

# GUIDE TO CARING FOR RABBITS

## HEALTH CARE

Annual vaccinations against Myxomatosis and another serious disease known as Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD) are essential. It is very easy for rabbits to catch these diseases if not vaccinated and in recent years a new strain of the VHD virus has entered the UK, so two vaccinations are now required annually. One will protect against Myxomatosis and VHD1 and the other against VHD2. Discuss this with your 'rabbit savvy' vet. You can search for them at: [www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk](http://www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk).

It is important to have rabbits neutered as this helps prevent some behavioural and health issues, and allows for social groupings.

Pet rabbits should be registered with your vet and insured against unexpected veterinary costs as soon as possible.

Fly strike can be fatal so ensure you check your rabbit underneath daily, especially during summer, to ensure they are clean. Flies are attracted to soiled areas around the tail where they lay eggs. If you suspect your rabbit has fly strike, contact your vet immediately.

Rabbits are traditionally kept in a hutch, or shed and run outdoors, but are increasingly popular as house pets. If you decide to keep your rabbit indoors it is essential that your home is rabbit-proofed. Be aware of exposed electrical wires, other pets and plants – many of which are poisonous to rabbits. They also chew door frames, furniture and clothes, so they should be supervised at all times.

## PET CODE OF PRACTICE

Never release a pet (companion animal) into the wild. It is illegal and for most species this will lead to an untimely and possibly lingering death, as they are not native to this country. Any animals or plants that do survive might be harmful to the environment. This includes the need to properly dispose of soiled substrate, so that eggs and live food can't escape into the wild.

## SHOPPING LIST

- hutch, run with a cover to protect from extreme weather
- large, safe exercise run for the garden
- puppy panels to create an indoor space, if applicable
- commercial rabbit food and ceramic food dish
- water bottle, bottle brush and water dish
- good quality feeding hay or freeze-dried grass
- hay rack
- hay or soft dust-extracted straw for bedding
- treats
- toys and tunnels
- pet-safe disinfectant
- fly repellent
- nail clippers
- litter tray (one per rabbit)
- rabbit care book

## THE FIVE ANIMAL WELFARE NEEDS

The Animal Welfare Act 2006 means all pet owners have a legal duty of care to their pets. Anyone who is cruel to an animal or is found not to be providing the five animal welfare needs, as listed below, can be fined and sent to prison.

- 1 Environment:** pets should be given the correct housing according to its size, this includes shelter, space to exercise and a secure, comfortable place to rest.
- 2 Diet:** pets should be offered the correct type and volume of food to cover all their nutritional needs alongside access to clean, fresh water.
- 3 Behaviour:** all pets should be allowed to exhibit normal behaviour patterns and should be provided with the facilities to do so.
- 4 Company:** some animals require the company of their own kind, whilst others should be kept on their own.
- 5 Health:** all animals should be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease, and given veterinary treatment if they become sick or injured.

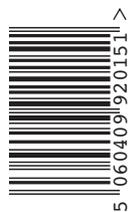


This leaflet is produced by The Pet Charity, a national charity which promotes the joy and benefits of pet ownership.

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These organisations support the aims of The Pet Charity to promote the welfare and responsible keeping of pet animals



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the  
**pet**   
**Charity**  
*For joy, health & companionship*



Rabbits can make wonderful pets if cared for correctly. Watching them run, jump and play is a real delight.

## THE PET CHARITY GUIDE TO CARING FOR RABBITS

Rabbits come in different shapes, sizes and colours, and domestic rabbits kept as pets are fundamentally the same as their wild cousins – who live in large social groups and cover an area equivalent to six football pitches every day.

Rabbits typically live for around 7–10 years, although some can live up to 12 years, so you must be sure you can care for your rabbits for the next decade. If you are buying rabbits for your child, they will be your responsibility.

### GENERAL CARE

Rabbits should be kept in neutered pairs or compatible groups – never on their own. A male/female partnership work best. Rabbits suffer from stress and loneliness if kept alone and they value companionship as much as food. We do not recommend keeping rabbits and guinea pigs together as they have different needs.

Rabbits thrive on regular contact, so make time for them every day. Offering them a small treat is a great way to interact and build trust.

### CHOOSING YOUR RABBIT

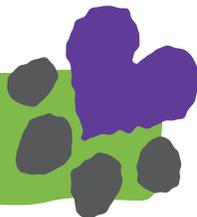
There are many varieties of rabbits which vary greatly in size and temperament. Dwarf Lop-Eared Rabbits are popular due to their appealing looks and docile nature. Dwarf Lops are smaller than English or French Lops, but they can still weigh more than 2kg when fully grown. Long-haired rabbits are less suitable as pets because they need daily grooming. Lops, can be more prone to teeth and ear problems.

A healthy rabbit:

- should be active and inquisitive with bright eyes
- should have no signs of discharge from the mouth, nose or ears. This may indicate a tooth/ear problem, or a respiratory infection. Lumps around the mouth and jaw may also indicate these issues
- should not have an excessive amount of fat under the skin. Feel over the hips, ribs and spine to determine this. An excessively under/overweight rabbit may have health issues or have been kept in poor conditions
- should always be clean, with no wetness, discharge or faeces around their bottom
- should be at least eight weeks old when you get them. When you buy baby rabbits, feed them the same food they have been used to, alongside plenty of fresh hay and water

### DID YOU KNOW?

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### HOUSING

Rabbits should be provided with a large, spacious enclosure so they can comfortably stand on their hind legs. An outdoor home should be sturdy, waterproof and raised off the floor by around 25cm. Place it in a sheltered position so they are protected from all weathers with a cover, blanket or piece of old carpet for added protection on cold nights. A house-rabbit's cage should be placed in a cool room and out of direct sunlight and draughts.

Rabbits are active so it is essential they are allowed daily exercise outside their cage, whether in a safe garden enclosure or a rabbit-proof part of your home. An outdoor enclosure should be secure enough to keep them in as well as other animals out.

A permanently attached exercise area attached to the hutch or cage is recommended, as this allows rabbits to exercise whenever they please. A hutch or cage is not enough alone and should be regarded as burrows to rest in as part of a larger living area.

An exercise run on the lawn will allow your rabbits to express normal behaviour, such as running, digging, burrowing, jumping, hiding and grazing. It is important to be aware that they may dig their way out of a run, so be sure to move it regularly to prevent escapes. Moving the run will also give them access to fresh grass.

If your rabbits' run is attached to their hutch and is unable to be moved, it is recommended to pave the floor and provide a digging box and plenty of fresh hay.

All hutches and runs need to be sturdy and predator-proof. Before purchase, check hutches and runs have bolt locks rather than swivel locks, and ensure the wire is strong. Visit [www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk](http://www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk) for details on the best options on housing.

Rabbits are prey animals so they're naturally shy, quiet and usually dislike being held above ground level. Children should be encouraged to interact with them at ground level.

### BEDDING AND HUTCH MAINTENANCE

A hutch or cage should have a layer of absorbent bedding on the floor with plenty of hay or straw for nesting. Any wet bedding should be removed daily, along with uneaten fresh foods. Rabbits often use the same area for their toilet which means they can be trained to use a litter tray. This is easily cleaned out daily.

Hygiene is extremely important, particularly in summer. An unclean hutch will attract flies and other undesirable pests, so it should be cleaned thoroughly at least once a week.



### FOOD AND WATER

Rabbits should be fed in a way that is as close as possible to their natural diet, which is mostly grass and hay. We also recommend providing some fresh leafy vegetables and a small amount of commercial feed.

A daily healthy diet for adult rabbits should be:

- 80% grass or hay. This should be available 24/7, preferably from a hay rack
- 15% leafy greens/vegetables, such as kale, carrot tops and broccoli
- 5% commercial feed pellets, approximately one tablespoon for every kilo of ideal body weight, and divide it into two feedings

Hay provides rabbits with healthy gut fibre. It can also prevent dental problems by keeping teeth at a good length. Rabbits' teeth grow continually so hay is a vital part of their diet.

A wide range of prepared food is available that is formulated for rabbits of different ages or sizes. Extruded pellets/foods with at least 18% crude fibre are best as they are palatable and contain the required nutrition. Always follow the manufacturer's instructions. Scatter-feeding pellets rather than using a bowl will encourage foraging and provide enrichment. Young and giant rabbits, in particular, have special requirements. Do not overfeed as this can lead to obesity.

Do not change your rabbit's commercial feed suddenly, as it can cause fatal digestive upsets. The transition should be done gradually over a period of at least two weeks.

Fresh foods should be given in moderation – a small handful each day is ideal. Baby rabbits, in particular, need only a very small amount. Suitable fresh foods include kale, spring greens, broccoli and dandelions. Contrary to popular belief, lettuce should be avoided. Fresh food should be washed thoroughly before feeding and do not allow it to become frosted. Remove uneaten food regularly.

Muesli-type foods should be avoided as they will promote selective feeding and may lead to nutritional imbalances.

Fresh water must be available at all times and should be provided by both a gravity-fed bottle and a bowl.