

Rabbit Care

Rabbits make great pets as long as they have been well handled from a young age. As with all animals temperaments are variable and you should choose one that is relaxed when handled. The dwarf rabbits have the reputation of being the calmest.

Rabbit's teeth grow continuously. This means that if they have upper and lower jaws that do not align properly then the teeth do not grind against each other and become overgrown. To aid in the maintenance of healthy teeth rabbits should be given wood to chew on and have access to dirt. This can be achieved by feeding grass with the dirt and roots still attached or by letting your rabbit graze on grass or by providing washed sand sprinkled on top of the dry food.

Wood can be provided in the form of blocks purchased from the pet shop or from branches of fruit trees.

Handling

Rabbits have a delicate bones and strong muscles. This means that a rabbit that kicks out or struggles when being handled is at risk of breaking its legs or back.

This means that children should always be supervised when playing with a rabbit. When children hold a rabbit they should be sitting on the ground (so the rabbit does not have very far to fall).

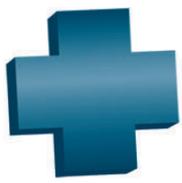
In addition if rabbits are startled while being held they can kick out with their back legs and badly scratch the person holding them. If you are close to the ground it is much easier to safely release the animal quickly, to minimise your own injuries without causing harm to the rabbit.

Rabbits must never be picked up by the ears. The correct way to pick up a rabbit is by grasping the scruff (the loose skin between the shoulders) or the upper body with one hand and supporting the hindquarters with the other.

If you have to carry your rabbit for any distance, tuck its head under your arm, ensuring its eyes are covered. The rabbit should remain quiet and relaxed in this position.

Feeding

Rabbits have a digestive system that is able to cope with large amounts of dietary fibre. In the wild they eat a wide range of plants, with a preference for tender succulent plant parts as well



as course roughage. The roughage (hay or straw) stimulates gut motility and supports the microorganisms in the gut ('hind gut fermentation') that assist in the digestive process.

In recent years it has been a trend for rabbit dry foods to contain molasses.

This is of great concern as rabbits and guinea pigs gain most of their nutrients through hind gut fermentation of complex carbohydrates and fibre. The feeding of molasses, a sugar compound not normally available to these animals may in some circumstances encourage the overgrowth of clostridial bacteria to occur. These bacteria produce toxins that can result in death of the rabbit. Rabbits on molasses containing diets are most vulnerable to clostridial toxicity during periods of stress. In our experience stresses that may induce this toxicity include pregnancy, hot weather, surgical recovery, illness and injury.

Therefore rations containing molasses are not a suitable diet for rabbit's and should not be fed. Read the label carefully before making a purchase to make sure the mix is free of molasses, sugar and dried fruit.

In addition to the dry pelleted rabbit chow, hay, straw and/or chaff should comprise at least 50% of the diet and may be up to 80%. For the rest of the diet rabbits may be fed grass and/or leafy vegetables (e.g. lettuce, spinach, cabbage, the outer leaves of corn etc) and other vegetables like carrots, tomatoes, capsicum, corn cobs etc.

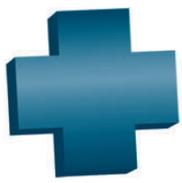
Potatoes and pumpkin should be avoided. Lucerne hay may only be given in small amounts as it can lead to urinary tract problems.

Fruit may also be given in small amounts. Apple is very good for the rabbit's digestive system and we recommend your rabbit receive a quarter of an apple every day.

It is very important to store the food in a cool dry place in a rodent proof container. Mouldy or sour food should never be fed as the toxins in the mould can be fatal to the rabbit. Rabbits require fresh water at all times.

Rabbits often eat the faeces they produce at night. The reingested faeces contain vitamins, protein and microorganisms that can then be utilized by the rabbit. The faeces produced after the second round through the gut look like clusters of small balls, quite different to the pellet shape that comes through initially.

The urine of normal rabbits can be thick and creamy. In addition the color of normal rabbit urine varies from yellow to orange to red depending on the diet and the season and is not a cause for concern.



Caging

In general rabbits like the company of other rabbits. In the wild they live in large stable groups. Rabbits will hop, run, chase, play and sleep together. However male rabbits may fight and castration should be performed if males are to be kept together.

Females may be desexed as well. However rabbits can be kept alone as long as their social needs are being met by you.

Rabbits can be kept indoors or outdoors. They need protection from predators such as dogs, cats, birds of prey and foxes. They also need refuge from rats, mice and mosquitoes.

Indoor rabbits are generally caged most of the time and then let out for supervised exercise. If a rabbit is given free range in the house it must have a cage or box available in which it can hide. Rabbits can be trained to use a litter tray.

We recommend outdoor housing in a sheltered weatherproof spot close to the house. It must have a solid insulated sleeping area with bedding such as straw or shredded paper. If you use material for bedding then make sure that any bedding material is closely woven, as anything with loose weave is likely to ensnare their toenails. To minimize this risk nails should be trimmed on a regular basis.

Rabbits do not tolerate direct sun for any length of time during the summer months. They are better adapted to cold weather than to hot and as they are unable to sweat or pant they are very susceptible to heat stress. In summer, when the ambient temperature is 30° C or higher, rabbits may need to be brought inside.

Rabbits, especially females, will dig burrows; therefore if they have access to the ground in their enclosure they may dig out and escape. We recommend the enclosure have a wire mesh floor to prevent digging.





Diseases

Rabbits should have an Annual Health Examination to check their teeth, eyes, ears, feet, coat, and weight, to ensure they are in optimal health. In addition rabbits are vaccinated against calicivirus on an annual basis which is given during the annual health examination. The first calicivirus vaccination is given at 12 weeks of age.

Myxomatosis is a slowly fatal disease of rabbits and there is no vaccination available and there is no cure. The disease is spread by mosquitoes therefore rabbit housing should be mosquito proof.

Soft stools which can be mistaken for diarrhoea are generally a sign of reduced gut activity and you should increase the amount of hay and straw in the diet. If the soft stools persist or there are no stools produced, you should bring the rabbit in for an examination.

Enjoy your Rabbit!

Rabbits make great pets, so get hopping!