they benefit from the natural light and fresh air. The drawbacks include the risk of predation, disease, fly strike and hypo/hyperthermia.

Rabbits are surprisingly happy indoors. They enjoy basking on rugs and lounging in front of fires; they are clean (using litter a tray) and shed less hair than a dog or cat. Rabbits are always happy to see their owner and being sociable animals benefit from the close contact and generally owner and house-rabbit are bonded closer than outdoor rabbits.

If there is a shortage of outside space then having a house rabbit means you can still enjoy having a pet, whilst a house-rabbit does not take up too much space inside and can fit in with a busy lifestyle.

Choosing whether your rabbit will be housed indoor or outdoor does not limit the rabbit to being exclusively 'indoor' or 'outdoor'. Bunnies that live outside can be brought into the house when you are at home, and house rabbits will be happy outdoors too, (Indeed this is important as indoor bunnies need access to sunlight to produce vitamin D to maintain healthy bones and teeth).

If your rabbit is going to join you in your house then 'bunny-proofing' is essential. Wires need to be made inaccessible or un-chewable, houseplants and valuables/breakables moved out of harm's way, (some rabbits love to climb so beware!). Some gnawing of furniture or woodwork should be expected as the bunny explores its territory. A separate area must be set up for the bedding and as a 'rabbit exclusive' area that the rabbit may retreat to if it wants some peace and quiet or is scared by something. This area can also be used to restrict access overnight when the bunny may get up to some mischievous adventure whilst unsupervised!

Litter training

Rabbits can be easily trained to use a litter tray as they are clean animals. Even if your rabbit lives outside litter training can be beneficial as this makes cleaning them out easier and reduces the risk of the bedding attracting flies.

Please ask for a nurse clinic for further tips on how to litter train your rabbit(s).

Rabbits and children

We would never recommend rabbits as children's pets. If a rabbit is bought for a child then a parent **must** take overall responsibility for its welfare.

Rabbits are not really 'cuddly', they dislike being off the floor and are really quite fragile so incorrect handling, dropping or even them jumping down from being held can cause serious injuries. When they are scared they will wriggle, scratch and bite, which of course may lead to injury to the child and result in the rabbit being dropped suddenly! As they are a 'prey' species they are naturally nervous and the time taken to form a strong bond between the owner and rabbit may lead to the child becoming bored of the rabbit before this is achieved.

The cleaning and checking of the rabbit, as mentioned previously, is very important for both the health and welfare of the animal, and children often become fed up carrying these out and the animals begin to be at risk as a result.

Rabbits and other animals

Rabbits can get on well with other animals. However never leave your rabbit unattended with a dog or cat as the rabbit's cheeky nature is likely to lead to injury if the dog or cat tells it off! Do not allow them in close proximity until you are sure that they will not see the rabbit as prey and attack.

What is fly strike?

Flies are attracted by smelly bedding or to bunnies that are unable to maintain good hygiene for some reason, and will lay eggs on the rabbit. Once these eggs hatch the maggots begin to eat their way through the skin and into the rabbit. The maggots produce a substance that causes the rabbit to go into toxic shock and death results rapidly. Initially the maggots secrete local anaesthetic so that the rabbit may not show obvious signs as the skin becomes damaged, such as mosquitoes biting us; however this is undoubtedly a painful and distressing way to die. If treated by a veterinarian quickly enough it is possible for the rabbit to survive, for this reason it is essential to check your rabbit for signs of eggs or maggots twice daily.

Routine checks:

Bottom	Twice daily	Should be clean with dry fur. No redness, urine staining or poo present around the tail. Fly strike is an emergency
Coat	Daily	Apart from during the moult, the coat should lay flat and smooth, feel soft and not coarse. If the coat is scurfy or sparse then a vet should be consulted. Rabbits use the inside of their paws to clean their face, if the fur here is wet or crusty this may be due to your rabbit cleaning a runny eye or nose, and a vet should be consulted.
Nose	Daily	The nose should be clean at all times. Sneezing is usually due to eye problems, and these will need veterinary attention.
Ears	Daily	Should be clean, without any wax. The bunny should not be shaking its head or scratching its ears, this is a sign of a problem.
Eyes	Daily	The eyes should look the same on both sides and not be bulging, swollen or weeping. Runny eyes can often be caused by poor teeth.
Hocks	Daily	There should be no bald areas, redness or sore areas.
Teeth	Weekly	You will be able to check the front teeth at home, by lifting up the lips. Check that the teeth line up and are nice and short, and that there are no cracked or broken incisors, bad breath or lumps around the jaws which can signal abscesses. Poor dentition can lead to a variety of further issues. Not eating for 12 hours or more is an emergency
Nails	Monthly	Can be trimmed as necessary if long. A nurse will be happy to show you how. Never trim within 5mm of quick as this will cause pain; clipping the quick will cause bleeding that may take a long time to stop.
Bodyweight	Monthly	It is important to assess whether your rabbit has lost weight, potentially a sign of illness, and to ensure they are not getting too fat which can lead to other problems.

Preventative healthcare

Worming

Panacur rabbit wormer treats both worms and protozoa, known as *E. Cuniculi*. It is recommended that treatment is carried out quarterly, and it must be given over a period of consecutive days.

E. cuniculi can cause problems with various areas of a rabbit's body depending on where the parasites migrate. Blindness; kidney failure; brain damage, which may show itself as a head tilt, falling over, loss of control of limbs or fitting, can occur.

Fleas

Specific rabbit products are available to treat fleas, which also carry myxomatosis (see below). It is important to use one designed for rabbits as chemicals used to treat other species can be fatal for rabbits.

Fly strike

Rearguard is a product that will protect Rabbits from flystrike for 10 weeks, so is well worth applying during the summer months.

We don't get wild rabbits in our garden so we don't need to vaccinate do we?

Rabbits need vaccinations against Myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Diarrhoea (VHD), even if there are no wild rabbits visiting your garden. VHD always causes death, whilst there is only a very slim chance of survival with myxomatosis. Myxomatosis is spread by biting insects such as fleas and midges; it causes swelling of the mucus membranes such as eyelids, nose and mouth which cause blindness, difficulty breathing, and inability to eat, leading to starvation.

The VHD virus causes massive internal bleeding and this may manifest as bleeding from the nose, mouth or anus, although sometimes there are no external signs other than sudden death. Worryingly the virus can be passed on easily by grass/hay which has come into contact with infected rabbits, it can be wind-blown, or even brought into the garden by the feet of birds or by you after a country walk. The virus can survive for months in the environment so there are no signs of contamination.

These vaccinations are now available as a combined annual vaccination that can be given from 5 weeks of age.

When to go to the vet

Apart from obvious emergencies such as broken limbs, difficulty breathing or haemorrhage there are a few other problems that need veterinary treatment as soon as possible. Rabbits are prey animals, this means they are very reluctant to show weakness and so by the time they are showing signs of being ill they are usually very ill. It can be hard to tell if a rabbit is in pain, they may be hunched or grinding their teeth loudly; screaming is a sign of extreme pain.

- Lethargic/non-responsive
- Difficulty eating/has not eaten for 12 hours
- Lots of caecotrophs/no poo
- Flystrike
- Diarrhoea
- Runny eyes and/or nose/sneezing
- Incontinence

“My rabbit is losing its hair in clumps!”

Rabbits moult one to two times a year; generally the moult begins at the head and works its way down the body. The fur will become loose, tufted and will literally come out in clumps, which can be alarming if you don't know what is happening! During this time your rabbit may require grooming more than once daily, especially if the rabbit is a long-haired breed, to prevent them ingesting too much fur, and becoming seriously ill as they are unable to vomit unlike a cat that has a fur-ball.

New shorter fur should be seen beneath, however if your rabbit has bald patches you should visit the vet.

For further information:

Book a nurse clinic appointment

Or visit the Rabbit Welfare Association Fund online, www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk