



Handle with care

Rabbits

Species: Domestic rabbits
Scientific names: *Oryctolagus cuniculis*

Description

Rabbits kept as pets come in a variety of different colours and sizes. They can be as large as the Flemish giant, weighing in at 6.1kg, or as small as a mini rex at just 1.8kg. There are long and short haired varieties of rabbit and the lop-eared rabbit has been bred to have large, floppy ears. All rabbits have powerful back legs and shorter forelegs – which make them very efficient burrowers – short fluffy tails and large incisor teeth specially designed for grazing. Rabbits normally live for about eight to ten years.

Life in the wild

Wild rabbits are very social animals. They live in extended family groups in underground burrows called warrens. Tunnels link the sleeping and nesting chambers; there are usually several exits. Warrens are often built on the edge of woodland – where it borders grass – or in arable fields. Rabbits doze in the burrows by day. In early morning and at dusk they go into the fields to feed. Rabbits were originally kept for food or fur rather than as pets. They have never become truly domesticated and have kept much of their natural behaviour patterns and needs. As a result they are complicated to look after.

Source of animals

RSPCA animal centres, reputable breeders and rescue centres are reliable sources for rabbits – your local veterinary surgeon may also be able to advise on sources. It is important, wherever possible, to always see rabbit kittens with their mothers – this gives owners a good picture of how well they have been cared for, their eventual size and sociability.

Prior knowledge and preparation

Before keeping rabbits, it is crucial that any potential owner finds as much out about them as they can. Only then can they decide if rabbits are the right pets for them and if they can provide the specialist care, time, financial means and long-term commitment to look after them properly. Before bringing the rabbits home, owners should make sure they have the right accommodation, food and the necessary accessories in place. They should also take the time to speak with other experienced rabbit keepers and a vet for advice before making a final decision about rabbit ownership.

Vet care/costs/holiday cover

Rabbits will need regular veterinary care to check their general health and problems like overgrown teeth and claws. They will also need regular vaccinations against: Rabbit Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD) and myxomatosis, and treatment for ticks, mites and fleas if they are affected. Rabbits should also be neutered. The veterinary surgeon can advise on costs of consultations and provide information regarding their care and treatment.

Providing the right accommodation and enclosure for rabbits can be expensive. Holiday cover may also be expensive and difficult to arrange, but your rabbits will need to be looked after every day while you are away on holiday. There are various boarding facilities which look after rabbits, but you may have a reliable friend or neighbour who understands their complex needs and is prepared to come and look after them, or who will care for your pets in their own home.

Health issues to find out about

- *Rabbit Viral Haemorrhagic Disease.*
- *Myxomatosis.*
- *Coccidiosis.*
- *Respiratory infections.*
- *Overgrown teeth and claws.*
- *Fleas.*
- *Ticks.*
- *Mites.*
- *Fly strike.*

Unhealthy/healthy animal signs

Healthy rabbits are alert and bright eyed, with no signs of sneezing or discharge around their eyes, ears and mouths. Their breathing should be quiet and regular and they should have clean, glossy coats with no bald patches. Their teeth and claws should be of a normal length and not look overgrown. Healthy rabbit feet are strong and clean with no lumps and sore patches. They should move around easily with no signs of pain or limping. The fur around a rabbit's tail and feet should be clean with no signs of diarrhoea.

Why are rabbits vulnerable in captivity?

Rabbits are completely dependent on their owners to provide the correct accommodation, food and veterinary care. Many owners are not prepared for the fact that rabbits do not behave like 'pets' and lose interest in them confining them to a life of boredom in a hutch at the bottom of the garden. Rabbits are highly social animals and suffer if they are left on their own. Rabbits are also dependent on their owners to keep them clean – if they are not checked on every day, not groomed and allowed to live in dirty conditions they can become victims of fly strike. The strike fly lays its eggs in faeces-covered fur. When the eggs hatch the maggots burrow into the rabbit's body literally eating it alive.

Handling/transporting the animal home

Rabbits should be lifted with two hands – one on the scruff of the neck but the weight supported in the other arm which should be around the hindquarters. The rabbit should then be cradled against the body with the head towards the shoulder. Rabbits should never be picked up by the ears or scruff of the neck.

When returning a rabbit to its home the best method is to lower it in hind feet first. It is then impossible for the rabbit to kick out and scratch the handler. Children cannot be expected to lift rabbits safely other than the smallest breeds. Rabbits should be safely confined in a cat carrying case when travelling. In an emergency they can be carried in a secure cardboard box with holes punched in the sides for ventilation. Rabbits should never be left in parked cars on warm days – even with the windows open – they could literally roast to death.

Needs: grouping, diet, accommodation and environment

Rabbits need to be kept in groups. Keepers should make sure that they can give a home to two rabbits – two neutered females, a neutered male and a neutered female, or two neutered males all from the same litter will make good companions. Guinea pigs and rabbits should not be kept together.

Most rabbit hutches sold in pet shops are simply too small. A home for two medium-sized rabbits should measure at least 180cm long x 90cm wide x 75cm high and with enough space for each rabbit to have its own sleeping area. The rabbit's home should be divided into two connecting compartments – one for day with a wire mesh door to let in light and air and one fitted with a solid door to provide a retreat at night and from bad weather. A louvred door which can be put over the front of the home in bad weather is also important. In cold weather, rabbits should be moved into the shelter of a porch or outhouse.

A good rabbit home should be weatherproof and raised off the ground to table height – this protects the rabbits from rising damp, rats and dogs. It also makes cleaning easier as the dirty litter can just be scraped directly out into a bucket held below. The floor of the sleeping compartment should be lined with newspaper and then covered with plenty of wood shavings and hay or shredded paper. The rabbits' home should be cleaned every day and the bedding completely changed each week.

The best location for rabbit accommodation is in a sheltered position, not facing directly into the wind or the midday sun and in a secure enclosure in which the rabbits can exercise during the day. A ramp leading from the home to the enclosure floor will enable them to do this easily. Rabbits need daily exercise in a large grassy enclosure. The enclosure should be sunk into the ground, escape proof and safe from predators.

Rabbits need a diet of grass, rabbit pellets, apples, carrots, dandelions and good quantities of hay. They also need a constant supply of water in a metal tipped feeding bottle and also a gnawing block to wear down their teeth.

Rabbits can also make suitable house pets as they can be trained to use litter trays. Care must be taken, however, to ensure that they do not chew electrical cables and that 'no go' areas in the house are blocked off.

THIS IS BASIC INFORMATION ONLY.

If you still believe that you could care for this animal then you must obtain further specialist information prior to taking on the responsibility.