



## Love your pet... love your vet

### Rabbit Ownership

Congratulations on your new rabbit! You are joining millions of pet lovers who think of rabbits as ideal pets. Naturally social animals, in the right homes they can quickly become part of the family and are very affectionate animals. However, like any pet, owning a rabbit is a big commitment, so we have put together some information on how to best care for your new friend, give him (or her) the best possible home and environment and keep a happy bunny!

#### Feeding

Probably the single most important piece of advice that we can give is on the correct feeding of your rabbit. Thoughts have changed over the last few years on the best diet for pet rabbits and information in many older books, what you may have done before and even advice given by the pet shop or rabbit breeder may be a little out of date now.

Although they are different shapes, sizes and colours, pet rabbits are closely related to their wild cousins. Wild rabbits eat grass, grass and more grass and the digestive tract of your rabbit is designed to do the same. As soon as we start to feed more energy rich foods such as cereals (as found in all commercial rabbit mixes and pellets) and especially sweeter foods such as bread, biscuits, cakes, chocolate and even sweet fruits such as bananas, we run the risk of upsetting the delicate balance of the rabbit's digestive system. Therefore the healthiest and most appropriate diet for your rabbit is grass and hay. All other foods should be fed as a small supplement to this and the best thing you can do for the health of your rabbit is to start out as you mean to go on.

Unlimited access to good quality hay as a food, not just as bedding is the first most important point. Secondly a commercial food can be given but must be regulated to avoid overeating (causing obesity). It is generally recommended that commercial rabbit diets be fed up to a maximum of 25g per kg bodyweight per day. This means the average adult lop rabbit should have only 50g (approximately a third of a bowl) of rabbit food per day. When choosing your hay, opt for good quality meadow hay or (ideally) Timothy hay.

**Leafy greens** (not lettuce) and especially vegetables that grow on the surface are also a good feed for rabbits. For example carrot tops are better than the carrots themselves. Rabbits are sensitive to chemicals, however, and all fresh food should be rinsed thoroughly before feeding. Most rabbits will also enjoy herbs, including basil, oregano, parsley and even mint. A portion the size of the rabbit's head given twice a day is about right.

**Pellets or mix?** Most rabbits will be selective on their eating given a choice, so we would recommend a good quality pellet where the rabbit cannot pick out the bits he likes and leave the rest.

**Treats** are fine, but try to stick to healthy treats such as carrot, broccoli, apple cores, peelings, cauliflower stalks, sweet corn, and cucumber. These should be given in moderation as carrots for example are quite high in energy for rabbits and one or two a week is plenty.

**Water.** Rabbits eating lots of greens may not need to drink so much but those on a more dried diet will probably drink more. Often offering both a drinker bottle that can't be knocked over and is easily kept clean, together with a drinking bowl is the best option to give your rabbit the choice.

## **Teeth**

Unlike our own, rabbit's teeth have evolved to grow throughout their lives in order to keep up with the attritional wear of eating so much plant material. Poor diet, selective eating and most importantly not enough fibre in the diet can cause the teeth to overgrow. This is a potentially life threatening condition requiring regular trimming or extraction of the teeth and much ongoing care. Crucially, once a rabbit has developed dental problems it can only be controlled and never completely cured, so feeding the correct diet from the start is vital for the long term health of your rabbit.

## **Vaccinations**

There are two main infectious diseases that we see in rabbits in this area, but fortunately there is a vaccine for both. Myxomatosis is found frequently in the wild rabbit population. It is passed most commonly in the UK by insect bites (biting flies and most commonly fleas). A fox or cat passing through your garden can leave fleas behind that can then be picked up by your rabbit. In this area it is recommended that we vaccinate rabbits against Myxomatosis twice a year.

Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD) is a less well know but equally deadly virus that can be passed on from wild rabbits, or the virus particle can be carried into your garden by other animals. Vaccination against VHD is carried out annually. It should be noted that due to the sensitive immune systems of rabbits, Myxomatosis and VHD vaccinations should be separated by a period of at least two weeks.

## **Neutering and multiple rabbits**

Rabbits make fabulous pets and are very social, but if you keep more than one together neutering is normally required. Even for single rabbits, neutering is strongly recommended for a longer and healthier life, as well as protecting against the very common diseases of uterine and ovarian tumours in females and testicular tumours in males.

Modern anaesthetics and techniques make rabbits anaesthetics much safer than in previous years and are considered no more of a risk than for a dog or cat.

Rabbits are often happier in pairs (or more) and two neutered bucks (males) will often become very closely bonded for life.

## **Housing**

Rabbits can make excellent house pets and there is specific information available (see below) on how to “rabbit proof” your house and toilet train your new bunny.

Rabbits need space and exercise. The best option is a good weatherproof hutch, bedded with shavings (not dusty sawdust) or newspaper then a large amount of bedding. Straw is better than hay for bedding as it is coarser and does not get caught up in their coats so much. A separate area for good quality hay, possibly in a manger can then also be used. Rabbits also need to exercise so it is vital that they have daily access to a good sized run, the larger the better. However if left unattended make sure it is fox and predator proof.

Rabbits can also readily be kept indoors and can usually be litter trained. They will need some form of cage containing bedding food and water which then doubles up as a place for them to sleep and when you want to shut them in at night-time. House rabbits do, however, enjoy chewing so do make sure you provide plenty of chew sticks (willow sticks or fruit tree branches such as apple trees are best) and protect wires and cables as much as possible.

## **Insurance**

Rabbits can now be insured in the same way as you might insure your dog or cat. We have found that Pet Plan offer a very good level of cover and you can pick up a leaflet from the waiting room.

## **Further information**

Hillside are a very “rabbit friendly” practice so please feel free to chat with any of the clinical team if you have any further questions. A free healthy hopper clinic is run by the nursing team which is an opportunity to learn more about general rabbit care including nutrition, welfare, worming and dental problems - call the surgery on 01202 698899 to make an appointment.

We would also recommend the excellent website of the Rabbit Welfare Fund that includes a lot of further information - look online at [www.rabbitwelfarefund.co.uk](http://www.rabbitwelfarefund.co.uk).

*Disclaimer: The information and advice contained in this handout is for general information only. It is not intended to be a substitute for a veterinary examination and/or specific treatment or advice. You should always seek advice from your veterinary surgeon.*

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