



Keeping your
rabbits healthy
and happy

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HOW TO TAKE CARE OF YOUR

rabbits

www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits



HOW TO TAKE CARE OF YOUR

rabbits

Owning and caring for rabbits can be great fun and very rewarding, but it's a big responsibility and a long-term commitment in terms of care and cost. If you own or are responsible for rabbits, even on a temporary basis, you are required by law to care for them properly.

The biology and behaviour of pet rabbits is very similar to that of wild rabbits. This means they have very complex needs and although traditionally thought of as good pets for children, this is not the case as they are not easy to look after well. Typically, rabbits live for 8-12 years, but some may live for longer.



Grass: Dimitrije Tanaskovic/istock

There is no one 'perfect' way to care for all rabbits because every rabbit and every situation is different. It's up to you how you look after your rabbits, but you must take reasonable steps to ensure that you meet all their needs.

Under the Animal Welfare Act, pet owners are legally obliged to care for their pets properly – as most owners already do – by providing the following five basic welfare needs.

- 1 A suitable place to live.
- 2 A healthy diet, including fresh clean water.
- 3 The ability to behave normally.
- 4 Appropriate company, including any need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals.
- 5 Protection from pain, suffering, injury and disease.

This booklet will help you to find out more about what your rabbits need to stay healthy and happy.



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Environment

MAKE SURE YOUR RABBITS HAVE A SUITABLE PLACE TO LIVE

Rabbits are active animals so they need to be able to hop, run, jump, dig, stand fully upright on their back legs, and stretch out fully when lying down. They need regular and frequent opportunities to exercise every day to stay fit and healthy, as well as an appropriate place to go to the toilet.



Rabbits must be able to hide from things that scare them and, as they are a prey species, they need to be able to hide in a secure place, away from the sight and smell of predators such as foxes, cats, dogs, ferrets and birds of prey. They are intelligent; if they are bored and do not have enough to do, rabbits may suffer – see pages 10-13 for tips about toys and activities to keep your rabbits occupied.

As they are inquisitive animals, if there are hazards within their environment they may easily injure themselves, so their home should be safe, secure and free from hazards.





A home not a hutch

Living in a draughty, damp, hot, poorly ventilated or dirty environment can cause rabbits to suffer and become ill. Providing housing that meets rabbits' complex environmental and behavioural needs is an important part of responsible ownership. A traditional small hutch must not be the sole and permanent home of any rabbit as it will not meet his/her need for exercise and stimulation and could cause health and behaviour problems.



You should provide both a large escape-proof living enclosure where rabbits can exercise and behave normally and a secure main shelter where your rabbits feel safe and can rest together if they chose to. Make sure that all areas of your rabbits' home are well ventilated, dry and draught-free and that they are protected from predators and extremes of weather and temperature. Rabbits must have constant access to additional safe hiding places

where they can escape if they feel afraid, as well as platforms from which they can scan their environment for threats.

Your rabbits' home should be large enough to allow each rabbit to stand up on their hind legs without their ears touching the roof (so a medium-sized rabbit needs a height of at least 75cm), to lie fully outstretched in any direction, to take a number of consecutive hops, and to run, jump, explore and forage.

The shelter could be sited in/attached to a traditional exercise 'run' outside, an indoor pen or a 'rabbit-proofed' room in your house (where you'll need to protect wires and cables by covering them or removing them from reach as rabbits love to chew).

By permanently attaching your rabbits' shelter (for example, a large hutch, cage, shed or playhouse) to their enclosure, exercise run or pen, your rabbits will have more space and choice about which section they spend time in and when, rather than limited access to their exercise area.

Your rabbits should have access to the main enclosure at all times unless it is absolutely necessary to secure them in their shelter. Rabbits are most active in the early morning and late afternoon, and overnight. This is when they like to graze, forage for food and be sociable, so you should try to make sure they are able to use a large area for exercising at these times in particular.



CREATURE COMFORTS

Your rabbits will need enough bedding to keep them comfortable and warm – it should be safe for them to eat so provide suitable insulating bedding materials such as dust-free hay and shredded paper.

They will also need regular (ideally constant) access to a suitable place where they can go

to the toilet which should be separate to where they sleep.

If you provide litter trays, provide a tray for each of your rabbits (with ideally one more in addition) and use absorbent materials such as newspaper, hay, shredded paper and/or natural wood or paper-based non-clumping, non-expanding litter.

House proud

Your rabbits' toilet area(s) should be cleaned every day. The whole home should be thoroughly cleaned regularly, approximately once a week. Cleaning is potentially stressful for rabbits so after cleaning, a small amount of the used bedding should be placed back into the toilet area and shelter as this will smell familiar to the rabbits and help to reduce the stress caused by cleaning. Only non-toxic cleaning products should be used and the housing should be dry before the rabbits are replaced in it.

»» For information on the extra bedding and protection your rabbits need during the winter months, please download our *Winter care* advice sheet at: www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/pets/rabbits/health.

Holiday time

If you are going away, try to find someone to care for, and meet all your rabbits' welfare needs within their familiar home. If boarding your rabbits, try to ease the move by keeping paired/grouped rabbits together and leave them with familiar-smelling items, such as toys.



Transporting rabbits

When you transport your rabbits make sure they are comfortable and safe at all times. Putting familiar smelling items in the carrier and the new environment can help make your rabbits feel at more ease. Rabbits that live together and are friends should be transported together to give reassurance, and ensure the same scents are transferred to all rabbits, helping to avoid the potential problems associated with reintroducing rabbits after a period apart.

»» You can download an advice sheet on *Transporting rabbits* from: www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/pets/rabbits/environment.



Diet

MAKE SURE YOUR RABBITS HAVE A HEALTHY DIET



Rabbits are grazers and in the wild they eat only grass and other plants – in fact, your rabbits' digestive systems must have hay and/or grass in order to function properly.

Rabbits' teeth grow continuously throughout their life and need to be worn down and kept at the correct length and shape by eating grass, hay and leafy green plants – if they don't eat the right sorts of food they can suffer from serious dental disease. They produce two types of droppings – hard dry pellets, and softer moist pellets which they eat directly from their bottom and which are an essential part of their diet.

Rabbits tend to eat for long periods of time, mainly at dawn and dusk when they like to graze, forage for food and be sociable, so try to feed your rabbits during their active period. How much an individual rabbit needs to eat depends on his/her age, lifestyle and general health. But if a rabbit eats more food than he/she needs, he/she will become overweight and may suffer.

Food and drink

Your rabbits need fresh clean drinking water at all times – without access to water they can become seriously ill. Check their water supply twice a day and make sure it doesn't freeze if they live outdoors in winter.

Good quality hay and/or grass should make up the majority of your rabbits' diet and should be available at all times. Each rabbit needs at least a 'rabbit-sized' bundle of good quality hay every day which should be sweet-smelling and dust-free. Feeding some hay from a hay rack or hanging basket keeps it clean and above floor level. Placing a hay

rack above your rabbits' litter tray may encourage them to eat more hay.

Find out which plants are safe to feed your rabbits. Offer them a variety of safe, washed leafy greens or weeds every day – ideally five or six different types. Safe plants include cabbage, kale, broccoli, parsley and mint. Don't feed them lawnmower clippings as these can upset their digestive system and make them ill. A rabbit's diet doesn't naturally include cereals, root vegetables or fruit but you can give apples or root vegetables like carrots, in small amounts



as an occasional treat. Avoid feeding any other treats as these may harm your rabbits.

You can also feed a small, measured ration of good quality commercial rabbit pellets or nuggets to help to ensure your rabbits get a balanced diet, but remember that hay and/or grass are much more important and must be available at all times. Make sure that any pellets/nuggets you provide are high quality and contain high fibre levels.

If you feed pellets/nuggets, for a healthy adult rabbit, allow 25g (an egg cup-full) of pellets per kg of each rabbit's body weight but take care to adjust the amount given according to individual rabbits' needs, based on their lifestyle, activity levels, age and state of health. Growing, pregnant, nursing or underweight rabbits may need a larger portion of pellets/nuggets. Make sure your rabbits have finished the whole portion before giving them more, i.e. don't keep topping up the bowl/food dispensers, as this may result in them not eating enough hay and/or grass.

Muesli-style foods are associated with health problems in rabbits and should not be fed. Feeding muesli can increase the risk of rabbits developing serious teeth and tummy problems (including obesity), which can cause terrible suffering. If you currently feed muesli, you need to gradually transfer your rabbits onto a healthier diet. This change should be done slowly over 14-28 days to avoid potentially serious tummy

upsets (the exact time-scale will depend on each individual animal). Mix a small amount of pellets/nuggets into their current food, gradually reducing the amount of muesli, until it has been completely replaced. Your vet can advise you on how to provide the best diet for each of your rabbits and how to safely transition them onto a hay, leafy greens and pellet/nugget based feeding plan.

»»» For more information about why muesli is unhealthy for rabbits and dietary advice, visit www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/pets/rabbits/diet/muesli.

Take note of the amount each rabbit eats and drinks every day, and watch out for any changes in an individual's eating, drinking or toileting habits. For example, if the number of droppings gets less or stops, or if there are soft droppings sticking to his/her back end, talk to your vet straight away as your rabbit could be seriously ill.

Don't make any sudden changes to your rabbits' diet as this could make them very ill. Introduce new foods and make any necessary changes gradually to avoid upsetting their digestive systems. By keeping a careful eye on your rabbits you will be able adjust how much you feed them in order to make sure they don't become underweight or overweight.

»»» For more dietary advice, check out www.rspca.org.uk/rabbitdiet

»»» For suggestions about how to provide your rabbits' food in interesting and enriching ways, visit www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/pets/rabbits/behaviour/enrichment/dietary



Behaviour

MAKE SURE YOUR RABBITS ARE ABLE TO BEHAVE NORMALLY

Rabbits are highly social, playful and inquisitive animals and need to interact and play with other friendly rabbits. Many rabbits also enjoy interacting with people through gentle petting and positive reward-based training (such as clicker training).

Rabbits need regular and frequent opportunities to exercise every day. Try to make sure your rabbits have access to a large area to exercise during their most active periods (early morning, late afternoon and overnight) and, ideally, their main shelter and living enclosure should be permanently attached.

The way a rabbit behaves will depend on his/her age, personality and past experiences but if one of your rabbits changes his/her behaviour, he/she could be distressed, bored, ill or injured. Rabbits that are frightened or in pain may change their behaviour or develop unwanted habits, such as aggression or hiding.

Signs that a rabbit may be suffering from stress or fear can include hiding, chewing cage bars, over-grooming, altered feeding or toileting habits, over-drinking or playing with the water bottle, sitting hunched, reluctance to move, and repeated circling of his/her enclosure.

Be observant. If your rabbit's behaviour changes or he/she shows regular signs of stress or fear, talk to your vet or a qualified animal behaviourist. Never shout at or punish your rabbits, they are very unlikely to understand and may become more nervous or scared. If your rabbit's behaviour becomes an ongoing problem, talk to an expert.

»»» For further information on finding a qualified animal behaviourist, take a look at the RSPCA website at: www.rspca.org.uk/findabehaviourist.



»» Find out more about providing platforms at: www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/pets/rabbits/behaviour/enrichment/platforms



RABBITS NEED TO HAVE LOTS TO DO

The size of your rabbits' home is very important, but what's in their enclosure is also key to their welfare. An interesting environment gives your rabbits mental and physical stimulation, which means that they are more likely to remain fit, healthy and happy as a result. You'll have fun too, spending time watching them exploring and enjoying themselves!

Hiding places and platforms

Remember, your rabbits must be able to hide from things that scare them (see page 4). They need to be able to hide in a secure place, away from the sight and

smell of predators such as foxes, cats, dogs, ferrets and birds of prey.

Platforms allow rabbits to scan their environment for threats and can help them to feel safe. They can also help to build up a rabbit's physical fitness and bone strength, as jumping on and off a platform is an important weight-bearing exercise.

But if your rabbit has previously been kept in a restricted environment with little or no opportunity to exercise and jump onto objects, ask your vet for advice before providing platforms, so that you can make sure he/she does not injure him/herself.



»» Find out more about the importance of providing constant access to hiding places at: www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/pets/rabbits/behaviour/enrichment/hidingplaces



Play time

Toys allow rabbits to perform normal behaviours such as digging, chewing, chin marking and investigating. Different rabbits enjoy different types of toys, so try providing a variety of items until you find out which ones your rabbits like best!

Provide your rabbits with safe toys to play with and chew, and regular opportunities to play with other friendly rabbits and/or people. Rabbits tend to love the simple (and cheap!) things in life – here are a few suggestions for toys and objects that could be a hit with your bunnies...



PAPER shredded newspaper, paper bags with the handles removed and telephone directories (with the glossy covers removed). You could even bundle up your rabbits' favourite food item in brown paper as a parcel for them to unwrap!

CARDBOARD boxes with holes cut into them make great hiding places. Cardboard tubes can be stuffed with hay and healthy treats/part of their daily food ration.

TUNNELS plastic and fabric tunnels can be purchased commercially. Tunnels can also be made from cardboard boxes, cardboard tubes and large ceramic pipes (with a wide diameter).

»» You'll find lots more ideas for safe toys and objects that your rabbits may enjoy playing or interacting with at: www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/pets/rabbits/behaviour/enrichment/toys.



Digging and marking

Many rabbits love to dig so try to provide your rabbits with some form of 'digging box'. A large plant pot or litter tray filled with earth, a cardboard box filled with shredded paper or a sandpit filled with child-friendly sand provides a safe place for them to have fun.

Rabbits use scent as an important means of communication so you should provide objects and areas within your rabbits' home where they can scent mark using chin secretions, urine and droppings. This is a rabbit's way of marking his/her territory and making it smell familiar and reassuring to him/her. These scents are not detected or noticed by people.

Heather Pinchien



Safety first

Make sure any items you give your rabbits are safe and inspect them regularly to check for potential injury points. Repair, discard or replace any items that become damaged or dangerous. If you have more than one rabbit, check that there are enough items for each rabbit. Always ensure your rabbits can move away from a new object and keep a close eye on your rabbits when first giving them new items. If they do appear stressed or frightened by a new item, remove it and watch their behaviour – talk to your vet if you're worried.

Regularly rotate the toys and objects that you give your rabbits to maintain their interest and prevent them from becoming bored. To make sure your rabbits get the most from the resources you provide, take a look at the RSPCA's advice on enrichment at: www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/pets/rabbits/behaviour/enrichment/guidance.



Scent is an important means of communication for rabbits.

»» To find out more about how to enrich your rabbits' environment visit: www.rspca.org.uk/rabbitenrichment.



Company

MAKE SURE YOUR RABBITS
HAVE APPROPRIATE COMPANY

Rabbits are naturally sociable and normally prefer to be with another rabbit. A rabbit left on his/her own can develop abnormal behaviour and may suffer if left without company and nothing to do for long periods of time.

So please keep your rabbit with at least one other friendly rabbit, unless advised otherwise by a vet or qualified animal behaviourist.

A good combination is a neutered male and a neutered female. It's best to get your rabbits neutered, unless they are intended for breeding and provisions have been made to care for both parents and offspring. Rabbits that are brought up together will usually get on with each other, but if introduced for the first time as adults they may fight. Neutering reduces the likelihood of fighting in both male and female rabbits, and has other benefits (see page 17).

Rabbits kept together will naturally form a 'pecking order' with some animals being more dominant than others. A rabbit can be bullied if he/she cannot get away from other rabbits that he/she doesn't like.

So make sure all your rabbits have constant access to places they can go to get away from each other if they want to and that there are enough hiding places for all your rabbits at all times.

Introduce new rabbits gradually and under supervision, preferably in a space that is new to both rabbits. Always talk to a qualified animal behaviourist if you are unsure or have problems.





Hands on

If you take the time to handle your rabbits regularly they will learn to see you as a friend and companion, so handle them gently every day from an early age. To hold your rabbits correctly, you should pick them up gently but firmly, making sure that one hand supports their back and hindquarters at all times and that they feel secure by having all four feet held against your body. For more detailed advice on how to handle and train your rabbits, you can download an RSPCA advice sheet on *Rabbit handling* at www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/pets/rabbits/company. If you are unsure how to handle your rabbits, please ask your vet or a qualified animal behaviourist for advice.

If your rabbit has to be kept on his/her own for some reason it's especially important that you interact positively with him/her every day to provide companionship.

Rabbits that receive little handling at an early age, or rough handling at any age, may find human contact distressing. This can be expressed as fearfulness, escape behaviour and aggression. If you are concerned about

your rabbit's behaviour, speak to your vet for advice. It's important to get your rabbit checked by a vet first to rule out any illness or injury that could be causing the behaviour problem. Your vet can then refer you to a behaviour expert. Your rabbit's reaction to handling is likely to depend on his/her past handling experience, so patience will be needed to help him/her grow more confident and comfortable around people.

IN GOOD COMPANY

When you are away, make sure your rabbits are cared for by a responsible person. Never leave your rabbits unsupervised with another animal or person who may (deliberately or accidentally) harm or frighten them.

Rabbits will usually be scared of cats and dogs because they are natural predators, but if introduced to them carefully, early in life, they can develop friendships. Never leave your rabbits unsupervised with a cat or dog, even if you know they are good friends.

Rabbits and guinea pigs have different needs so keeping them together is not advised. The best companion for a rabbit is another friendly rabbit.

»» For further information, including advice on what to do if you already have a rabbit and guinea pig living together visit: www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/pets/rabbits/company/rabbitsandguineapigs



Health & welfare

MAKE SURE YOUR RABBITS ARE PROTECTED FROM PAIN, SUFFERING, INJURY AND DISEASE

Rabbits feel pain in the same way as other mammals, including people, but they are not very good at showing outward signs of pain and may be suffering a great deal before you notice anything is wrong.

A change in the way a rabbit normally behaves can be an early sign he/she is ill or in pain. If a rabbit is not eating or is more quiet than usual, he/she is highly likely to be ill, or in pain, in which case you should talk to your vet immediately.

Rabbits are vulnerable to many infectious diseases and other illnesses, especially dental disease. They can catch deadly

infectious diseases from wild rabbits so you should prevent your rabbits from having contact with wild rabbits or areas where wild rabbits have been.

Some breeds of rabbit have been selected for exaggerated physical features which can cause them to suffer and reduce their quality of life, while certain breeds are particularly prone to inherited disorders and diseases.

Feeding your rabbit the correct diet of mainly hay and/or grass will help prevent a lot of common diseases such as dental and gut disease.



Health check

Before deciding to buy/acquire rabbits, make sure you find out how they have been bred, what they have been fed and how they have been cared for. Also, check out if any of them they have had (or may be prone to) any health or behaviour problems before you take them on and always ask a vet for advice if you are unsure about anything.

You should also think about taking out pet insurance and having your rabbits microchipped. For just a few pounds a month you'll be covered for unexpected vets' bills in the future and safeguard your pet's health. A one-off payment for microchipping your rabbit means you are more likely to be quickly reunited if he/she goes missing and he/she will receive prompt veterinary care if injured.

The RSPCA also advises that you get your rabbits neutered, unless they are intended for breeding and provisions have been made to care for both parents and offspring. Unneutered female rabbits are at a high risk of developing cancer of the womb, and unneutered rabbits are more likely to fight if kept together. If you are thinking of allowing your rabbits to breed, talk to your vet to make sure they are suitable for

breeding in terms of their health and personalities and to get advice on how to care for the parents and offspring.

Feeding your rabbit the correct diet of mainly hay and/or grass will help prevent a lot of common diseases such as dental and gut disease. Check that your rabbit is eating every day and that he/she is passing plenty of dry droppings. If your rabbit's eating or drinking habits change or the number of droppings gets less or stops, talk to your vet straight away as he/she could be seriously ill.





Health checklist

- **Make sure your rabbits are vaccinated regularly – take them for a routine health check with your vet at least once a year.** Vaccinations protect them against myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD) (also known as Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease, (RHD). Your vet will advise how often your rabbits should be vaccinated.
- **Rabbits that are stressed are much more likely to become ill** so try to minimise unnecessary stress, provide constant access to safe hiding places and watch to see if their behaviour changes or they show regular signs of stress or fear, in which case, seek advice from your vet or a qualified animal behaviourist.
- **Check your rabbits for signs of illness or injury every day.** Make sure this is done by someone else if you are away. **Consult your vet immediately if you suspect your rabbit is in pain, ill or injured.**
- **In warm weather check the fur and skin around your rabbits' rear end and tail area twice a day,** as urine staining or droppings that are stuck will attract flies, which can lay eggs and cause 'flystrike', which is often fatal.
- **Front teeth and nails should be checked at least once a week** as these can grow quickly but only a vet should correct overgrown or misaligned teeth.
- **Give your rabbits treatment for external and internal parasites** (e.g. fleas and worms) as necessary, as advised by your vet.
- **Only use medicines that have been specifically recommended for your individual rabbit by a vet** – some medicines used for other animals can be very dangerous to rabbits.
- **Groom your rabbits' coats regularly to keep them in good condition.** If you are unsure how to groom your rabbits properly ask your vet for advice.

Poisoning

Never 'watch and wait' in any case of suspected poisoning. If you think your rabbit has been poisoned, act fast and contact a vet for advice immediately.

Some of the most common, potentially severe rabbit poisons are rodent poisons

('rodenticides'), ivy, rhubarb, foxgloves and glyphosphate herbicide products. Preventing your rabbit from coming into contact with poisonous substances and treating any accidental poisonings quickly and appropriately is an important part of responsible pet ownership.

►►► **For more detailed advice on what to do if you think your rabbit has been poisoned and how to prevent poisonings go to: www.rspca.org.uk/poisoning**

FIND OUT MORE...

Rabbits are amazing animals with complex needs that must be met if they are to be kept healthy and happy.

There's loads more to learn about rabbits on the RSPCA website – from our top ten rabbit facts to detailed advice sheets on various aspects of rabbit care. So make sure you visit www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits

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and happy

»» Why not join our online rabbit community to find out more about rabbit care and hear more about our campaign to improve rabbit welfare: www.rspca.org.uk/campaigns/rabbits.



If you are thinking of looking after rabbits, you've really researched their welfare needs and you're committed to taking care of them for the whole of their lives, please think about giving a home to some of the many rescue rabbits available for adoption at RSPCA animal centres across England and Wales.

There are no animals more deserving of loving owners, and we are always pleased to provide help and advice with choosing and caring for rabbits.

This booklet will help you find out what rabbits need to stay healthy and happy.



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