

*Caring for...*

# **Rabbits**





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## IS A RABBIT THE RIGHT ANIMAL FOR YOU?

**Just answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the following questions and find out...**

- *Can you afford weekly expenditure on rabbit food and bedding?*
- *Can you afford to regularly vaccinate your rabbit against myxomatosis and Rabbit Haemorrhagic Viral Disease and pay for veterinary treatment if it falls ill?*
- *Can you provide a safe and spacious living area for your rabbit?*
- *Can you provide an escape-proof garden or run where your rabbit can exercise every day?*
- *Can you put up with cleaning out your rabbit’s living area at least twice a week and preferably daily?*
- *Can you provide your rabbit with essential companionship – either another rabbit, a guinea pig or yourself?*
- *Can you afford to board your rabbit when you go on holiday or do you have reliable and caring neighbours who will look after your pet for you?*

**If you can’t honest answer ‘yes’ to these questions but still want a rabbit, think about this: Every year the USPCA rehomes many rabbits which have been abandoned or badly treated by owners who didn’t think carefully before taking their pets on. On the whole the USPCA considers rabbits unsuitable as domestic pets.**

## THE RIGHT CHOICE

Rabbits have never become truly domesticated. This means that they have kept many of their natural, ‘wild’ behaviour patterns and needs. Because they will not always behave like ‘pets’, people sometimes tend to lose interest in keeping them. It is therefore doubly important that you consider carefully before taking a rabbit as a companion animal.

### **What sort?**

Rabbits come in all shapes and sizes. The breed you finally choose depends very much on the size of animal you want and what you are prepared to pay for it. The best time to get a rabbit is when it is between nine and 12 weeks old as it will be easier to handle and tame. Small and medium breeds like the tiny Netherland Dwarf, the Polish and Dutch are usually better for rabbit owners-to-be. Some of the heaviest rabbits – the Chinchilla Giganta or Flemish Giant – are too big for children to handle safely and confidently.

### **Male or female?**

Rabbits are social animals in the wild and need companionship. For this reason the females (does) generally make better pets than the males (bucks). Two males from the same litter can live happily together **providing they are neutered** and often make more interesting pets. Unneutered males over the age of three months will almost certainly fight with each other. All rabbits need company – animal or human – and can be kept with a guinea pig **provided that introductions are made when both animals are young**. If you buy a single rabbit you must be prepared to spend time with it every day (see the section House rabbits on page four).



## **Neutering is best**

Unneutered males are aggressive and rivalry between them often leads to fierce fighting. From the age of three to four months an unneutered doe is almost continually in season. On average, a doe can produce three litters a year with up to eight kittens in each litter. So in a single year a breeding pair could produce anything from 12 to 24 young, adding to the overpopulation problem.

Keeping male and female rabbits apart is the simplest method of birth control. However, neutering is an operation carried out under a general anaesthetic and can be done from about four months old. Does should be 'spayed' – this involves removing the womb and the ovaries. In the male rabbits the testicles are removed – this is called castration. It is vital that you talk to your veterinary surgeon before you make any decisions.

## **FINDING A HEALTHY RABBIT**

### **Look for...**

#### **1. A nicely rounded animal.**

Rabbits should be at least nine weeks old before they leave their mother. A rabbit's back should be firm without a protruding backbone. Avoid skinny rabbits.

#### **2. Bright clear eyes.**

Don't be tempted to take rabbits with runny eyes or runny and sneezing noses.

#### **3. A dry, clean tail.**

Reject any rabbit with a sore anus or diarrhoea – indicated by a staining or matting of the fur under the tail.

#### **4. A healthy coat.**

The coat should be smooth, glossy and clean, with no bare patches or parasites. There should be no visible wounds or abscesses on the body or matted fur around the nose or forelegs.

#### **5. Clean ears.**

The ears should be clean and free from deposits and scabs right the way down the inside.

#### **6. Healthy claws and teeth.**

Check the length of the claws and teeth to ensure that neither need trimming.

#### **7. Sex.**

It is essential to check the sex of your rabbit. Male rabbit kittens have a round genital opening, and gentle pressure on it will reveal the penis. The females have a genital slit.

**The USPCA will certainly be able to advise you. Your local veterinary surgeon may also be able to help. If you are rehoming a rabbit from an animal rescue centre ask the staff for any background information they may have.**



## MAKING A GOOD HOME

### *Living room*

A well designed, properly constructed, carefully maintained and roomy rest area is vital to a rabbit's welfare. It should be at least 150cm long, 60cm wide and 60cm high (5ft x 2ft x 2ft) and divided into two compartments. One should have a strong wire mesh door to let in air and light; the other a solid door to provide a retreat at night, and from the weather. Areas exposed to the outside should be protected so that insects cannot enter. Net curtaining or mosquito/fly mesh are suitable. The rest area should be on raised legs (23cm/9in) to give protection from rising damp and other animals. The roof – which must slope backwards – should be covered with overhanging roofing felt which will also keep the sides dry. The accommodation needs to be in a sheltered position and should not face directly into the mid-day sun or the prevailing wind. In severe weather it will need to be put in an outhouse; in hot weather it will need to be in the shade.

### *Home comforts*

Rabbits need a warm, dry and comfortable floor surface. This should consist of a lining material and an overlay of shredded paper or straw to provide warmth and insulation. A 5cm layer of peat, cat litter, natural wood fibre chippings or white wood shavings (not pine) make a good absorbent lining. Put a really deep layer of straw on top so that the rabbit can bed down comfortably.

**Make sure your rabbit has something hard to chew on. A piece of deciduous wood will exercise the rabbit's teeth and stop if gnawing through the walls of its rest area. This will keep its teeth in good**

**condition and help keep the incisors the correct length.**

### *House proud*

Rabbits urinate heavily and need to be cleaned out regularly – wet litter and droppings should be removed daily and the floor will need cleaning about once a week. Rabbits defecate only in certain areas so this will make cleaning easier. A lined litter tray can also be used to help keep the rest of the area dry and clean.

Bedding should be renewed every ten to 14 days. Three or four times a year you should wash and disinfect the living area. Rinse it well and allow it to dry before rehousing the rabbit. Good hygiene will keep your rabbit comfortable and healthy. Remember to check your rabbit every day – good hygiene will prevent flystrike and other infections.

### *Easy lifting*

Rabbits need firm but gentle handling and **must never be picked up by their ears.** To lift, simply turn the rabbit to face you, put your left hand on the scruff and your right hand around the rump. Lift the rabbit towards you and either cradle it or rest it against your body.

When returning a rabbit to its rest area, lower it in hind feet first to prevent it kicking.

## HOUSE RABBITS

Rabbits are very easy to house-train and may make affectionate household pets.

Indoor rabbits with access to a room or rooms get far more exercise and company than those kept outside. All too often, rabbits are relegated to the bottom of the garden and neglected. Young, male, and preferably neutered rabbits are the quickest and easiest



to adopt as house pets. Neutering also allows two or more rabbits to be kept together which provides a more natural social structure.

## **Toilet training**

Bring the rabbit into the house and sit it in a litter tray lined with kitchen roll and hay. Putting in a few of the rabbit's pellets or newspaper soaked in its urine may help. If the rabbit chooses another site for itself, it will repeatedly go there so reposition the litter tray. If the rabbit has been kept outside, start training it before you bring it into the house by placing a litter tray in its living area.

## **EXERCISE TIME**

**Permanently caging a rabbit condemns it to a life of boredom and may cause unnecessary suffering. Rabbits must have daily physical freedom so they can hop around and play, generally rummage about and, ideally, graze.**

### **Run around**

Putting its living quarters into an enclosure is a good idea. During the day the door can be left open and, by the use of a ramp or stairs, the rabbits can be left free to come and go as they please. The enclosures fencing must be at least 1m/3ft high and sunk well into the ground to stop them burrowing out. It should also have a fine mesh cover to keep out cats, dogs, weasels and stoats. It should not be placed near dog kennels/runs nor near ferrets.

If space is limited, a portable ark would give the rabbit access to grass and the chance to run around. This ark should be at least 2m long and 1m wide, with a solid wooden area at one end, so the rabbit can shelter. The

ark should be high enough for the rabbit to stand on its hind legs. Always make sure your rabbits are safely locked away in their rest areas at night.

## **FEEDING WELL**

Rabbits are herbivores and need a nutritious and interesting diet. This should include green-stuff, root vegetables and fruit, good quality hay and 'concentrates'. These can be commercially prepared rabbit pellets or a home-made mix including crushed oats, mixed corn, bran, etc.

Rabbit pellets are convenient and nutritious but should not be fed more than once or twice a week as they offer no variety. Foods should be put in heavy-duty earthenware dishes which are difficult to tip over and can be easily washed each day.

It is perfectly natural for a rabbit to eat its own droppings. This is called refection and is essential for digestion. The drier and harder pellets produced during the day are not eaten. Refection is essential to the rabbit's health and must not be prevented.

### **Bare essentials**

1. *Hay is the staple part of a rabbit's diet so make sure it is fed liberally.*
2. *A mineral lick should be easily available at all times.*
3. *A drip-fed water bottle with a stainless steel spout is the best way of offering fresh water to a rabbit. Bottles should be washed weekly and sterilised with boiling water.*



## HEALTH MATTERS

Rabbits should be examined regularly and carefully, especially the ears, eyes, nose and genitals. If you know how your rabbit looks and acts when it is in good health, you will be quick to recognise any change in its behaviour. During warm weather, check the rabbit's tail area every day to ensure it is clean. This should prevent flies laying eggs there and causing flystrike – a disease which causes immense suffering and death.

### ***Grooming marvellous***

Rabbits groom themselves regularly and are capable of keeping their fur in good condition, with the exception of the Angora which must be groomed daily. Most rabbits seem to appreciate brushing, especially during their spring and autumn month. Regular grooming also gives you the chance to check your rabbit's health – whether claws need trimming or teeth are overgrown.

## FINDING A VETERINARY SURGEON

Even the very best kept and healthiest animals need veterinary attention. Never let the thought of having to pay for veterinary treatment stop you from making sure a sick or injured animal has the best of care.

To find a veterinary surgeon ask your friends for recommendations or look in your local Yellow Pages which will have the addresses of all local veterinary practices.

**If you really can't pay the full cost of veterinary treatment in one payment, be honest with your veterinarian as s/he may be able to suggest a way to help.**

## ACCIDENTAL PREGNANCY

The USPCA strongly recommends that male rabbits, and females which may come into contact with unneutered males, should be neutered – see page 3 – to prevent unwanted kittens coming into the world.

If you think your rabbit may be pregnant and are uncertain about finding good homes for the young, seek advice from your veterinary surgeon. During the pregnancy – which lasts about 30 to 33 days – the rabbit should be handled as little as possible. She will need extra food, and her protein ration should be gradually increased, so that she is receiving about twice the normal amount of food by the end of the pregnancy.

A pregnant doe can be given a nesting box containing hay, straw or shredded paper so that she can make a nest. Once she has given birth, check the litter for dead kittens and remove them. Do not disturb the doe too much or she will eat or abandon the remaining young. By the end of the first week she should be getting about three times her usual amount of food. She can return to her normal amount of food after several weeks of weaning.



## DISEASES AND COMPLAINTS

### ***Myxomatosis***

Rabbits that constantly scratch may be infested with fleas. These – and mosquitoes – can carry the virus which causes myxomatosis. The first symptoms are severe eye inflammation and discharge (conjunctivitis). In advanced cases, the whole face becomes swollen and there is a discharge from the nose and the rabbit has great difficulty in breathing. Death may take one to two weeks. Vaccination will give immunity within three days and lasts six to nine months.

### ***Rabbit Haemorrhagic Viral Disease (RHVD)***

Several thousand rabbits have died from RHVD since 1992. Symptoms range from a loss of appetite to sudden death. By the time owners realise something is wrong it's usually too late. Your rabbit doesn't even need to have been in contact with an infected rabbit – the virus can be transported via people, clothing, accommodation and animals which have been in contact with the disease. Your veterinary surgeon can give your rabbit an annual vaccination against RHVD.

### ***Coccidiosis***

This is a very serious disease which has two forms, one attacking the intestines and the other the liver. Symptoms include loss of appetite, dullness, persistent diarrhoea and a yellow jaundiced look. Suspected coccidiosis should be dealt with immediately by isolating the rabbit and getting veterinary help. If diagnosed early, the disease can be controlled. Otherwise death is inevitable.

## OTHER COMPLAINTS

### ***Flystrike***

A major summer problem is the 'strike fly' which lays its eggs in faeces-soiled fur. Within 12-24 hours, the maggots hatch out and bore into the flesh ultimately killing the rabbit. Check your rabbit daily to ensure the area under its tail is clean.

### ***Parasites***

All rabbits are sometimes prone to fleas, lice and mites. Symptoms of fleas include scratching, especially around the head and neck. Your veterinary surgeon will be able to treat these. If fleas are present, you must clean, disinfect and dry the living quarters thoroughly.

**Lice** infestation often displays the same kind of symptoms as fleas. Lice lay their eggs (nits) in the fur and can be dealt with using a special insecticide available from your veterinary surgeon.

**Mites** which affect the ears causing ear mange or canker, should be dealt with by a veterinary surgeon. Symptoms include much head shaking and ear scratching.

### ***Pneumonia***

A rabbit huddled in a corner with laboured breathing, loss of appetite, a lacklustre coat and runny nose probably has pneumonia. It is caused by damp accommodation and bedding and the rabbit must be seen by a veterinary surgeon immediately.

### ***Snuffles***

This respiratory tract condition, similar to the common cold, is a highly infectious disease which could lead to pneumonia. Rabbits sneezing and with a discharge from the nose should be isolated well away from other rabbits and veterinary advice sought.



## **Overgrown incisors**

Overlong teeth must be cut back regularly by your veterinary surgeon, or the rabbit will not be able to eat. Make sure your rabbit has sufficient hard food and a gnawing block – see page 4.

## **Overgrown claws**

Domestic rabbits' claws may need clipping from time to time. Ask your veterinary surgeon to do this for you initially. S/he may demonstrate the technique so that you can do it yourself in future.

## **Obesity**

Rabbits which have inadequate exercise are most at risk. Symptoms can include a goitre-like dewlap beneath the chin. Reduce food intake and increase exercise until the right weight is achieved.

## **Constipation and diarrhoea**

Constipation may be a simple dietary disorder, cured by feeding more greenstuff; diarrhoea may be cured by withholding greens for 24 hours and feeding only hay and water. When persistent, or combined with other symptoms, both conditions may indicate more serious illness needing veterinary diagnosis. For example, constipation could be due to a blockage caused by furballs – this needs to be detected early so it is important to check your rabbit's faeces daily.

## **A KIND END**

Well cared for rabbits can live to a good age – sometimes eight years or more. But if a rabbit shows signs of a painful disability, has an incurable illness or severe injury, it should be gently put to sleep. This can be a very difficult decision to make and you should always talk to your veterinary surgeon, but it is one of the kindest things that an owner can do for a suffering animal.

Try not to blame yourself for your pet's death. If you gave it care and attention throughout its life and took it to your veterinary surgeon when it was ill, then you did all you could. Don't be afraid to show how upset you are in front of your veterinary surgeon – he or she will understand your feelings. And don't rush into getting another rabbit to replace the one you have lost until you are really ready – give yourself time to grieve.

No untrained person should ever put a rabbit to sleep and it is an offence to kill an animal by improper means.