

Caring for your rabbit

How to keep pet rabbits healthy and happy



Notcutts

GARDEN INSPIRATION SINCE 1897

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Are rabbits right for me?

Rabbits are lively and responsive pets, each with their own distinctive characters. Rabbits can be great fun, but it is a big responsibility and a long-term commitment to care for them.

Rabbits can be good pets for children provided they are handled with care and always supervised. If looked after properly, pet rabbits can live for up to 12 years. Rabbits can even be house trained.

Your rabbits will be completely dependent on you. They need affection and attention every day and will require regular and frequent opportunities to exercise. Rabbits shouldn't be left for any more than 24 hours (ideally no more than 12).

Pet rabbits themselves are usually inexpensive to buy but setting up the correct home environment can cost hundreds of pounds plus the cost of neutering and regular supplies of good quality food. Rabbits also require annual vaccinations which can be expensive over time. Pet insurance is highly recommended in case of illness which is another financial factor to consider.

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

Your rabbit will need at least two days to settle into his new hutch before being handled. To start with, stroke and talk to your rabbit when he is being fed. After two days you can take him out of his hutch.

It is a good idea to have a chair available to sit on, as some rabbits do not like being picked up at first and will feel more secure if settled on your lap.

Only let your rabbit out of the hutch for a few minutes at first, increasing the time each day for a few days to begin with. Soon your rabbit will be able to go into the rabbit run. Rabbits should be vaccinated prior to being allowed to run on grass.

Our pet centre team will advise you of the food that your rabbit has been eating, and also what they have had from their breeder so you can settle them in with the food they are used to. Avoid giving your rabbit any greens (e.g. cabbage and grass) at all unless he has been used to eating them. Rabbits should not be fed biscuits, cake or wholemeal bread as this may make them ill. Carrot should only be given as an occasional treat as it is very high in sugar.

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After four weeks, a small dandelion leaf or small handful grass (as long as vaccinations have been administered) can be given each day so that your rabbit's stomach gets used to new foods. Too much of anything or too suddenly can make him ill.

Avoid putting your young rabbit in a run for a few weeks, unless the run is on concrete or the grass is completely covered. In those cases, your rabbit can be put in for small amounts of time if the weather is good.

It is important to reduce stress as much as possible, particularly in the first two weeks of your rabbit being in his new surroundings. Given time, your nervous rabbit can turn into a happy and friendly member of the family.



Creating a happy home

Except during the coldest of weather, rabbits can be kept outside all year round. Choose a sheltered site away from driving rain and wind or the midday sun.

The hutch should be raised off the ground to prevent rising damp and possible problems from rats and other vermin.

A waterproof roof with overhanging eaves will keep your rabbit's hutch dry. A good hutch will also contain an enclosed sleeping area with plenty of living space.

When there is very cold weather the hutch should be covered or brought into a shed or outhouse that offers natural light and good ventilation without vehicle fumes.

Bubble wrap or foam backed carpet can provide good additional insulation when draped over the hutch at night. You can also buy a special hutch cover if you prefer. Your rabbit's hutch will need to last 8 to 10 years so consider this purchase wisely. Wood will last longer than ply but may need weather-proofing. You can treat the exterior of the hutch with gloss paint or polyurethane varnish. Always check the product used is suitable and will not harm your rabbit. The treatment will need to be totally dry before your rabbit can enter.

Hutch size

- 1.5m (5 feet) for dwarf rabbits
- 1.8m (6 feet) for other rabbits

It is a legal obligation for owners to provide suitable housing for their pets. Any rabbit

run should be as big as possible but as a minimum have space for your rabbit to be able to make 3 full hops and be able to stand up fully on his hind legs. Please ask a member of our pet team to make sure your hutch is the correct size before choosing your rabbit.

Inside the hutch

Line the floor of the hutch with a deep pile of shavings and with shavings topped with straw in the sleeping compartment. As rabbits urinate heavily, soiled bedding needs to be changed daily. They usually use the same spot for this and do not normally dirty their bedding. It is a good idea to use a litter tray in the 'toilet' corner to make cleaning easier.

A healthy diet and treats

A rabbit's diet should be made up of:

- 85% hay or grass
- 10% leafy green veg
- 5% extruded pellets or nuggets (about an egg-cup full)

Rabbits are grazing animals and should have constant access to hay or grass. Offer pelleted mix in the morning or evening as too much can cause obesity and constipation.

Any change to your rabbit's diet should be made gradually, over several days. Do not change from one food to another overnight as this can cause them great stress.

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 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 from becoming overgrown.
- Treat your rabbits with natural sweet treats such as fruit e.g. a bite of banana or apple, or small chunks of 'sweet' vegetables such as carrots and broccoli.

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Poisonous plants

Your rabbit will be vulnerable to poisonous plants around the garden and home. If you have these growing, ensure your rabbit cannot get to them.

- All houseplants.
- Bulbs such as snowdrops, hyacinths (including grape hyacinths), bluebells, crocuses, daffodils.
- Buttercups, foxgloves, primrose, delphiniums/larkspur, columbine (aquilegia) hellebore, comfrey, poppy, periwinkle, monkshood, nightshade, ivy, privet, holly.

Getting to know you

While many rabbits can get used to being handled with time, don't assume that they always enjoy being handled. Rabbits that have been handled between 4 and 8 weeks of age (which is the time spent with the breeders) are much more amenable to being handled than those who have had little or no human contact during this key phase.

Daily handling of your rabbit is vital if he is to feel at ease with the situation.

Remember, a rabbit is a prey animal so it is natural for them to fear anything that tries to whisk them off into the air.

Start by hand feeding one or two of your rabbit's favourite treats or fresh produce for the first couple of days. Once he is used to that, slowly progress to stroking him while he is feeding. Try stroking his forehead or back, as these are less sensitive areas,

then you may be able to progress to gently placing your hands around the back end and under the shoulders, always supporting the legs. This lets him get used to the feeling of being lifted. Once he's familiar with lifting you may be able to gently and quickly scoop your rabbit up using both hands supporting the weight of his body and place him in your lap. Now you can give him a treat but if at any point your rabbit panics, then stop handling for the day. Keep trying the process again until your rabbit becomes accustomed to you and handling.

When placing your rabbit in his hutch, lower him in gently. Never pick up a rabbit by the ears, or by the scruff of the neck.

Exercise your rabbit needs

Exercise is very important to rabbits for their health and wellbeing. They will suffer if they stay in their hutch all the time.

A large run allows rabbits to graze, dig and binky - which is when a rabbit jumps with happiness.

Free reign of your house or garden can be given but only with close supervision. There are many potential dangers to your rabbit and property which need to be monitored.

Rabbits will enjoy playing with toys such as balls, tubes, tunnels and boxes. Rabbits love to pick up toys and throw them, so light toys are ideal.

At night your rabbit must be locked into his hutch for security.

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Rabbits and other pets

Rabbits shouldn't be kept alone, unless they are a house rabbit which will receive lots of attention. Company is important to rabbits in preventing psychological and behavioural problems. The best pairing is a neutered male and female of the same species.

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 kept together at the same time and given plenty of space.

Rabbits and guinea pigs should not be kept together.



How your rabbit may behave

It is important to understand rabbit behaviour to interpret your pet's feelings about their environment and what may need to be altered to make it the happiest rabbit it can be.

Normal rabbit behaviour

Rabbits that don't want to be handled, that kick, scratch or show signs of aggression are usually scared. In the wild, rabbits that feel threatened by predators would normally retreat into their warren for safety. If they can't do this then the last resort would be for the rabbit to attack to save its own life.

In the home environment we do not normally have the facilities for escape into a warm secure warren. A hutch restricts the rabbits' environment because in the wild they would live in a huge network of tunnels and dens. This explains why sometimes they react against their owners because they perceive them as a predator. This behaviour includes stamping a back foot or charging and nudging your hand with their nose.

This is perfectly normal behaviour and shouldn't be confused with aggression. It sometimes happens when we invade the rabbit's territory (even by just reaching in to fill the food bowl).

Although this is normal behaviour for a rabbit, it is not considered acceptable, particularly around children. A rabbit

displaying fear and aggression will need time and patience to gain the trust of the owner. If your rabbit feels unsafe when first being handled, he will try to avoid the situation again, which normally means kicking and struggling to get away.

If you have a rabbit that doesn't like to be handled, spend time on its level, for example sitting on the floor while he runs around you. You must gain your rabbit's confidence and ensure that he associates human contact with positive experiences. Using treats in this respect is ideal.

Some female rabbits may display some kind of aggression around the breeding season (January to June) when they would want to protect their nest and young. This is perfectly natural, but is not always the case as some females will show no signs of aggression at all.

Neutering may reduce some aggression, but only if the cause is hormonal e.g. sexual aggression towards another rabbit, or females defending their 'nest'.

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 keeping the hutch clean, 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 a 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 the symptoms subside. Both of these conditions can kill within 48 hours so veterinary 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 aligning properly. If unsure, have your rabbit checked by a vet.

Grooming

Regular grooming is essential for long and short haired rabbits especially when they are moulting. Grooming equipment should be soft and used very carefully as rabbits have very delicate skin. There are several tools on the market, a rubber pimple

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or soft brush will be great for general grooming but you will need something harder during moulting.

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).

Consult your vet about neutering which is essential for the rabbit's health and wellbeing. Teeth should also be checked regularly.

Pet insurance for your rabbit

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

Your new pet checklist

- Large hutch and run
- Water bottle
- Woodchips
- Feeding bowl
- Straw
- Cage disinfectant
- Hay
- Vitamins
- Food
- Brush
- Mineral lickstone
- Toys
- Plastic or cardboard
- Tunnels

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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