

# Factsheet 11 -LOOKING AFTER YOUR RABBIT INFORMATION FOR RABBIT OWNERS

Rabbits make friendly and quiet house pets and may live to up to 10 years of age. We hope that the following information will be useful to you in caring for your pet rabbit.

## FEEDING YOUR RABBIT

Many problems that we see in rabbits are related to diet.

**Hay** is the most important part of a rabbits diet and should be provided at all times (contrary to what you may be told by other sources). The best type is grass hay. Chewing on hay is good for the rabbit's teeth.



**Fresh food** is the second most important part of the diet. Foods such as carrots and carrot tops, beet tops, dandelion leaves and flowers, kale, romain lettuce (NOT light coloured or iceberg lettuce), chickweed, red green or yellow peppers, parsley, clover, cabbage, broccoli (including leaves), pea pods, brussel sprouts, basil and raspberry leaves. Introduce new types of fresh food slowly otherwise your rabbit's stools will become too soft.

**Rabbit pellets/ commercial mixes** are the least important part of the diet. They were designed for laboratory rabbits that do not live a full life span. If you feed only this it may lead to obesity and tooth problems. Rabbits up to 6 months can have access to pellets ad lib, but after that they should be restricted to a maximum of:

A rabbit weighing	1-2kg	1/8cup daily
	2.5-3kg	1/4 cup daily
	3.5-4.5kg	1/2 cup daily

Treat foods include strawberries, pineapple, apple, pear, melon, peaches and tomatoes and should be given as a TOTAL of 2 tablespoons per kg bodyweight daily.

The following should be avoided as they can cause bowel upsets:-

Salty or sugary snacks, nuts, chocolate, breakfast cereal, peas and beans, and other grains such as oats, corn, wheat and bread.

## WHERE TO KEEP YOUR RABBIT

Rabbits can be kept indoors or outdoors. An indoor rabbit can be caged and let out some of the time for supervised exercise or give free range in a "rabbit proof" room (but still give them a box in which to hide. We recommend a rabbit is not kept all the time in a cage as it leads to foot, urinary and bowel problems. They also may develop behavioural problems due to boredom.

Rabbits kept indoors should be neutered as it makes them easier to house train.

Outdoor rabbits need to be sheltered from wind and cold below 4C. There should be enough space in the hutch for 3 full hops. Rabbits can not tolerate high temperatures so must be shaded from sun.

## LITTER TRAINING

Rabbits can be trained to use a litter box. Initially keep your pet in a small area and place a litter tray in the corner - try pick the corner the rabbit has already chosen for a toilet. The sides of the tray should be low for easy access. It may help to put hay in the tray as rabbits often pass droppings while eating. Your rabbit can be rewarded with a "treat" food for using the tray.

## HANDLING YOU RABBIT

Always support the hindquarters so as not to injure the spine. A rabbit should NEVER be picked up by it ears. The best way is to scoop it up under the chest and place your other hand under the back legs.

## IMPORTANT DISEASES

**Female rabbits** - 4 out of 5 will get cancer of the uterus when they get old. The only way to prevent this is spaying.

**Teeth problems** - rabbits teeth grow continuously and if the teeth aren't lined up properly then they don't wear properly and can grow into the tongue or gums. This is the most common problem. Rabbits that suffer with this condition need their teeth trimmed regularly.

**Respiratory disease** - rabbits easily get bacterial infections of the nose and pneumonia

**Skin problems** - itchiness and heavy dandruff is often due to skin mites, fleas or ringworm. All are easily treated by sprays, injections or baths

**Fly strike** - it is important in summer to keep a rabbit's rear end clean, otherwise flies will lay eggs on the rabbit's skin. These eggs hatch into maggots, which start eating the rabbit's skin and burrowing deeper. This can be life threatening

## **VACCINATIONS**

Currently there are 2 vaccines available.

1. Myxomatosis - this is a virus spread by biting insects and is usually fatal. Vaccinate from 6 weeks of age and then annually.
2. Viral haemorrhagic disease - this is a virus and your rabbit can become infected only if there are wild rabbits entering your garden. Vaccinate from 10 weeks of age and then annually.

## **INSURANCE**

There is now pet insurance available for rabbits. This does not cover vaccinations or neutering. Please ask us for details if you are interested.