

Caring for a house rabbit

How to keep house rabbits healthy and happy



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Are house rabbits right for me?

Living with a house rabbit can be a great addition to the family and offers a very rewarding and fun experience.

Your rabbit will benefit too as he will enjoy an interesting, social and stimulating environment in your home.

The rabbit you choose must be confident and easy to handle. Any breed can make a good house rabbit.

To commit to having a house rabbit you will need to be patient and be prepared to spend a few hours every day to care for your rabbit. As well as his basic needs, he will need a lot of love and attention.

You should also be comfortable spending a lot of time on the floor interacting with your house rabbit.

Time will be needed to train a rabbit not to eat your furniture as chewing is natural to them. Try not to be upset if they nibble, especially in those early days of house training.

Choosing a new pet rabbit

When selecting your rabbit, check these signs that he is healthy:

- Alert and interested in his surroundings
- Clean, dry nose
- Bright, clear eyes

- Clean ears
- Neat teeth in alignment
- Healthy fur with good coverage
- Good gait with no limping
- Healthy appetite and weight
- Clean bottom
- Good feet with no swellings or cuts

The first few days

Preparing the house

Before bringing a rabbit indoors, you will need to spend time proofing your home against hazards for your rabbit and protecting items of furniture that you do not want nibbled.

For new house rabbits, they will need a good sized cage, a hay rack filled with plenty of hay, food dish and a water bottle attached to the cage. Have some toys ready and put the litter tray in one corner.

If you are bringing your outside rabbit indoors, then fill the litter tray with the contents of his outside toilet to get him adjusted to using the litter tray quicker.

Rabbits will chew anything they can get their teeth into, including electric cables, furniture, shoes and books. Provide your rabbit with plenty of items that he is allowed to chew and protect anything he must not chew.

Cover all electric cables and wires with thick plastic cable protectors and check these regularly.

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When he arrives

Introducing your rabbit into your home takes patience. When he first arrives, put him in his cage and leave him alone. Avoid the temptation to handle him. These first few moments are a nervous time for him and stress should be minimal.

Your rabbit needs to know that his cage is his refuge, a place where he can go to eat, sleep, go to the toilet and get away from people. Never lift your rabbit out of his cage unless he is unwell.

Give your house rabbit some space to get used to his environment, still in his cage. He needs to know that his cage is his territory. Talk to him and offer him treats so he can get used to you.

Letting him out of his cage

Pick a time when the house is quiet, ideally his feeding time, and cordon off any areas in the room that are out of bounds.

When he seems relaxed, open the cage door and allow him to come out in his own time. Your rabbit may not be ready to come out and if so, don't force him. Try lying on the floor with some treats nearby. Make a soft noise at the same time, like gently talking or shaking a box, and he will soon learn to associate the noise with a food treat. With

time, you may be able to use this as a signal for your rabbit to come to you. Your rabbit will eventually come out to explore. Take things slowly and let your rabbit set the pace for discovering his new home.

Your rabbit may not be tentative at all and come bounding out of his cage. Avoid picking him up as this stage, it is important he becomes comfortable in his new home. Use treats to distract him and focus his attention.

Ground rules

It is important that you establish a few rules so that you and your rabbit will get along together. If there are things you do not want your rabbit to do, for example, jumping on the furniture, it is important this behaviour is never allowed. Don't confuse him by allowing some behaviors in some instances and not others.

Always stop your rabbit from doing something that may cause him harm.

Toilet training your house rabbit

Rabbits generally prefer to go to the toilet in their cage where they feel safe, unless they are marking territories.

For the first couple of days, allow them to choose their own toilet spot in their cage. You can then place their litter tray in that spot and add a little of their soiled bedding so they associate the tray as their toilet.

Training for bedtime

Establish a signal which tells your rabbit that it is time to return to his cage, like a treat or piece of veg.

He will then associate going back to his cage with receiving a treat. When he first comes out of his cage, after about 10 to 15 minutes, use this signal to tell him to go back to his cage. Over the next couple of weeks gradually increase the time your rabbit is allowed out of his cage.

As your rabbit grows in confidence, he may need a little more encouragement to go home. Always try to encourage him to go into the cage himself.

A healthy diet and treats

Clean, fresh water should be available at all times. Vitamin drops can be added to fresh water given each day.

There are two basic types of dry rabbit food, both of which provide a complete diet, and are widely available:

- A mix of flakes, grains and pellet
- Pelleted food (which prevents selective feeding)

Other food:

- Plenty of good quality, fresh hay should be available at all times to help with digestion.
- Fresh, clean fruit and vegetables can be given every day. Suitable produce includes: apple, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, kale,

parsnip, pear and spinach. Wild plants such as dandelion, plantain, chickweed and knapweed can also be offered (only if not taken from busy roadsides). To avoid diarrhoea, introduce fresh produce slowly if your rabbit is not used to eating it.

- A mineral lickstone provides essential salts and minerals and should be available at all times.
- Wood gnaws help to wear down your rabbit's teeth keeping them healthy.

Treats should be used to encourage good behaviour. Carrot should only be given as an occasional treat as it is very high in sugar, but cabbage or dandelion leaves are ideal. Instead of green food you could use specialist rabbit treats. Any foods which your rabbit is not used to eating must be given sparingly at first.

House rabbits and other pets

Rabbits are social animals and need company, which is usually provided by people when a rabbit lives in a house.

If you are away from home a lot, it might be a good idea to keep two rabbits. Male rabbits may be kept together if they are neutered and taken home at the same time, however, there is still a chance they may fight. Females can usually live happily in twos or threes, if they are neutered and have grown up together but the ideal pairing is a neutered male and female.

Rabbits and guinea pigs should not be kept together.



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Rabbit gender and neutering

Please ask a member of our team to confirm the sex of your rabbit before buying.

Neutered rabbits are easier to toilet train, are better behaved and lead less stressful lives. Neutering also eliminates ovarian, uterine or testicular cancers. This can be done by a vet when rabbits reach 4 to 6 months of age.

Potential health issues with rabbits

Flystrike

This is a serious condition and is quite common. It usually happens during hot summer weather and is caused by flies settling on soiled fur under the rabbit's tail and laying eggs. Maggots will then burrow into the rabbit's skin causing toxic shock and many affected rabbits do not survive.

This can be prevented by checking your rabbit's fur daily and using a fly repellent spray. Consult a vet immediately if you spot this problem.

Constipation or diarrhoea

This may be the sign of a simple dietary disorder or caused by a blockage caused by eating the wrong foods. For constipation feed more greens and for diarrhoea withhold green foods until symptoms subside. Both of these conditions can kill within 48 hours so vet advice should be sought as soon as possible.

Overgrown teeth

Teeth are really important to your rabbit's health so they must be checked regularly to ensure they are not overgrown or not aligning properly. If unsure, have your rabbit checked by a vet.

Stress

Stress and fear can not only lead to aggression, but can also cause illness, especially in young rabbits. When stressed, their body slows down all functions and the stomach is less able to digest food. This means the beneficial bacteria found in the gut is taken over by harmful bacteria causing diarrhoea, bloated abdomen and can sometimes be fatal. If your rabbit is showing signs of stress, seek veterinary advice.

Vaccinations and vet visits

We strongly advise that you seek out a good local vet for long term care of your rabbit. Rabbits are classed as Exotics so you will need to find an Exotic Vet or rabbit savvy vet.

It is important to have your rabbit vaccinated every year against myxomatosis and two strains of rabbit viral haemorrhagic disease (RVHD1 & 2).

Pet insurance for your house rabbit

We highly recommend taking pet insurance for your rabbit as soon as he is settled into his new home.

Your new pet checklist

- Indoor rabbit cage or easy to clean hutch which your rabbit can get in and out of easily. It needs to be big enough for a rabbit to take 3 hops and to stretch fully upright
- Woodflakes and soft straw for bedding
- Good quality rabbit food
- Unlimited daily supply of dust free hay
- Hayrack
- Water bottle
- Heavy food bowl
- Litter tray (wood-based cat litter is good to use in this)
- Wooden boxes and a few toys
- Wood chews
- Cage disinfectant



Help and further advice

If you have any questions about caring for your pet, our fully trained team are happy to help if they can, or advise on where to find more specialist information.

Whilst there is a wealth of information available online, only a professional will be able to correctly answer your query. If in doubt, call your local vet for an appointment.

It is against the law to release, or allow to escape, non-native animals or birds. If you have trouble caring for any animals contact our team for advice.



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