

BASIC RABBIT CARE

What should I feed my pet rabbit?

Rabbits are herbivores, which mean that their digestive system is adapted to feed on plants and plant material. A good rabbit diet will contain good quality grass and hay, as well as fresh vegetables and maybe a small amount of pellets. Anything apart from these should be considered a treat!!

Obviously, constant access to fresh water is a necessity for any rabbit. The following is a good guideline as to what to feed your pet rabbit:

- Continual access to fresh, good quality grass and/or grass hay (e.g. Oaten Hay, Timothy Hay, Meadow Hay)

Note that alfalfa hay and clover contains high levels of protein and calcium which can cause harm to the adult rabbit. It may be ok for growing rabbits or pregnant/lactating female rabbits

Constant access to hay is VITAL for rabbit digestive health, dental health and mental health

- Adequate supply of fresh, leafy green vegetables (1-2 cups per kg)

Examples: Broccoli, Cabbage, Celery, Brussel Sprouts, Spinach leaves, Parsley, Coriander...

It's a good idea to add one vegetable to the diet at a time because some may cause diarrhoea or soft faeces in certain rabbits. Stop feeding this vegetable if this occurs.

- Good quality rabbit pellets which should be high in fibre (1/4 a cup per 3kg)
- Anything else is considered a treat (2 tablespoons per 3kg)

Examples: fruits, root vegetables (e.g. carrot, sweet potato), capsicum

Note that young rabbits are not as good as digesting fruit compared to adult rabbits and are more vulnerable to experiencing diarrhoea when fed fruit. Thus it is smart to avoid feeding your pet rabbit any fruit until they are older than 7 months of age

Cereals, grains, nuts, seeds, corn, bean, peas, bread, biscuits, chocolates, breakfast cereals are all things that should NOT BE FED to your pet rabbit under any circumstance

If possible, allow rabbits to have access to natural unfiltered sunlight, UV light is an important factor which enables rabbits to make their own vitamin D

Housing considerations

Rabbits can be housed successfully either indoors or outdoors. There seems to be a gradual shift from keeping rabbits constantly enclosed in a hutch, as these are often too small and do not provide adequate space for the rabbit to fulfil their normal behaviors. This can lead to both physical and mental problems in your pet rabbit. All pet rabbits should be given the opportunity to exercise outside (free range or in a run) for a few hours per day.

When considering a rabbit hutch, they should be designed as large as possible and serve only as intermittent or temporary accommodation:

- Rabbits within the hutch should be safe from predators, and the hutch should be designed in a way which prevents the rabbit from escaping

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- Hutches should be easy to clean – remove soiled bedding daily and totally clean the hutch AT LEAST once per week
- Mosquito-proofing of the hutch with fly screen wire is a good idea
 - Mosquitoes can carry deadly viruses which can infect your pet rabbit
- All hutches should be well ventilated and located in a draught free area
- Hutches should be protected from the rain
- Appropriate heat protection must be offered (e.g. hutch placed in the shade, adequate areas of shelter within the hutch)

Note – rabbits are extremely vulnerable to heat stress

- Hutches are often made with wire mesh flooring which can cause major damage to your pet rabbit's feet. Appropriate bedding/flooring material for your pet rabbit includes:

Thick layers of hay or straw

Peat moss

Washable blankets/towels/cloths (ensure rabbit doesn't chew!)

Shredded paper

In the wild, the rabbit's burrow is its safe place where it will retreat to when it feels threatened. In any housing situation, rabbits should also be provided with places where they can run and hide when they feel threatened (these are called 'bolt holes'). Bolt holes can be simulated in the form of an upturned box, or a covered corner of a room, PVC piping or even a deep layer of hay or straw.

If at any stage your rabbit is given free reign of the yard environment, then measures need to be taken to prevent escape – either by digging, climbing or jumping. Note also that they WILL destroy your garden.

If rabbits are going to have free range of the house, then it is important that you protect your house from the rabbit, and also to protect your rabbit from items in your house. Rabbits are chewers, and will chew on anything in their path, including electrical cords and furniture.

Rabbits usually go to the toilet in similar spots all the time. Rabbits can be toilet trained and will soon learn to use a litter tray or a particular area to defecate and urinate in. No matter the material used as 'litter', it needs to be changed at least daily. Suitable litter materials include:

- Recycled paper cat litter (avoid clay type cat litters – can cause intestinal disease)
- Straw or hay
- Shredded paper

Rabbits are social animals and there are many benefits of housing rabbits together. However, just like not all humans get along, not all rabbits get along and it is hard to predict whether two rabbits will or will not get along. Given this, always watch rabbits very closely when introducing them and always provide them with places to hide during this introduction period. Suitable mixes of rabbits includes:

- 2 female rabbits
- 1 male and 1 female rabbit (desexing needed to prevent breeding)

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- Mixes of desexed rabbits

It is not recommended to keep guinea pigs with rabbits as rabbits can spread diseases to the guinea pig and can sometimes bully them.

No matter where they are kept, rabbits need to be stimulated by continuously varying the environment, because rabbits like to explore new things. This can be as simple as hiding food in cardboard boxes etc.

Does my rabbit need to be desexed?

Obviously, in both male and female rabbits, desexing prevents unwanted breedings, which is important in rabbits that can have more than 5 litters per year. The recommended age for breeding male and female rabbits is 5-6 months of age.

It is recommended that ALL females be desexed due to the extremely high incidence of uterine cancer in older, non-desexed female rabbits. Desexing your female rabbit also reduces likelihood of aggression both to other rabbits and to humans.

It is recommended that males be castrated to reduce the chances of aggression, and also to reduce territory marking behaviour

Does my rabbit need to be vaccinated and wormed?

Pet rabbits should be vaccinated against calicivirus once per year. Sometimes depending on the age of the rabbit, a booster may be required 4 weeks after their first vaccination

Rabbits do not need to be protected against intestinal worms. This is rarely an issue in rabbits.

Why is my rabbit aggressive?

There can be many reasons why a rabbit may attack another rabbit:

- Protecting their young
- Keep newcomers out
- Establishing dominance (neutered rabbits less likely to be dominance aggressive, and tends to be seen when rabbit reaches puberty at 4-6 months)
- Fighting over resources e.g. water bottles, food bowls
- Sometimes, we just don't know why

Rabbits, like any other pet, have the potential to show aggressive behavior towards humans (they bite, kick and scratch). The most common reasons why a rabbit may be aggressive towards a human include:

- Pain or illness
- Territorial aggression
- Learned behaviour or improper socialization
- Previous bad experiences with certain situations

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Important rabbit facts

- Female rabbit: Doe, Male rabbit: Buck, Baby rabbit: Kit
- Life expectancy: 5 – 15 years
- Weaning age: 3 – 5 weeks
- Sexual maturity: 4 – 10 months
- Gestation period: 29 – 35 days
- Oestrus (heat): Assume sexually mature rabbits are always on heat
- Ovulation: Rabbits do not generally ovulate unless they are mated
- Rabbits teeth never stop growing, and without adequate hay or grass in the diet to wear down their teeth, these teeth overgrow and can cause serious problems for your rabbit
- Rabbits exhibit a behaviour called caecotrophy, which means the rabbit ingests some of its faeces as they are passed from their bottom. This is a very important behaviour, and if interrupted can lead to serious problems in your rabbit
- Rabbits need to eat regularly. Starvation, even for relatively short periods of time, can quickly become fatal for your rabbit. If you noticed that your rabbits faecal output is decreasing then this can indicate that the rabbit is not eating enough
- Rabbit's bones are very thin and vulnerable to breaking. Whenever holding a rabbit, always support its backside so that it cannot suddenly kick its hindlimbs out with excessive force. This can lead to a fractures of the spine
- Rabbits are creatures which require a lot of care and love, and can become entertaining, loving, valued members of the family

Thank you to Dr David Vella for his thorough notes provided regarding rabbit care and husbandry.

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