

Caring for your Rabbit

This guide provides trusted advice from your veterinary team here at the George on how to keep your rabbit healthy, comfortable, and well cared for at home.

Environment

The minimum space requirement for two bonded rabbits is 3m x 2m x1m high. This is for both indoor and outdoor rabbits and should be one continuous space so your rabbits can run the full 3m length uninterrupted. Examples include; a converted garden shed or wendy house, an aviary or a large rabbit hutch with a permanently attached run.

The location should be:

- Out of direct sun light
- A little bit of shade
- Protected from the wind and rain

Things to avoid:

- Cages
- Hutches can be used if big enough (avoid ones with runs underneath)
- Avoid starter hutches (rabbits outgrow these)
- A hutch should never be the main accommodation for rabbits



Diet

A rabbit's diet should be made up of the following:

- **85% hay and grass** to which they should have unlimited access. These include timothy hay, oat hay, Orchard grass & meadow grass
- **10% vegetable and herbs**- Leafy greens and vegetables, including: broccoli, celery, curly kale, dandelion leaves, parsley and coriander.
- **5% pellets** - this should be a supplement to their diet, and less than an egg cup a day! Use timothy based pellets (avoid nut/seed mixes), the pellets should all look the same.
- **Occasional healthy treats** can include blueberries, bananas, strawberries and rabbit-safe baked treats.



Water bowls are better than water bottles, as lapping from a bowl is more natural for rabbits. Bottles can easily get clogged and will freeze in the winter.

Rabbits like to toilet and chew at the same time. A hay rack next to their litter tray is recommended.

Caecotrophs are a type of faeces rabbits pass, which look like a bunch of grapes. They are normal and your rabbit should eat these from its bottom as they're produced. This is entirely normal, and it is a natural stage in a rabbit's digestion.

Behaviours

- Ear position - when your rabbit's ears are up this means something has got their attention. When their ears are back, this means they are very relaxed.
- Licking each other - rabbits show their affection by grooming/licking each other.
- Flopping – happens when a rabbit is totally comfortable and relaxed.
- Binky - this is when rabbits jump in the air and twist. This is a good sign and shows that your rabbit is happy and being playful.
- Fur pulling - this may be a sign of boredom or pain. You may also see this in un-neutered females who are experiencing a phantom pregnancy.
- Nipping - this could be a request for attention, or it could be a warning nip to let you know your rabbit is agitated/upset.
- Grinding their teeth - gentle grinding is a sign of contentment. If you hear your rabbit grinding their teeth loudly then **please see a Vet asap**.
- Chinning - rabbits have scent glands under their chin. You may often see your rabbit rub their chin on an item to mark it with their scent.
- Bottom twitching - when you give your rabbit a tasty treat, they may twitch their bottoms. This means that your rabbit is enjoying the food you just gave them.
- Thumping - rabbits do this to tell others they are feeling threatened. If your bunny thumps their back legs, it usually means they have seen or heard something they believe could be harmful.



Enrichment

- Homemade food forage trays. Make them a forage tray by getting a shallow tray or planter and fill it with hay/shredded paper, some freshly pulled grass and some healthy rabbit treats (coriander, parsley, kale)
- Egg carton puzzle - Cut a cardboard egg carton in half and fill with tasty hay/treats.
- Rabbits like to dig. Fill a planter with potting compost so they can dig to their heart's content!

Enrichment cont'd

- Create platforms for them to climb on and give untreated wooden logs to gnaw and explore.
- Hide leafy greens throughout their hay and in hiding spots to encourage them to forage.
- Playing games is a great way to prevent boredom and encourage your rabbit to exercise. There are plenty of boredom breaker toys out there that you can use for enrichment
- Build a low wall out of cardboard boxes and encourage them to hop over them for a treat. Or cut two holes either side of the box for your bunny to run through/chew.
- Fill a tissue box or loo roll tubes with hay/grass or small bits of scrunched-up cardboard for them to pull out.
- Rabbits love apple sticks or willow sticks as chew toys.
- Ball toys can be a lot of fun for rabbits. Willow balls, hay balls and plastic balls can be used.

Companionship

Rabbits are very sociable animals, and it is very important that they live with at least one other rabbit. They enjoy eating together, grooming each other and keeping each other warm throughout the cold months.

Although rabbits can enjoy spending time with people, living with another rabbit will make sure that they always have a companionship. Rabbits are crepuscular (active at dawn, dusk and at certain periods of the night), so even if you spend a lot of time with your rabbit, we cannot meet a rabbit's social needs.

Rabbits can live together as:

- Two litter brothers or two litter sisters
- A neutered male and a neutered female
- A compatible group
- Unrelated same sex rabbits that are introduced early.

Although there is no risk of pregnancy with some of these options, it is vital to still neuter them as hormones will cause them to fight as they get older.

Bonding Tips

- Start by using two exercise runs side-by-side to help the rabbits get familiar with each other. Provide a barrier so they are still able to smell and see each other. Ensure they both have access to hiding places in case they want to hide.
- During the day, exchange their litter trays, tunnels, bedding etc so they can get used to each other's scent.
- Prepare a neutral area separate from their enclosures. Once the rabbits are comfortable with the sight and smell of each other they may be introduced for short periods in this area. Keep the area empty for the first couple of introductions so you're able to watch at all times.
- This must be supervised at all times. Gradually increase the time they're together. If both are getting on, you may introduce toys/ hiding places and tunnels etc.

Positive Behaviour signs:

- Grooming each other
- Behaving normally together
- Resting/sleeping next to each other
- Eating side by side

Negative Behaviour signs:

- Mounting
- Fighting
- Growling
- Chasing each other

Vaccinations

We recommend an annual vaccine that reduces the mortality and clinical signs of myxomatosis and rabbit haemorrhagic disease (RHD) caused by classical RHD virus (RHDV -1) and RHD type 2 virus (RHDV-2). It is given in one dose and can be given from 5 weeks of age. The onset of immunity following Nobivac Myxo-RHD PLUS is 3 weeks. Below is some information on the diseases we vaccinate against.

Myxomatosis

This is a highly contagious viral disease that is spread by biting insects such as fleas, mites and mosquitoes. Depending on the strain it may take between 1-3 weeks for symptoms to show.

Symptoms:

- Swelling, redness or ulcers around the eyes, nose or genitals
- Milky eye discharge
- Breathing problems
- Inappetence
- Lethargic
- Runny nose

In unvaccinated rabbits, the disease is very severe and in most cases euthanasia is recommended.

Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease (RHD)

This is a virus that attacks rabbits' internal organs and causes internal bleeding. It spreads via rabbit-to-rabbit contact, in the air and via insect bites. Sadly, this is fatal in most cases. There are two types of this virus, RHD 1 & 2.

RHD2 is more of a recent strain of the virus and develops slowly, but there are often few symptoms. Rabbits with RHD2 are more likely to spread because it can take 1-2 weeks for symptoms to show.

Symptoms:

- Blood around the nose, mouth or bottom
- Lethargy
- Eating less
- High temperature
- Sudden death

Neutering

It is recommended that all pet rabbits are neutered to avoid health problems like ovarian and testicular cancer and to also prevent unwanted pregnancies. Neutered rabbits also tend to be more sociable with other bunnies. Rabbits can be neutered around 4-6 months old.

Advantages to having male rabbits castrated:

- ⇒ Prevents them spraying urine
- ⇒ Prevents breeding
- ⇒ Reduces cancer in the testes and prostate gland
- ⇒ Neutering helps with litter training
- ⇒ Unneutered males can be aggressive towards other rabbits

Advantages of having female rabbits spayed:

- ⇒ Prevents uterine cancer and pyometra
- ⇒ Stops unwanted pregnancies
- ⇒ Less risk of developing mammary tumours
- ⇒ Un-spayed females can be aggressive and territorial. They may have phantom pregnancies which can cause them to bite, scratch or lunge at other rabbits or their owners

Common Conditions in Rabbits

Gut stasis

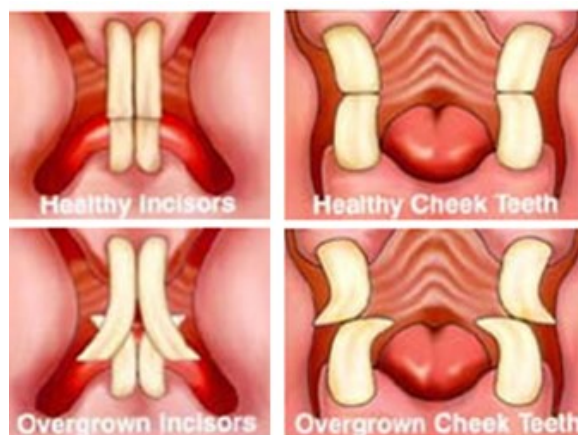
This is the common term in rabbits to describe reduced or absent gastrointestinal motility and is by far one of the most common disorders in pet rabbits. Stress can be a common cause, so any illness, painful condition, or stressful event can trigger this. It will cause the rabbit to stop eating and if left untreated this can become life-threatening.

Dental disease

Rabbits' teeth are designed for chomping and chewing and they continuously grow throughout their lives. Dental disease is often caused by a diet that is too low in fibre.

Common problems include spurs, tooth root abscesses, overgrown teeth and broken teeth.

Symptoms include weight loss, drooling, reduced appetite, tooth grinding and a painful jaw. The best way to prevent this is to feed your rabbits a well-balanced diet which is high in fibre.



E cuniculi

This is a microscopic brain and kidney parasite that can affect rabbits. Symptoms include head tilt, eyes may track side to side, weakness on one or both legs, uncontrollable spinning/rolling, drinking and urinating more due to kidney failure.

To treat this, your rabbit will need a suitable anti-parasitic treatment prescribed by your Vet.

Fly Strike

Fly strike is when flies lay their eggs on your rabbit and those eggs hatch out into maggots. They can eat into your rabbit's flesh within 24 hours and can cause death. The most obvious signs are live maggots in the fur, on the skin, or open wounds.

To prevent this it is vital to check your rabbit's bottom every day, especially in the summer. If you notice any urine/faeces stuck please clean and dry the area. Keeping a rabbit's environment clean will also keep any flies away.

It is also important that rabbits are not overweight in order for them to clean themselves.

If you think your rabbit may have flystrike, **please contact your Vet ASAP.**

Please contact us if you have any questions or concerns on

01666 823165

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