



Caring for rabbits

YOUR GUIDE TO KEEPING RABBITS
HEALTHY AND HAPPY



Animal Welfare Foundation

www.bva-awf.org.uk

AWF is the charity led by the veterinary profession

Registered Charity No. 287118

Owning any pet is not something to be taken lightly, no matter how big, small or expensive they might be. All animals have needs which, as an owner, you have a duty to meet and rabbits are no exception. Here you'll see how the five major needs of rabbits are the key to their happiness and health.



The need for social contact with the right animals

Rabbits are very social animals which means they need contact with their own kind. Keeping rabbits on their own causes boredom, frustration and fear and is no longer seen as acceptable. With this in mind you need to consider right from the outset whether you have the space, time and finances for two rabbits, not just one.

The best mix is a neutered male and a neutered female. This way you avoid the obvious problem of unwanted babies, but you will also reduce the chance of fighting too. Neutering also helps prevent some medical problems later in life.

Just because animals need social contact doesn't mean that they can be happy with just any other animal. For years people kept rabbits and guinea pigs together but this is **NOT** safe. These are very different animals and rabbits can seriously injure guinea pigs. Rabbits want rabbits as friends.

Rabbits are also prey animals which means they will be fearful of many other animals like cats, dogs, foxes and birds of prey. You need to make sure that your rabbits can hide from and avoid such animals and be totally secure when they do tuck themselves out of sight. For this they'll need somewhere suitable to live.



The need for somewhere suitable to live

This may sound obvious but it is simply not enough to have a small hutch at the end of the garden with your rabbits crammed in like battery hens.

It's useful to consider how wild rabbits live. We've seen they don't like to live alone but also consider the huge amount of room they have in the wild. They run, jump and dig and at the slightest hint of danger they hide away in a warm, dry, dark and secure place.

Think about these things when you're buying a hutch and a run. Always try to get the largest combination you can afford. There should be room for all of your rabbits to stretch out comfortably, to take at least three hops from one end to the other and enough height for them to stand up on their hind legs.

They need room to sit or sleep together but they also need space to get away from each other if they want to. The hutch should be sheltered from the worst of the weather, including being shaded from the sun. In the coldest weather you can move it into a garage or shed. It should be waterproof, free of draughts and raised off the ground.



The run should be secure from predators, have a shaded area and preferably be attached to the hutch so that your rabbits can get out for exercise as often as they'd like. It should be tall enough to allow your rabbits to stretch up to full height and it should allow your rabbits to run rather than just hop.

Use good quality, deep bedding like straw or hay and line the rest of the hutch with paper or wood shavings. Take away wet or dirty bedding daily and clean thoroughly weekly.

Some people keep rabbits indoors as pets but remember that they benefit from some time spent outdoors to produce vitamin D from sunlight.



The need for a good diet and fresh water

Rabbits in the wild spend more than half their time above ground eating grass and similar foods. Their teeth grow continuously throughout their lives and need to be worn down by long periods of grinding and chewing. Their guts have developed to digest these high levels of fibre through slow digestion.

Therefore the bulk of your rabbits' diet should be grass or good quality hay and a rough guide is that they need a pile of at least their own body size every day!

Do not feed 'muesli'-style dry food because it can cause a lot of problems. Rabbits pick out the bits they like and leave the rest, leading to an unbalanced diet. The food is almost too easy to eat compared to grass so their teeth overgrow which can have fatal consequences and many rabbits eat too much so become overweight.

You can offer dry food in nuggets alongside hay, to avoid selective feeding but only give small amounts. A useful guideline is to feed a tablespoon daily or

twice daily if the rabbit weighs over 3.5kg. Fresh vegetables like broccoli, cabbage, carrot tops and small amounts of dandelion can be offered daily too. Speak to your vet about which foods are safe and which plants are poisonous. Try to avoid offering fruit. Rabbits would not naturally eat fruits and they are high in sugars and can quickly make your rabbit fat.

Rabbits produce a soft form of poo in the morning which they eat straight from their bottom so that they have a second chance to get nutrition from their grass and hay. This is quite normal and essential for health.

Make sure freshened water is always available daily. Use bowls or bottles and remember to check bottles for blockages or leaks.



The need to behave normally

This might sound like a plea from parents to children but it is a serious issue when it comes to animals. All animals have behaviours that they feel compelled to do like dust bathing in chickens and grooming in cats. If animals can't do these things for one reason or another they can become bored, depressed and can start behaving oddly to try and compensate. It's important to know what your pet needs and rabbits are no exception.

Digging

No one wants their rabbits tunnelling out but you can give them things to dig in safely. Try a large container full of compost or soil in their run or sink the run into the ground so they can dig but not escape.

Friends

We've already seen that rabbits need the company of other rabbits and shouldn't be kept alone.



Hide-aways

We've mentioned that rabbits are prey animals. They should always have somewhere to hide if they feel frightened or anxious.

Foraging and keeping busy

You can scatter the small amount of pellet food around so that your rabbits have to search for it and provide toys or cardboard tubes to keep them stimulated.

Exercise

Provide the biggest run you can so your rabbits can run, jump and play.

When rabbits are unhappy or ill they don't always show obvious signs so you need to watch out for changes in behaviour. Repetitive circling, drinking more or less than usual, changes in eating or just quiet, hunched behaviour can all be signs that your rabbits are unwell or unhappy.



Protection from illness and injury and providing treatment when needed

You can prevent many diseases and avoid suffering for your rabbits by being informed and prepared.

Vaccinations

Make sure your rabbits are vaccinated against Myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD). Both these diseases can kill.

Parasites

Rabbits can pick up fleas, lice, mites and other parasites. *E. cuniculi* is a parasite spread via urine. Rabbits should be treated regularly to control this parasite. Speak to your vet about what to watch out for; preventative treatments and what to use if you have a problem.

Medicines

NEVER use other animals' medicines without advice because they can kill rabbits.

Neutering

This not only stops unwanted babies but prevents some serious diseases like certain cancers too.

Handling

Rabbits can become ill very quickly so you need to check them every day for signs of problems. Make sure you know how to handle your rabbit properly by supporting their back legs at all times to avoid injury to you or your pet and **NEVER** pick a rabbit up by the ears. Get advice if you are unsure.

Fly strike

Flies can lay eggs which turn into maggots on your rabbits. They can cause horrible injuries and death, especially in the summer, so ensure the hutch is kept clean. Ask your vet about how to spot these problems and more and how to check your rabbits' bodies every day so that you notice straight away when something is wrong. It is particularly important to thoroughly check your rabbits in warm weather when flies are active.

Teeth

Rabbits' teeth can get too long and cause pain and abscesses and stop them eating properly. You can check the front teeth weekly but only your vet can look at the back teeth so have them checked every few months and follow our diet advice.

Ask your vet about how to spot these and other problems and how to check your rabbits' bodies every day so that you notice straight away when something is wrong.





Animal Welfare Foundation

AWF is the charity led by the veterinary profession. We are committed to improving the welfare of all animals through veterinary science, education and debate.

The Foundation is funded entirely by voluntary contributions. To make a donation please visit www.bva-awf.org.uk or call us on 020 7908 6375

You can download our other leaflets and resources from our website or you can request copies by contacting us:

AWF, 7 Mansfield Street, London W1G 9NQ

Tel: 020 7908 6375

Email: bva-awf@bva.co.uk

Web: www.bva-awf.org.uk

Twitter: AWF_VETS