



The Rabbit Rescue and Friends Guide To a Healthy and Happy Rabbit!

Why Learn About Rabbit Care?

At Rabbit Rescue and Friends, we think that every animal is important and it is our job as owners to give them the best quality of life possible. Not only that, the Animal Welfare Act 2006 outlined several requirements for ensuring minimum standards of welfare, so not keeping any animal (including rabbits and other small furies) correctly is now against the law.

What Do I Need to Know?

The RSPCA have come up with a way of ensuring that an animal's needs are being met, and called it the '5 Freedoms'. These are:

1. Freedom from hunger and thirst - by providing fresh water and the right type and amount of food to keep them fit

This means providing constant access to clean water and a diet of **80% hay**, 10% veggies, 5% good quality pellets (not muesli, as this can cause an unbalanced diet) and 5% healthy treats. This will help keep teeth (which grow constantly) and gut in good working order.

2. Freedom from discomfort - by making sure that animals have the right kind of environment including shelter and somewhere comfortable to rest

This means providing a large, well ventilated but draught-free enclosure (usually a hutch and run) that protects your rabbit from temperatures above 25 and below 3 degrees centigrade. Bedding should be straw, and access should be provided EVERY DAY to a large area (like a garden) for exercise.

3. Freedom from pain, injury and disease - by preventing them from getting ill or injured and by making sure animals are diagnosed and treated rapidly if they do.

Rabbits need to be vaccinated and wormed regularly avoid diseases (some of which can be passed onto humans). They also need to be neutered, as unneutered rabbits can have as much as 90% chance of developing certain cancers. The reduction in hormones is also likely to make your rabbit feel calmer and more contented. Finally, it is important to learn about common conditions such as Gastro-intestinal Stasis and Sore Hocks, so that you can spot the signs and get veterinary treatment quickly.

4. Freedom to behave normally - by making sure animals have enough space, proper facilities and the company of other animals of their own kind.

This is why at Rabbit Rescue and Friends, we don't rehome rabbits signally, unless you already have a bunny that needs a friend. Even with human company, these highly social species can become extremely stressed when kept alone. Whilst having a companion may cause slightly more in food and produce more droppings, the benefits for



your pet far outweigh the disadvantages. Getting your rabbit a neutered friend is the single thing you can do to make the greatest difference to his quality of life.

To ensure your rabbits have enough space, they need a hutch that is a minimum of 6x2x2 feet and a large attached run, that they have access to at all times. Regular time out in the garden or in the house is also essential every day.

5. Freedom from fear and stress - by making sure their condition and treatment avoid mental suffering.

As rabbits are clever and inquisitive, a range of toys and things to chew are essential. Otherwise they are likely to get bored and you may see repetitive behaviours (such as fur pulling and biting the cage bars develop). A quiet and calm environment (away from noisy machines or people!) and gentle handling (kept to a minimum) will help to minimise stress. Many rabbits often rely on their companion for support during stressful experiences (such as a trip to the vet – on which they should go together) so this is another excellent reason for keeping them in pairs.

This is a very brief overview of what rabbits need – read on for more information....

Living Area

The Victorians first designed hutches to be used when rearing rabbits for meat and unfortunately, their design hasn't changed much in over 100 years! Hutches sold in pet shops today are generally unsuitable because of size and because of lack of protection from the elements (getting very hot in summer and draughty and cold in winter) and they are just too small. These types of hutches *can* be used successfully, but need to be modified to in order to meet modern welfare standards.



A spacious sleeping and living area that allows them to move about freely, stretch out, hop and sit up tall (periscope) without touching the ceiling or sides. At Rabbit Rescue and Friends we ask that you provide a hutch that is a **minimum of 6x2x2ft** in size (as advised by the RSPCA and the Rabbit Welfare Association) although this is only just adequate – bigger is most definitely better! Traditional hutches (like the one pictured) are usually extremely small in floor area and height, and lack any kind of insulation. They are not suitable, so either

need modification (for example by linking two together), or even better, convert a shed instead! Sheds can often be bought for a similar price as a large hutch, and your rabbits will have significantly more space. Take a look on the internet for examples of shed conversions and contact us if you would like specific advice. If you prefer to buy a hutch, look out for these things:



- A large floor space of **at least 6x2ft** (but buy much bigger if you can), sufficient height (at least 2 feet per level) and insulated walls (or the ability to add something like polystyrene behind plywood, to create insulation).
- Separate sleeping and living areas and that are well ventilated (to avoid respiratory problems) but also free of significant draughts and weatherproofed.
- Something made from materials that are easy to clean and not harmful if chewed. Wood is OK but think about how you will keep it clean if your rabbits don't reliably use their litter trays.



Very few companies sell hutches of this standard, but you could try The Welfare Hutch Company (although you'll see from their prices that you could buy a really good shed for the same price or cheaper).

A hutch should only ever be regarded as a bedroom for your rabbits – the 'Hutch is not enough' Campaign (www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk/ahutchisnotenough) has some good advice and information on the minimum requirements to keep rabbits healthy and happy.

This means that you'll also need to provide a spacious attached run (so your rabbits can access the outside when you are not there with them) and also time spent free-ranging in a garden, so they get the chance to exercise properly. It is suggested that runs are big enough to allow a rabbit 'three hops' but we feel that this is still rather small, so we recommend that you buy or build a run that is at least 6 feet long and fox-proofed if this is an issue for the area you live in.

Slabs provide a good base for permanent runs, but you'll need to consider a soft floor covering if they are very rough, to protect your rabbit's skin and also to provide a 'compliant' surface that allows their nails to sink in and maintain the correct angle of the foot. Without doing this, your rabbit is at risk of the condition 'pododermatitis' (sore hocks). Children's foam or rubber matting can be used for this and is relatively easy to replace if needed.

When thinking about your rabbit-keeping set up, you are only limited by your imagination! The internet can provide some great inspiration and also be a source of cheaper materials if you decide to build your own, or improve a readymade hutch or shed. People that have adopted our rabbits have added many extra features to their set up, including cavity-wall insulation (with polystyrene sheets), a shelf to provide extra space, digging boxes and even a IP webcam, that allow you to keep an eye on things via a smartphone, and monitor the temperature in summer and winter.

Inside the hutch

Traditionally, wood shavings have been used to provide absorbent floor and litter material, but research has indicated that this is actually an unsuitable material and the dust and vapours given off by shavings can contribute to respiratory illnesses (which rabbits are already susceptible to). Individual shavings also tend to get



stuck in longer fur and make it difficult for rabbits to eat their cecotrophs (see 'Diet' for details). For these reasons, straw is a much better alternative, and for rabbits prone to sore hocks, a deep layer of hay may be the only option.

Several litter trays should be provided, and placed in areas that your rabbit has chosen as their toilet. There is debate around the best material for litter trays – shredded paper and specialist bedding (like Carefresh) are an option, but many owners choose simply to use kitchen roll or newspaper for absorbency and a good layer of hay on top (which rabbits love to nibble on as they toilet!). Regardless of what you choose, litter trays need to be cleaned out a minimum of once per day, and hutches cleaned out a minimum of once per week. Without this, there is an unhealthy build-up of ammonia, which can contribute to health problems and is very unpleasant for your rabbits to live in. A good rule of thumb is that hutches that smell 'rabbity' are likely to need to be cleaned out more often, as there should be very little or no unpleasant smell detectable if the cleaning schedule is sufficient.

Think about how you will keep your rabbit cool in the summer and warm in winter – rabbits can't cope very well in temperatures that are outside 1-25 degrees centigrade and can get heat stroke at 26 degree and above. This is because in the wild, burrows tend to stay at a temperature of about 14 degrees c. Rabbits wouldn't choose to put themselves in the temperatures that we expect them to cope with! Some ideas for warming and cooling include:

Warming:

- ✓ Insulate your hutch
- ✓ Provide deep beds of straw
- ✓ Provide a piece of 'vet bed' or similar to lie on if your rabbits don't tend to chew.
- ✓ Consider buying a snugglesafe heatpad to rest under a layer of straw
- ✓ Ensure water bottles and bowls don't freeze
- ✓ Be sure to allow access to enough space to run about – this is primarily how rabbits keep warm
- ✓ Get them a rabbit friend to snuggle up to!

Cooling

- ✓ Provide shade – this is absolutely essential and without it the risk of heatstroke is very high.
- ✓ If your rabbits don't chew too much, consider a gel pet mat – this cools when pressure is applied to it.
- ✓ Freeze bottles of water for them to lie against
- ✓ Direct a fan into the hutch or run. Some rabbits will sit in front of this, but ensure there is also an area they can move to in order to get away too.
- ✓ Put ice cubes in water bottles and bowls, refreshing several times a day if possible.
- ✓ Provide wetted vegetables to help with hydration.



Indoor Rabbits

Rabbits can live very well indoors, in a house that has been proofed to ensure they don't hurt themselves (tucking away wires, blocking spaces they could get stuck in and so on). They too will need an indoor hutch so that they have a bedroom, but will also need constant access to additional space. An indoor hutch could work, but many find that a large dog crate or c and c cage is much better, and regardless of what you use, your rabbits will need access to a penned-off area to run around in at all times. You may find it easier to give them a small room in your house or to section of a part of a larger room with puppy pen panels (pictured).

Companionship

The biggest misconception about rabbit keeping rabbits at pets, is that they are able to live quite happily alone. With *very few* exceptions this is completely untrue. Rabbits are highly social species and can quickly get bored and stressed if alone. It would not be an exaggeration to say that keeping a single rabbit could be compared to solitary confinement – even with attention from a human owner, this is not sufficient to replace company of their own kind. Animal welfare legislation is based around the RSPCA's 'five freedoms' and one of these is freedom to express normal behaviour, which is impossible if kept alone.

Is a guinea pig a suitable friend? We would advise against this, as guinea pigs can be injured by rabbits, are not likely to understand body language and communication signals of a species different to their own.

What is it like having two rabbits?

There is a marginal increase in the space and food requirements when keeping more than one rabbit, but this is more than offset by the reduction in behaviour and health problems that are likely to develop if a rabbit is kept alone. Lonely rabbits can chew excessively, develop repetitive behaviours, pull out their fur, become depressed and aggressive, and develop issues like sore hocks and weight gain through lack of movement. If you are unsure about keeping two rabbits, please get in touch – we can provide information and advice, and talk through your concerns, to help you find a solution that will work for you.

Many of our rabbits go to adopters who already have a rabbit and are looking for a companion for them. This is fantastic news and we are always happy to rehome one of our 'singletons'! Some of our rabbits also go in pairs (to adopters who don't yet have any rabbits, or want a group) and we ask that as a condition of their adoption, when one of the pair passes away, you adopt another to keep them company or return the lone rabbit to us so we can find them a new friend. We understand this is can be difficult as many owners wish to let their rabbit live out their days alone if they are older, but we are passionate about ensuring the welfare of each and every one of our adoptees, for the whole of their lives.



Behaviour



Rabbits can be extremely entertaining and when happy you may see them perform wild tricks, leaping around and twisting in mid-air (known as ‘binkying’). When relaxed they may suddenly and dramatically drop to the floor or roll on their side in a classic ‘bunny flop’. As ‘prey’ animals, they often sleep with their eyes open and are always alert to potential threats in their environment, often wanting to investigate new items and places.

To keep these intelligent and entertaining pets happy and content, it is important to provide lots of things for them to chew and objects to explore (for example cardboard boxes, apple branches, cardboard toilet roll tubes stuffed with meal pellets or veggies and hay). It is also beneficial to teach your rabbits some tricks – like other animals, they can be taught to sit, recognise their name and come when called! This is especially important to learn in case your rabbits ever escape. Getting them back will be much less stressful and more successful! To teach your rabbit to come:

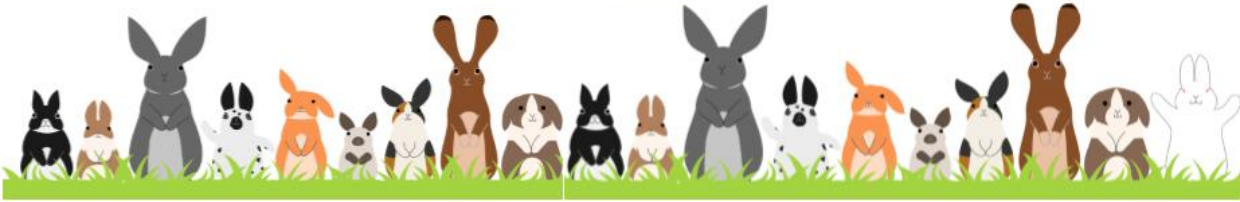
- Decide on a cue word or a sound (like the shaking of their food bag or tub)
- Have some tasty food rewards ready (tiny cubes of their favourite food works best – boring foods may not be exciting enough!).
- When you see your rabbit coming towards you, call your word or make the sound and when they reach you, reward them immediately with the food and let them go back to what they were doing.
- Repeat this often, including at meal times, giving their meal as a reward.
- Try not to call them if you need to do something unpleasant such as putting them back in the hutch or picking them up as they will quickly associate this with being called, and avoid you!

Bonding

If you adopt a single rabbit from us to pair with your own pet, you’ll need to go through the process of bonding them. This is a delicate process that involves the rabbits getting to know each other and deciding who will be the leader of the pair. It can take a very short time, or be a process that happens over several weeks or months. Some understanding of rabbit body language and knowledge of the process is very helpful, so please speak to us and we will be able to supply you with help and support.

Handling

As prey animals that are based on (or under!) the ground, being picked up is very unnatural and frightening. It can also be dangerous, as a rabbit spine is extremely delicate and can be fractured or broken if they are picked up



incorrectly or allowed to kick and twist. For this reason, we recommend that children are never allowed to pick up your rabbits – teach them instead to sit on the floor together. Adults can pick them up with care, but ask us to show you how to do this correctly to minimise injury. If you need to move your rabbits (for example between the house and garden), pop them into a pet carrier – this is the safest and easiest way!

Bathing

Rabbits do an excellent job of keeping themselves clean and so you should never need to bathe them. If you need to clean their bottom, a gentle wipe with damp cotton wool is sufficient – they should **never be** immersed in water or washed with a shower so that their whole body is wet. Doing this can lead to shock and hypothermia.

Trancing

This is the term for placing a rabbit on its' back so that it goes into a trance-like state. People used to think that this calmed them and was helpful for clipping claws, cleaning etc, but we have since discovered that this technique is both cruel and dangerous. This is because 'trancing' triggers a survival mechanism in the rabbit, causing it to stop breathing and effectively 'play dead'. When the threat has passed, the breathing should restart, but this is sometimes not the case, and the lack of oxygen causes the rabbit to have a heart attack. Like likelihood of death at this point is very high, and even if they do survive, the experience is highly stressful and could induce shock.

Diet

A Good Bunny Diet

5%
Healthy
Pellets

5%
Healthy
Treats

10%
Veggies



IN RABBIT WORLD, HAY IS THE MAIN COURSE,
EVERYTHING ELSE IS JUST DRESSING ON THE SIDE!

80%
Grass Hay



Hay is such an essential part of your rabbit's diet, they can't be without it. Hay provides essential fibre to keep the gut moving and to keep the teeth (which constantly grow) ground down to a reasonable size. In addition to hay, you can also feed around an egg cup full per day (for a medium rabbit) of good quality pellet food – no muesli-type food, as this is usually filled with things that rabbits don't eat (like corn and peas) and encourages them to pick out the bits they like and leave the rest! Instead choose one of the following:

- Burgess Excel (Adult or Junior/Mini)
- Science Selective
- Protexin Profibre (a specialist food containing probiotics, excellent for those with sensitive digestion)

This can be supplemented with a range of herbs and forage such as dill, basil, mint, parsley, and dandelion. If your rabbit can tolerate vegetables, these can also be given daily.

Cecotrophs – the magic ingredients

You may notice that your rabbit produces two different kinds of droppings – round, fibrous droppings that are dry and crumbly (and have no smell) and small, shiny and mushy pellets that are dark in colour, clustered like a bunch of grapes and have a very strong smell! These special droppings are caecotrophs – balls of fibre and nutrients covered in a special coating of beneficial bacteria. Without us even noticing, rabbits usually reach down and eat these directly from their bottoms, so that they can be digested a second time, and all nutrients extracted. Healthy rabbits will eat all of these – if you see any, your rabbit might be too full to eat them and need fewer pellets in their diet.

Keep a very close eye on your rabbit's droppings – spotting changes can give you an early warning sign that there is a problem and may prevent a life-threatening condition from developing. Read more below on Gut Stasis, and how you can be prepared.

Water intake – offer both a water bottle and a bowl to see which your rabbit prefers. There is no reason not to offer both, in an effort to ensure your rabbit can easily and comfortably drink when he needs to.

Healthcare

Rabbits are regarded as 'exotic' and many vets don't have more than basic knowledge about how to treat them. It is worth finding a vet who is used to treating rabbits so you know that yours will receive the best and most up to date care. Once you have found one, request prices for the cost of a consultation, vaccinations and worming/mite treatments. This will help you to plan annual preventative healthcare costs.

Your rabbit needs to be vaccinated against both Myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD) and a combination vaccine exists for this. However, an additional strain of VHD (RVHD2) has also been identified, and this is also highly contagious and almost always fatal. A vaccine is now available in the UK, so please ask your vet to also discuss with you vaccinating against this strain too.



Worming

It is recommended that rabbits are wormed every 12 months – the usual course is 3 days, but increasing this to a full 9-day dose will help to protect your rabbits against a serious bacterial infection called *e.cuniculi*, which can cause neurological problems, incontinence, and death.

Internal and External Parasites

Mites and other parasites can travel to your rabbits via hay, garden insects and between rabbits, so it is wise to check your rabbits regularly for any signs of flaky skin, dirty ears, worms in droppings or general loss of condition. The vet can treat parasites easily with a course of medication such as ivermectin.

Teeth

Rabbit teeth are truly amazing – growing constantly throughout their lifetime. In order to keep teeth short and avoid the development of painful spurs (sharp teeth that cut into cheeks and gums), plenty of hay should be given. The action of chewing hay works to keep back teeth short, reducing the need for your vet to file or grind them down.

Digestion

Rabbits produce two types of dropping – firstly, caecotrophs – the edible droppings described above, that are essential for healthy digestion. The droppings you are likely to see are the second type - dry, round (and usually pale) brown droppings, with visible bits of fibre in them. These crumble when pulled apart (known as being ‘friable’). Your rabbit should produce around 300 of these per day.

Rabbit digestion is more similar to that of a cow or horse than a cat or dog, and problems can arise when gut bacteria is thrown out of balance or there isn’t enough fibre to keep digestion moving. The result is a slowing (or sometimes complete stop) of the digestive system – a condition known as GI Stasis or Illius.

If the normal dropping you see begin to darken in colour, get smaller, become wrinkled/raisin-like or fewer in number, your rabbit’s gut is likely to be slowing down. This is the onset of Illius or Gut Stasis and is a build-up of matter, bad bacteria and gas, which causes significant pain and discomfort. Rabbits with Gastro-intestinal (GI) Stasis need to receive immediate attention from a vet who understands rabbit care and treatment as the condition is life threatening and can develop in just a few hours. If GI Stasis is confirmed, then you should expect your vet to administer pain relief (often Metacam), sub-cutaneous fluids for rehydration, an injection of a gut mobility drug and also give you further pain medication, some recovery food and gut mobiliser (such as Ranitadine, which is also thought to protect against stomach ulcers) to give in the following days. Recovery will take a few days, and in this time, your rabbit should be encouraged to eat as much hay and drink as much water as possible, to restore normal gut function.



Feet

Unlike other species (such as cats and dog), rabbits are unusual in that they have no pads (areas of thickened skin) on their back feet. This means that long periods of sitting or friction-causing surfaces such as wire, concrete or carpet can cause areas of soreness to develop. This is known as pododermatitis or 'sore hocks'. Due to their fine fur, Rex rabbits are particularly susceptible, as are larger or heavier breeds. However, recent research found that in a sample, 100% of rabbits (across a range of breeds) had some degree of the condition (from light soreness, through to ulceration and infection). If you part the fur on the back feet of your rabbit, you are likely to find some level of soreness – look for pink or red round patches, progressing into long sections that run all along the underside of the foot. If you see any blisters or ulcers, puffiness, cracking, weeping or blood, your rabbit needs urgent medical attention.

How to minimise/manage sore hocks:

- ✓ Ensure the hutch and run floor is a soft, compliant material like rubber, foam, and/or deep hay (that is kept clean and free of damp)
- ✓ Allow plenty of time to free-range in the garden – eating grass requires a rabbit to keep moving and changes body position, relieving pressure on the back feet.
- ✓ If your rabbit is overweight, shedding some of this extra weight will help
- ✓ If the soreness isn't severe, encourage your rabbit to move about on soil and other abrasive surfaces, to harden and callous the skin
- ✓ Seek veterinary help to manage skin healing if there is already significant soreness

Please contact us if you need any help or advice about your rabbits, and if you suspect they are unwell, call your nearest rabbit-savvy vet straightaway.