

Rabbit - Facts & Care Sheet

This planet has been populated with rabbits for at least three and a half million years. In Africa their footprints have been found fossilised in lava dust. In the wild, rabbits are found all over the world, even in Australia where they were introduced last century and rapidly became a pest.

Rabbits are available in many colours and varieties. Some of the more common ones are Dutch, English and Netherland Dwarf. Dwarf lop eared rabbits are very popular because they are docile, intelligent and appealing to look at. Despite their name they can grow quite large but make ideal house rabbits.

Giant breeds can make ideal house pets but should be avoided unless you have a lot of space. Some of the true dwarf varieties have a reputation for being bad tempered. The Angora has long soft fur that requires a lot of grooming and is therefore not suitable for many adults and definitely not for children.

Rabbits are ideal pets for older children. They can appear nervous but rarely bite. They're inquisitive, friendly and like to come out and play regularly. Rabbits live for 6 - 8 years. Both males and females make excellent pets although neutered male rabbits are generally more laid back and friendlier. Rabbits are happiest when they have another rabbit for company, they are very sociable creatures. However, they should be neutered to prevent breeding or fighting. Neutered rabbits tend to live happily together. The best pairing is usually a neutered male with a spayed female. Young rabbits may need to be housed separately until they're old enough to be neutered. A vet will usually spay a female rabbit when it's around 6 months old and will neuter a male rabbit when it's approximately 5 months old. We recommended that you neuter your rabbit and indeed any rabbit obtained through the rescue will always be neutered before you take it home. Neutered or spayed rabbits are happier and healthier and as such make much better companions. They're calmer, more sociable and loving once their natural desire to mate has been removed. Their destructive and aggressive behaviour subsides too.

There are several common rabbit diseases, many of which are contagious. It's vital that your rabbit is vaccinated against the two killer diseases known as myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD). A single injection for each disease will fully protect your rabbit. Your local vet can advise you on these vaccinations and regular booster injections.

What kind of home do I need?

Rabbits can be kept outdoors all year round but ideally they should be brought into a shed or unused garage for the winter. Never put your rabbits in a used garage as the exhaust fumes from your car can be very dangerous. When choosing a home for your pets, buy the largest hutch you can afford. The hutch should have a separate living area and bedroom to allow your pets enough space to stand up on their hind legs or stretch out.



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If you're planning to keep your rabbits outdoors, make sure the hutch is draught-free and fully weatherproof. The hutch must be raised off the ground to keep the floor dry and to protect your pets from predators such as cats and foxes. Cover the base of the hutch with woodshavings to form an absorbent layer. During winter use straw as it will help to insulate your rabbits' home. Fill the bedroom area with a cosy bedding material such as hay so your pets can snuggle up at night. Rabbits can be litter trained and using a litter tray is a hygienic option. Rabbit accessories such as rabbit igloos, large cardboard tubes and rabbit toys will allow your pets to explore and play. Your rabbits should have permanent access to an exercise run.

Use a run that is a minimum of 7 ft x 5 ft or equivalent, with rocks, large terracotta plant pots, logs and toys for them to play amongst. Constant access to an exercise area is vital to their well being, you may wish to put a wire base below ground level if the run is to cover soft ground...this will prevent inquisitive pets from digging their way out. House rabbits can live quite happily indoors and there are cages designed especially for indoor rabbits. Rabbits usually use a particular area of their cage as a toilet so a corner litter tray is a great idea. To train your rabbit, simply place some soiled shavings in a litter tray. Wood litter pellets are ideal as they help to reduce odours and are highly absorbent. Neutering your pets will help to curb their natural tendencies to mark their territory and so may aid litter training. Rabbit-proofing your home is essential and a small pet playpen may be useful for playtime indoors.

Playtime

Rabbits can get very bored if they're left alone in their cage or hutch when you're not around. Stimulating natural behaviour by hiding treats around their cage and providing lots of gnawing toys can enhance their quality of life. Houses and hideaway holes allow them to snuggle up just as they would in the wild and wooden or willow toys are not only fun to play with, they help to grind their teeth down too.

What should you feed me?

There are two types of rabbit food, muesli and nuggets.

Muesli is very nutritional, but if your rabbits pick out the bits of muesli they prefer, they'll miss out on essential nutrients. We call this 'selective feeding'. In contrast, nuggets are extruded - all of the ingredients found in muesli are crushed and shaped into nuggets so your rabbits gain essential nutrients in every mouthful. Only a small amount of store bought food should be provided each day with the bulk of nutrition coming via hay. Rabbits need extra fibre in their diet to aid digestion. Hay is a natural long fibre and should always be available in your pets' home. It also helps to grind rabbits' teeth down, preventing them from growing too long and becoming painful. Small quantities of washed fresh fruit and vegetables such as apples, broccoli, kale or freshly picked dandelions can be given to rabbits over 16 weeks old but remember to introduce new food gradually to avoid stomach upsets. Too much green food can upset a young rabbit's stomach. Never give your pets any food which has been frozen. Heavy ceramic feeding bowls are great for rabbits as they're difficult to knock over and easy to clean. Give your pets fresh water daily.

How I should be handled

As your rabbits are likely to be nervous when you first take them home we recommend that you leave them alone to settle in for the first day or two. You should talk to them and after a few days gently stroke them. When your rabbits are used to this and are more comfortable and confident, you can pick them up. Use both hands, placing one hand under your rabbit's chest and the other hand under its bottom. Hold your pet close to you so that it feels secure and to prevent it from falling. Children should be encouraged not to pick rabbits up too often and should only ever do this under supervision. Never pick a rabbit up by its ears. All pet owners have a responsibility to look after and care for their pets.

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Hygienic conditions and a healthy diet will help to keep your rabbits in good health but there are a number of potential problems that you should be aware of.

Rabbits are rodents and their front teeth grow constantly throughout their lives. If they grow too long they can be very painful and feeding can become difficult. Mineral stones, hay and chew toys help to keep their teeth worn down naturally and should always be available in your pets' home. If your rabbits' teeth appear to be overgrown take them to a vet to have them trimmed. Rabbits are very clean animals and wash themselves like cats. A daily grooming session from you can help you to bond with your pets. If your rabbits have long hair, it's vital that you brush them every day to prevent hairballs and keep their coats shiny and clean. Healthy rabbits are alert with bright eyes, dry nostrils and clean, shiny coats. Droppings in their hutch should be small, firm pellets. Rabbits are susceptible to flystrike, in warm weather flies lay their eggs in the folds of skin around a rabbit's neck or their anal area. Dirty bottoms are a magnet to flies with the resulting maggots burrowing into the rabbit's skin and releasing toxins. Flystrike can kill a rabbit in just six hours. If your rabbit ever loses its appetite, appears listless, develops a cough, runny eyes or diarrhoea you should contact your vet immediately.

Dental

Hay and gnawing toys are an essential part of your pets' dental routine and should always be available as they help to prevent overgrown teeth.

Vitamins and supplements

Vitamins can be added to your pets' food or water. Probiotic supplements can help to maintain healthy digestion and relieve stress. Getting used to their new surroundings can be stressful for your rabbits so consider buying probiotic supplements before you take them home. As well as being good for your rabbits' teeth, hay is an essential part of the digestive process.

Grooming

Regular grooming will strengthen the relationship between you and your pets and it can also help to highlight health problems. Groom your rabbits once a week or daily if they have long hair to keep their skin and coats healthy.

Fleas, mites and flies

Keep an eye on your pets' skin and coat for signs of fleas and mites such as bald patches or irritation. Outdoor pets are vulnerable to flystrike during the summer months so make sure you keep your pets and their environment clean and dry.

Cleaning and hygiene

Clean out your pets' home at least once a week using a pet-safe disinfectant.

