

PetSavers

Rabbit

Guide



Introduction

Rabbits make friendly, intelligent pets – they are easy to handle, rarely bite, are active during the day and are highly sociable and so are suitable for both adults and families with children.

They are relatively long-lived with an average life expectancy of between 8 and 12 years, but many rabbits can live much longer if cared for properly. There are over 60 breeds of domestic rabbit, in a variety of shapes, sizes and colours.



It is important that even if the rabbit is considered the children's pet, an adult oversees their care to ensure their needs are adequately met. Rabbits should be kept with at least one other rabbit for companionship.

Owning rabbits brings its own special rewards and responsibilities and is not a decision that should be undertaken lightly.

The Animal Welfare Acts have introduced a duty of care making it the responsibility of the pet owner to ensure that their animal's welfare needs are met. Your rabbits will be members of your family for many years so it is worth considering how you will provide for their needs.



These include the need:

- For a suitable environment (place to live)
- For a suitable diet
- To exhibit normal behaviour patterns
- To be housed with or apart from other animals (if applicable)
- To be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

The specific requirements will vary depending on your own circumstances. Factors you should consider when taking on a rabbit include:

- Other pets in the household (dogs and cats are predators to rabbits; guinea pigs and rabbits should not be kept together as rabbits may bully guinea pigs and can also spread infectious respiratory diseases to them)
- Whether you plan to keep them indoors and/or outdoors
- The local climate

Many local veterinary practices employ veterinarians and nursing staff that have a



particular interest in small mammal pets such as rabbits. These professionals are your best ally in keeping your rabbit healthy; they have plenty of knowledge and experience and will be happy to offer you advice. It is worthwhile phoning around to locate and consult with a vet practice with the experience and facilities suitable for these important members of your family.



Choosing a rabbit

Wild rabbits are said to have been first domesticated in the 5th Century by the monks of the Champagne Region in France, but have since become popular pets in many countries around the world. There are many different breeds of rabbit, with variations in hair coat type, patterns, marking and colours. Breed standards are set by The British Rabbit Council in the UK. Cross-bred rabbits are also available. The choice is largely an individual preference. Different breeds of rabbits have similar care requirements.

Where to get your rabbit

Rabbits can be bought from many different sources; however, we would recommend that you don't rush into this decision. You want your rabbit to be healthy and sociable, so it is worth taking the time to research the source of your rabbit to make sure the breeder has done everything they can to give your pet a good start. Unfortunately, there are people who breed and sell small mammal pets with little concern for their health and welfare and purchasing from these people only perpetuates irresponsible breeding.

Reputable breeders should encourage you to visit and see the litter with their mother before making a choice. They should be willing to answer questions but will also want to satisfy themselves that their rabbits will be going to a suitable home. The breeder should provide you with details of any health problems in the parents, the current feeding regime and any treatments that have been given.

Rehoming and rescue centres will often have older rabbits available. They may be unable to provide detailed information regarding the parentage or previous care arrangements; however, they should be able to provide some details of the current feeding and socialisation regime and any health issues they have encountered.



Pet shops may have rabbits for sale. It is important to ensure that they have been kept in single sex groups and that the staff can give you information on the source, age, sex and care of the rabbits.

While the internet can provide a convenient way of researching breeds, we would advise against purchasing rabbits without visiting to see them in their home or pet shop environment first. Ideally, you want to inspect the mother and littermates. While the offer to deliver your rabbit to you may seem appealing, remember that this could be hiding irresponsible breeding and care practices.

The parents

Choosing a healthy rabbit starts with finding out about the health of the parents. It is worth checking how closely related the parents are as this can affect the chance of genetic health problems in the offspring. Ask about any health problems the parents have had and when they last had a veterinary check-up.

Selecting a rabbit

While it is not possible to guarantee the health of an individual rabbit there are several things that you can do to maximise the chance that your own rabbit will have the best start in life. Where possible have the rabbit checked by a veterinary surgeon either before or immediately after purchase. Do not choose a sickly looking rabbit because you feel sorry for it, you will only be taking on problems. Here is a list of things to check:

- The eyes and nose should be clear and free of any discharge that might indicate an infection
- The rabbit should be curious and inquisitive
- The rabbit should be in good body condition and not thin. Run your hand along the backbone, hips and ribs to check this – the bones should not be too prominent and should be covered with a reasonable layer of muscle



Choosing a rabbit

- Check for any wetness or caking of droppings around the anus
- Check for the presence of parasites such as fleas or mites by parting the fur along the back, and check inside the ears for any redness or excessive yellow or brown wax that may indicate ear mites
- If possible gently part the lips and examine the rabbit's front (incisor) teeth to check they are not broken or overgrown
- Find out whether the rabbit has been neutered (spayed or castrated); most will not have been until they are approximately six months old
- Ask whether it has been vaccinated against myxomatosis and rabbit haemorrhagic disease (RHD)
- Ask the seller if they offer any guarantee of health or a return policy
- Finally, find out what the rabbit is being fed on, as you do not want to introduce a sudden change of diet when you get it home – this may provoke gut disturbance and diarrhoea

The veterinary surgeon will also be able to do a more thorough health check to ensure the rabbit is developing normally, that there are no obvious abnormalities such as heart murmurs, dental malocclusions, hernias etc and will be able to confirm the sex.

Where a microchip has been inserted, you will want to make sure that the rabbit is correctly registered to you.



It is worth spending some time preparing your home before your rabbits arrive. It is also worth thinking about how you will adapt your household routine to accommodate your new pets. Rabbits are intelligent, inquisitive, active and athletic animals and need to be able to hop, run, stretch out, dig and stand fully upright on their hind legs. Any housing should be as large as possible. Remember you are now responsible for the welfare needs of your rabbits.

Housing

Before your rabbits arrive, you will need to make sure that your house and garden are safe and secure. Remember that your rabbits are small and inquisitive and may chew items that are toxic, dangerous or valuable. Your home and garden will seem very strange to your new rabbits and they may need some time to get familiar with their new surroundings.



Rabbits can be kept inside or out, but must always be provided with a secure living area large enough to exercise freely. A shelter where they can rest and feel safe is also very important.

Indoor rabbits make good house pets and can easily be litter trained. However, they love to chew and dig and can be destructive to furniture and carpets. It is best to supervise rabbits whenever they are loose in the house, and to have a secure cage or pen in which they can be kept at night or when you are out. It is also wise to take measures to prevent chewing of electrical cables – a potentially dangerous pastime! Old towels or blankets, or even a small sandpit filled with earth or bark chippings, can allow your rabbits to express their normal digging behaviour.



Preparing for your new rabbit

Although outdoor rabbits are traditionally housed in a hutch, this should be viewed only as a secure area that provides shelter from weather and a place to rest and feel safe. Your rabbits will also need a large exercise area, which can be a run or fenced area of garden with access to grass. Within this you should provide boxes or tubes as 'hides'.

House rabbits may be kept on soft towels, or shredded paper. Outside rabbits may be kept on wood shavings, straw or hay. Straw is a better alternative to hay for bedding, as hay is easily flattened and gives little warmth. Barley straw is recommended as it is softer than wheat or oat straw and there is less likelihood of it damaging the eyes. Avoid dusty or mouldy straw, as this can sometimes lead to respiratory problems. Sawdust should be avoided as it is dusty and can irritate the eyes. Bedding must always be dry and clean and soiled areas removed regularly.

It is important to provide your rabbits with many activities and toys to prevent boredom, but fortunately this is easy and inexpensive. Everyday household items can be used such as plant pots, boxes or tubes.

Rabbits can even be trained to jump and do agility courses, just like dogs!

Litter training

Rabbits can be litter trained relatively easily, as they will naturally urinate in one place. Initially the trainee rabbit should be kept in a small area (either a cage or a blocked off area of a room) and a litter tray placed in a corner of the area that the rabbit has already used to soil. The sides of the litter tray must be low enough so that the rabbit can get in and out easily. Newspaper, straw or paper-based litter is best (certain types of cat litter can be harmful if eaten). It may help to put some droppings in the litter box, to encourage the rabbit to use it.



Cleaning and hygiene

It is essential that your rabbits are kept as clean as possible, particularly if the enclosure is outdoors in summer. You should check your rabbits twice daily, especially in summer, for any signs of matted droppings or maggots around their rear ends. Clean the enclosure at least twice weekly, and if possible remove any urine-soaked bedding each day. The hutch may be cleaned with a dilute disinfectant.

The rabbit's environment

Indoor rabbits should be kept in the coolest and least humid part of the house. The optimum room temperature range for rabbits is 15–21°C. Rabbits cannot sweat or pant and if the environmental temperature rises above 27°C a rabbit may get heat stroke. Outdoor rabbits must have access to shade in the summer. Do not place the hutch in direct sun if the rabbit is confined within it, as the rabbit may overheat.

Outdoor rabbits must also be kept free from draughts, wind and driving rain, and should be protected from dogs, cats and other predators. Plenty of straw bedding in the winter and covering the front of the cage with a blanket at night will prevent them from getting hypothermia. Water bowls and bottles should be changed daily in the winter as they may freeze.



A correct diet is fundamental to maintaining health, particularly of the teeth and the digestive system. It's simple to feed rabbits. Provide unlimited good quality hay or grass, some leafy green vegetables and herbs, and you can supplement this with a small measured amount of nuggetted or pelleted feed in an amount recommended by the manufacturer. Always provide fresh clean water. Treats should be kept to a minimum, but if they are fed they should be healthy and natural. Fresh drinking water must always be available.



Grass and hay

The best diet for rabbits is one that mimics their natural grass-based diet in the wild as closely as possible. Grass is high in fibre (approx. 20–25%), has moderate levels of protein (approx. 15%) and is low in fat (2–3%). The bulk of the diet of the pet rabbit should consist of grass (fresh or freeze-dried) and/or good quality meadow/timothy hay. This should be available at all times. Eating these fibrous foods throughout the day will keep your rabbits occupied and prevent boredom. Hay can be fed from racks or nets to minimise contamination and increase the time spent feeding. Good quality meadow hay should be sweet smelling and not dusty. Dried grass products that retain colour and are highly palatable are also available.

Green foods

Leafy green foods are also important and a variety should be fed daily to rabbits of all ages. New plants should be introduced gradually to weanling rabbits. Examples are broccoli, cabbage, chicory, chard, parsley, watercress, celery leaves, endive, radicchio, dock, basil and other herbs, kale, carrot and beet tops. Wild plants such as bramble, groundsel, chickweed, and dandelion can also be given if available. All green foods should be washed before feeding.

Commercial feed

High quality nuggets or pellets, where all the nutrients are present in each individual nugget, are recommended for rabbits. Never feed any commercial foods ad libitum by constantly topping up the bowl, but feed a small measured amount daily. A good general rule is to feed a maximum of 25 g of pellets per kg bodyweight per day, and it must be emphasised that hay or grass should always be available and make up the bulk of the diet. However, always check the manufacturer's instructions. Many adult rabbits do not actually need commercial feed, especially if they are overweight. Seek advice from your veterinary surgeon about your rabbit's diet if you are unsure what to feed.

Baby and growing rabbits require higher protein levels than adult rabbits. Special feeds for baby rabbits are available, but the bulk of the diet should still be grass or good quality hay.

When presented with mixed feeds (coarse mix or muesli mixes), many rabbits will only eat certain components. Picking out the bits they like, and leaving the bits they don't, means they get a very unbalanced diet with an insufficient intake of fibre, protein, calcium and phosphorous. This can lead to many problems, the main one being dental disease. Overfeeding of mixed feeds may also lead to other problems such as obesity, heart and liver disease, chronic diarrhoea, kidney and bladder disease.

Treats

High fat or starchy treats should be avoided completely as they can lead to obesity and digestive upsets. These include honey sticks, beans, peas, corn, bread, breakfast cereal, biscuits, nuts, seeds, crisps and chocolate. Root vegetables, such as carrots, and fruit should also be regarded as treats and only fed in limited quantities, as they are high in simple sugars and can lead to gastrointestinal disturbance and teeth problems.

The best treats to feed are healthy treats such as small amounts of a favourite vegetable or herb. If the correct treats are chosen, they provide your rabbits with an extra source of fibre. Be very careful with feeding treats as they can lead to obesity and digestive upsets.

Water

Fresh drinking water must be available at all times. Drinking bottles are easier to keep clean than water bowls, and avoid wetting the dewlap (the fold of skin under the chin in females), which can lead to a moist dermatitis. However, bowls are easier to drink from and may in fact be preferred by the rabbit, especially in hot weather and for those individuals eating a lot of hay. Whatever method is used for providing water, strict attention to hygiene is needed and bottles need to be checked they are functioning properly every day.

Other considerations

Sudden changes in diet must be avoided. Any change in diet should be made gradually over several days or weeks, starting with small amounts of the new item and gradually increasing them, at the same time making a corresponding decrease in the unwanted item if necessary. Hay should always be available.

It is especially important to ensure that weanling rabbits eat plenty of hay. A sudden change in diet and a lack of fibre, combined with the stress of movement, is a significant cause of disease and death in young rabbits over the period of weaning – for example, when moving to a pet shop or a new owner. When purchasing a rabbit it is important that you be informed of the rabbit's past diet, so that any changes can be introduced gradually.

Frosted or mouldy food and lawnmower clippings should not be fed as these can lead to severe digestive disturbances.

Dietary supplements (e.g. vitamins and minerals) are not generally necessary if the correct diet is fed. They should be used only under the direction of a veterinary surgeon.



Grooming

Establish a regular grooming routine as soon as you bring your rabbit home. Make grooming sessions short at first until they are used to the process. Not only will it give you the opportunity to remove dead hairs from the coat and reduce matting, but grooming also provides the perfect opportunity to check you rabbit for any abnormalities e.g. solid hind end. Grooming sessions give you the chance to check for mites and to examine the rabbit's coat, feet and nails, eyes, ears and incisor teeth for anything that might require a trip to the vet.

The amount of time you will need to spend on grooming depends on the type of coat e.g. daily grooming is recommended for long-haired breeds.

Dental care

Rabbits have incisor teeth at the front of the mouth and a set of cheek teeth at the back of the mouth. All their teeth grow continuously throughout life. It is useful to check the incisors regularly at home, but due to the unique anatomy of their mouth it isn't possible to see the cheek teeth without specialised equipment. A visit to the vet is necessary for a thorough dental check and should be arranged at least once a year.



Socialisation

After bringing your rabbit home it is useful to introduce them slowly to various sights, sounds, people and experiences around the house and garden. Once they have become accustomed to their surroundings, it is helpful to handle them regularly so they are less anxious about being picked up in the future. If it is frightened or feels insecure when being handled, a rabbit may kick out with its powerful hind legs and can easily damage its spine, which can result in paralysis.

When picking up a rabbit, always support its hindquarters as this will prevent spinal injuries. Hold the front end of the rabbit under its chest between the front legs with one hand, scoop up the hind end with your other hand, and hold the rabbit close in to your body so it feels secure. You can tuck its head under your arm or cover its eyes with your free hand if it appears stressed as this will help keep it calm.

Never pick a rabbit up by its ears or let its legs dangle freely. Often it is best to get down to the rabbit's level and stroke it, letting it come to you; or gently place it on your lap while you are sitting on the floor, rather than picking it up and lifting it off the ground.

Do not lie a rabbit on its back, even if it lies still and appears to be 'hypnotised'. This is in fact a stress response and is not pleasurable to the rabbit, although it may be useful in some specific situations for non-painful grooming or veterinary procedures such as nail clipping.

Remember that rabbits are naturally prey animals and as such can have a nervous temperament. It is important not to overwhelm them with too many potentially frightening experiences at once.

Communication

Rabbits use extensive body language and a few vocalisations to communicate with each other. You will soon get to learn the different sounds your rabbit makes when it is excited, frightened, content etc.

Companionship

Rabbits are sociable and should not be kept on their own. They need other rabbits for companionship. They may be kept in single-sex groups, or pairs (a male and a female). Rabbits should not be kept with guinea pigs because rabbits can bully and injure guinea pigs, and they both need company from their own species. Bringing siblings up together and then keeping them together is one option (for information related to neutering, see page 16).



Disease prevention

Rabbits should be vaccinated routinely against rabbit haemorrhagic disease (RHD) and myxomatosis. Both these viral diseases can be rapidly fatal in an unvaccinated rabbit, and there is no specific cure for either disease once established. The only protection you can give your rabbits is through vaccination.

RHD is spread by direct contact between rabbits (both wild and domesticated) but also via indirect contact with people, clothing, shoes, other objects and fleas. Myxomatosis is commonly spread by fleas and other biting insects, and can often be transmitted in this way from wild rabbits to pets. A combined myxomatosis-RHD vaccination can be given from as early as five weeks of age. Boosters are given every 12 months and cover both diseases. Your

vet will provide you with further advice on vaccination, as well as flea and other parasite control.

The best way to avoid many disease problems in your pet rabbits is to have regular veterinary health checks at least annually, which can coincide with vaccinations. Your rabbits will be given a full examination and the teeth can be checked (particularly the back teeth) for any evidence of dental disease.

Rabbits with known tooth problems should be checked much more frequently – every 6–8 weeks at least. However, a thorough dental check will require the rabbit to be sedated or anaesthetised.



Signs of illness

Observe your rabbit regularly; if you notice any of the following it might indicate a health problem and you should contact your local vet to arrange a consultation:

- Lethargy
- Diarrhoea or a significant change in the size/number of droppings
- Weak hind limbs, swollen joints or lameness
- Hair loss, flaky or crusting skin or excessive scratching
- Not eating or drinking
- Dull eye colour or coat
- Squealing when urinating or blood in the urine
- Dirty, uneven or broken teeth
- Drooling or tooth-grinding
- Discharges from the eyes or nose
- Breathing difficulties
- Lumps
- Swelling of the abdomen
- Wounds or sores on the feet

Neutering

Neutering (sterilising) your rabbit can be beneficial for the following reasons:

- To prevent unwanted pregnancies
- To decrease aggression/fighting (especially in males)
- To prevent or treat ovarian cysts – a common reproductive disease in females

Routine neutering of both male (buck) and female (doe) rabbits is strongly recommended unless you wish to breed from them.

Rabbits become sexually mature between three months (in smaller breeds) and 6–9 months (in larger breeds). It is recommended that young rabbits be separated into single sex groups by three months of age.

Breeding is prevented by castration of male rabbits and spaying of female rabbits. Males should be neutered before sexual maturity, as soon as the testicles descend, which can be as early as 10 weeks old. Females can be neutered at any age, but the very small size and fragility of the uterus in very young animals means that neutering from about 5 months old is preferable. If you have a mixed sex pair of rabbits it is best to have them both neutered at about four months of age to ensure that unplanned pregnancy is avoided. Having your female rabbit spayed dramatically decreases the chance of her developing uterine cancer later on in life. In some breeds, the incidence of this cancer is over 80% in does of over four years of age. Spaying will also prevent the doe from becoming territorial, inclined to fight other rabbits or becoming aggressive to people.

Intact males are more prone to developing behavioural problems including fighting, biting and urine spraying. The urine may also become strong smelling.



However, neutered rabbits are more prone to obesity as they grow older, so care must be taken not to allow overeating and to encourage plenty of exercise.

Breeding/pregnancy

Rabbits are prolific breeders; females can get pregnant again immediately after giving birth. The female is pregnant for 30–33 days and the average litter is 4–8 (kits) babies.

Newborn rabbits are born with their eyes and ears sealed shut and completely furless. Don't be alarmed at how they look – it'll take them a couple weeks for the fur to grow enough to keep them warm outside the nest box. For the first three weeks of their lives, the babies will only drink milk. At around three weeks old, they will naturally begin to nibble at the mother's food and hay, although they still need milk at this stage.

It is recommended that does are not bred for the first time until they reach an adequate body size and level of maturity (usually 3–6 months).

Pet insurance

You may want to consider taking out pet insurance so that you won't need to worry about vet bills if your rabbit has an accident or becomes ill. Although routine procedures such as health checks and neutering are not covered by insurance, insurance can provide peace of mind by covering unexpected veterinary fees.

Ensure you check policy details and exclusion clauses before buying an insurance policy to check it is right for your situation. Remember that conditions that existed before taking out the policy will not be covered.



Old age and preparing for death

As with all animals, serious health issues can occur in older rabbits. It is important to discuss any changes you have noticed in your older rabbit's behaviour or health with your vet. They will be able to investigate the problem and provide advice on appropriate methods of treatment or, in the case of incurable problems, to relieve the pet's symptoms including pain or anxiety. With advances in veterinary science, some conditions can be managed successfully for prolonged periods, but there does come a time when the animal's life comes to an end naturally or the quality of life of the rabbit reaches a stage at which euthanasia may be considered the most humane option to relieve pain or advanced disease. Your vet can help provide guidance on when it might be appropriate to say goodbye. This can be a difficult time for all the family. The bond between owner and pet can be just as strong with rabbits as it is with any other animal and it is important to remember that it is normal to feel intense sadness at the loss of a beloved pet.

Serious health issues should be discussed openly with each member of the family; parents will vary in the way they wish to

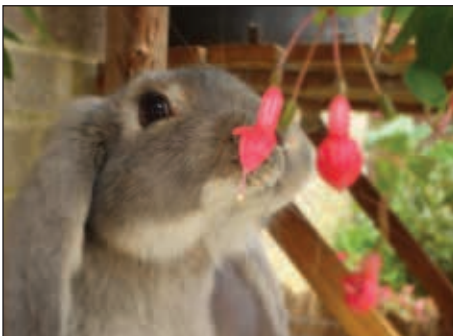


explain the situation to their children but it is important to acknowledge the feelings of everyone involved.

If a pet dies suddenly without notice, it is normal to feel shock or anger, denial or guilt. Causes of death can be investigated or at least discussed with your vet to help explain what happened.

For planned euthanasia, there are various options you can feel comfortable discussing with your vet beforehand, including whether you or other family members wish to be present. The process should be explained to you by the vet. This decision is never taken lightly and all staff at the practice will be sensitive to your emotions. Grief can be different for adults compared to children. Parents and friends can comfort the grieving child with empathy, love and understanding. Allowing children to talk about their pet is often a good way to help with the process.

Pet loss support counselling is available for those who need additional support to cope with the difficult loss of a pet.



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Other sources of information/links

- PetSavers:
www.petsavers.org.uk
- BSAVA:
www.bsava.com
- RCVS – Findavet:
www.findavet.rcvs.org.uk/find-a-vet
- RSPCA – Rabbit welfare:
www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/rabbits
- Blue Cross – Looking after your rabbit:
www.bluecross.org.uk/2147/looking-after-your-rabbit
- Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund:
www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk

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PetSavers is dedicated to improving the health of the nation's pets. We do this by funding clinical research projects and Master's degrees by research.

Clinical research projects give us a better understanding of pets' illnesses. This leads to improved diagnosis and treatment so that pets can have longer and healthier lives.

A Master's degree by research develops the skills of vets so they can apply the results of the research and their expertise to pets as soon as possible.

No experimental animals are used in PetSavers studies.

In the last 40 years PetSavers has given over £2 million towards these goals. Over this time the need for this funding has become even greater as other sources have dried up. We rely on the support of vets, nurses and pet owners.

By helping PetSavers, you can make sure that our knowledge of small animal medicine and surgery is improved. Please help us to continue funding these important research projects.

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- Nominate PetSavers as a beneficiary in your Will
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