

Caring For Your Rabbit

Feeding

Feeding the correct diet is the most important aspect of rabbit care.

It has become increasingly popular for pet rabbits to be fed commercial 'muesli' type foods. Many rabbit experts now recommend avoiding this type of food completely as there is evidence to show that it can lead to selective feeding (only eating selected parts of the food).

This selective feeding can cause problems:

Soft Bones from lack of calcium. This can lead to overgrown and misshapen teeth and roots, which produce abscesses causing weeping eyes. It can also lead to spine or limb fractures and / or back pain.

Lack of Fibre leading to digestive problems and tooth overgrowth

Diarrhoea caused by the high starch content of dry foods, which the digestive systems of rabbits cannot cope with. Diarrhoea can attract flies in summer leading to fatal fly strike (See next paragraph), or even a life threatening condition called enterotoxaemia.

Obesity Overweight rabbits cannot clean themselves properly and the build up of faeces around their tail attracts flies. These then lay eggs which hatch into maggots. This is known as '**Flystrike**' and requires prompt veterinary treatment. The product 'Rear Guard' may help prevent future occurrences until your rabbit loses weight.

Always consult a vet if your rabbit appears to have diarrhoea or a permanently dirty rear end.

What should I feed my rabbit?

Grass & Hay contain all the necessary nutrients for rabbit health. They also provide fibre to aid digestion. As in the wild, your rabbit will need to eat a lot to satisfy its energy requirements. This increased chewing results in healthier teeth and reduces boredom in pet rabbits.

Greens such as **Cabbage, Broccoli, Dandelions, Docks, Spring greens, Leafy topped carrots, Celery,** and **Herbs** provide variety in the diet.

Spinach & Kale may be fed in moderation but not everyday as they may cause bladder stones. Other occasional treats are **Green Peppers, Dark green salad leaves, Tomatoes and Apples.**

Avoid peas, beans and sweetcorn due to their high starch content and treats such as biscuits, bread or toast, treat sticks, sugary foods, chocolate drops and nuts for the same reason.

Pelleted food is appropriate as a **supplement** feed especially for growing, breeding or thin rabbits. All our surgeries sell one of the recommended foods in pellet form, which ensures your rabbit, cannot pick and choose and gives you confidence that a balanced diet is being provided.

Weight Loss for Rabbits

Rabbits need to eat frequently and starving them or sudden diet changes can upset their health. Changing to a healthy diet of mostly hay will help them lose weight gradually. Allow your rabbit plenty of exercise, at least 4 hours daily and the weight will come off naturally.

We provide FREE weight advice and weight check appointments for rabbits.

Changing to a Healthy Diet

Always feed hay. Gradually reduce the dry food over a couple of weeks and introduce some greens. Some rabbits are not keen to eat a different food or may get mild stomach upsets. By introducing new foods slowly, you can identify any that cause a problem.

Vaccination

Myxomatosis

A disease which is common in wild rabbit populations locally. It is transmitted by bites from fleas and flying insects, being easily transferred between animals. The infection causes skin swellings and respiratory disease and is usually fatal.

This disease can affect house rabbits too, as your rabbit does not have to come into contact with other rabbits to be at risk.

Vaccination is recommended with 6-monthly injections from 12 weeks of age.

Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD)

A condition which causes rapid internal bleeding, convulsions and sudden death.

Vaccination is recommended with annual injections from 12 weeks of age.

Boosters

To maintain immunity against these diseases we recommend boosters for each vaccination. The vaccines are not licensed to be given at the same time so are given at separate appointments, 2 weeks apart.

We complete a full health check at each visit and provide FREE advice on all aspects of rabbit care.

Housing

Rabbits need lots of space to allow adequate exercise for muscle and bone health. It also makes them less nervous and consequently less likely to become aggressive. They are quite tolerant to cold as long as they have a dry sheltered environment and plenty of warm bedding material, such as hay and straw.

Waste should be disposed of regularly as the fumes from soiled bedding can encourage rabbits to develop pneumonia.

Sunlight is important as it promotes Vitamin D production which helps to maintain a correct calcium balance and healthy bones and teeth. However, shade must be easily available to prevent overheating.

'House' Rabbits

House rabbits are becoming increasingly popular. Rabbits adapt well to being kept indoors as they are extremely social pets and can be easily trained to use a litter tray. Care must be taken to combat destructive chewing behaviour. Rabbit-proofing furniture and electric cables before introducing a rabbit is advisable!

Keeping Rabbits Together

Rabbits live in small groups in the wild, so pet rabbits can become lonely and bored if kept alone. Rabbits are generally happy together provided they have plenty of space. Care should be taken when introducing a new rabbit to a group or individual. Rabbits are

more likely to get along well if they have been neutered as it reduces aggressive mating behaviour as well as preventing unwanted litters.

Rabbits and Guinea Pigs

It is not generally recommended to house guinea pigs with rabbits, as the two species have very different nutritional requirements. Rabbits can inflict severe injuries on guinea pigs, and can make them very unhappy through bullying. Rabbits may also be carriers of diseases which can be dangerous to guinea pigs

Neutering

Neutering of rabbits is recommended to reduce aggression, urine marking, and mating behaviour.

In female rabbits, spaying will prevent uterine cancer and uterine infections later in life, as well as unwanted litters, and aggressive behaviour

We recommend spaying **female** rabbits at **5-6 months** of age.

Male rabbits are castrated routinely at **4-5 months** of age, or when the testes are of a reasonable size.

Insurance

It is now possible to insure your pet rabbit for veterinary treatment in the same way as you would a dog or cat. This is particularly recommended for 'house' rabbits and for breeds which are prone to particular health problems.

For More Information

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