



CARING FOR RABBITS

Rabbits are relatively easy to care for and make quiet, clean, inquisitive, entertaining and responsive pets for both children and adults. Like all pets, they require proper health care, adult supervision and a long-term commitment. The average lifespan for a healthy domestic rabbit is 5-8 years. Young rabbits (kittens) should be homed when they are 8 weeks old. Handling kittens regularly and correctly at an early age promotes well-socialised companions.

What to look for when choosing a rabbit

- The eyes and nose should be clear of discharge that may indicate respiratory infection
- The rabbit is bright and inquisitive and not too thin. Pet along the rabbit's backbone to check this.
- Check for wetness or caked droppings around the tail and look for fleas amongst the fur and black earwax that is telltale of ear mites.
- If possible, check that the front (incisor) teeth are not crooked or overgrown.
- If the rabbit is full grown, enquire if they are desexed or vaccinated against HVD (Haemorrhagic Viral Disease)
- Find out what the rabbit has been fed on as sudden changes in diet can cause diarrhoea.
- Ask if there is any history of health or behavioural problems (particularly for rabbits surrendered to a shelter)
- Find out about the breed's grooming requirements

Where should my rabbit live?

Wherever your rabbit lives, it is important to consider the amount of space they are given and the level of social contact they receive from either their owner or another rabbit. Outdoor hutches should be large enough for the rabbit to make 3-4 consecutive hops and stand up fulling on it's hind legs. (1 meter square and ½ meter high). They should be located in a safe area protected from sun, wet weather, wind and frost. The hutch should include an enclosed sleeping area with straw bedding that can be easily changed when soiled. They should have access to a safe movable run for access to fresh grass and exercise or be brought inside to hop around.

Rabbits also make great indoor pets and can be litter trained. For initial training, the rabbit should be kept in a small area with the litter box in the corner where the rabbit has already soiled. The sides of the box should be low enough to allow easy access. Use a non-clumping litter, preferably paper based and avoid earth-based litters, which are harmful if eaten. They should have their own indoor cage with a towel or shredded paper as bedding. Time should be spent 'bunny-proofing' the home before the rabbit is let out to prevent nibbling of electrical cables, indoor plants, carpets, furniture and books. Rabbits should not be left unattended with other pets in the home.

Optimum temperatures for rabbits are 15-21 degrees. Heat stroke can occur over 27 degrees so be sure shade is available in summer. Covering the hutch at night in the winter will help prevent hypothermia.

How often should I clean out my rabbit's hutch?

Rabbits must be cleaned out at least twice a week in the summer and weekly in the winter. In addition, try to remove urine soaked bedding each day. Once the hutch or indoor cage is empty, it can be cleaned with a dilute disinfectant. Rabbits that live outside in the summer need to be kept as clean as possible to prevent fly strike around the tail area. Check the tail area daily for maggots in warm weather.

What should I feed my rabbit?

Rabbits have an unusual digestive system that relies on the consumption of the first set of faeces they produce in the early morning – which are usually softer – so as to absorb as many nutrients as possible.

The most important part of a rabbits diet is good quality meadow hay and/or fresh grass. This should make up the bulk of the diet and be available all the time so they can graze as much as possible and prevent boredom. In the wild, rabbits forage 70% of the time. The high fibre content of grass and hay is required for healthy digestive function and normal tooth wear. Hay sourced as horse feed or from a farm will be cheaper than pet shops. Avoid mowed grass clippings as they ferment quickly.

High quality pelleted rabbit foods can be fed with care. Make sure the mix is left until all is eaten and that your rabbit is not just picking out the more palatable parts, which may not constitute a balanced diet. Rabbits over a year of age should have their access to pelleted foods restricted as overfeeding these low fibre, high carbohydrate foods can result in obesity, intestinal problems such as chronic diarrhoea and fur balls, dental disease, facial abscesses and sore eyes.

Fresh vegetables and fruit should not make up more than 20% of the diet and be introduced slowly to reduce the risk of diarrhoea. Items to try include Chinese cabbage, carrot, watercress, kale, parsley, spinach, radishes, celery, raspberry leaves, dandelions and clover. Avoid beans and rhubarb and never feed veges cold from the fridge. If the veges cause diarrhoea, stop giving them for a few days and keep his bottom clean. If not better in a few days, give us a call.

What about feeding treats?

Do not feed sugary treats like chocolate and biscuits or potato chips, seeds or bread. Be careful with treats generally as they can cause obesity and dental problems. Small amounts of healthy treats can include strawberries, pineapple, apple, pear, melon, banana, raspberries, peach and dried fruit. Rabbits also enjoy gnawing and stripping the bark from twigs and branches from any tree we eat the fruit from eg apple, pear, plum, hawthorn and wild rose. Make sure the trees have not been sprayed. Water should always be available in a bowl or gravity feed bottle and cleaned daily.

Will my rabbit need grooming?

Some of the longer haired breeds eg Cashmere and Angora as well as some crossbreeds require daily grooming to remove loose hair and mats. Longhaired rabbits that are not cared for properly develop uncomfortable mats in their hair and are at risk of fly strike as their faeces collects in the matted hair. Check their ears, eyes, nose, mouth bottom and nails daily.

How should I handle my rabbit?

It is important that the rabbit feels safe when being picked up. Rabbits that have not been handled as a youngster can panic when handled. It can take some patience to overcome this fear but you can begin by gently stroking the rabbit whilst giving a treat.

When picking up a rabbit, one hand should always support the weight under the bottom. Never pick a rabbit up by the ears or allow the hind legs to dangle. A strong kick can cause injury to the spine and paralysis of the hind legs.

One way to pick up a rabbit is to place one hand under the forelegs and chest and with the other hand, scoop up the rear end. Hold the rabbit close into your body so it feels secure. You can tuck its head under your arm. Clipping the tips off their long sharp claws may reduce injury. However, even clipped claws can do some damage. If he doesn't want to be cuddled at the moment, then don't pick him up!

Should I desex my rabbit?

Rabbits become sexually mature between 4 months (in smaller breeds) and 6-9 months (in larger breeds). It is recommended that young rabbits be separated into single sex groups at 16 weeks of age

to prevent unwanted litters. The capacity to ‘breed like rabbits’ is no joke. A female rabbit can become pregnant again immediately after giving birth.

Desexing male and females at 6 months of age can prevent breeding. Having your female rabbit desexed before 2 years of age dramatically reduced the incidence of uterine cancer. Desexing reduces aggression on both sexes. Entire males can develop very strong smelling urine and urine spraying. Desexed rabbits can be more prone to obesity if allowed to overeat.

Anaesthesia

In the past rabbits have gained the reputation of being high anaesthetic risk. However, modern drugs and veterinary methods have reduced this risk. Every effort is made to make your rabbit’s anaesthetic as safe as possible.

Should I vaccinate my rabbit?

Vaccination is available to protect pet rabbits against Haemorrhagic Viral Disease (HVD) – “rabbit calicivirus” – a which is a rapidly fatal and contagious viral disease spread by direct contact with other rabbits (wild or domesticated) as well as via indirect contact such as from people, clothing, shoes, other objects, birds and insects. There is no cure once infected and it can affect rabbits as young as 6 weeks of age. Vaccination is an effective preventative. Rabbits over 10 weeks require one injection and a yearly booster. Rabbits under 10 weeks should receive a second injection after 10 weeks and then a yearly booster.

Myxomatosis vaccination is not available in Australia. This disease is often fatal and is spread from infected rabbits by fleas and other biting insects. Keeping rabbits indoor rabbits or in screened hutches and controlling fleas will reduce the risk of spread. Ask for veterinary advice regarding flea control as not all products used on cats and dogs are safe to use on rabbits.

Vaccination time provides a regular opportunity for a health check including the teeth.

Some Common Medical Problems

Overgrown Teeth or Malocclusion

This is the most common problem encountered in pet rabbits and can be fatal if not treated early. Rabbit’s teeth grow constantly throughout their life and if there is insufficient fibre in the diet, or the teeth are not aligned to wear properly, they will overgrow. Teeth overgrow on angles forming spikes that injure the cheek and tongue and cause mouth infections, ulcers and an inability to eat or swallow.

Signs include anorexia, weight loss, dribbling (wet chin) and jaw abscesses. These abscesses are very difficult to treat even with major surgery and long courses of antibiotics. Eye infections and matted droppings around the tail can also be an indication of dental disease.

Some rabbits are born with malocclusion of the front teeth (incisors), which requires frequent trimming or tooth removal. This condition is more common in dwarf or lop-eared rabbits and affected rabbits should not be bred from. Older rabbits can develop a similar condition if they lack fibre in their diet. Fibre in the form of grass, hay and vegetables is essential to wear the teeth down at a sufficient rate.

Skin disease

Ear mites cause excessive production of crusts in the ear canals and lead to head shaking, ear scratching and possibly blood in the ear canal. Treatment of all in contact rabbits and repeat treatment in three weeks is required to control infection.

Mites can also infect the skin of the back and shoulders causing a white scale and itchy skin. These mites may cause a rash on humans.

If the bedding is not changed, or grooming neglected, rabbits can develop mats of hair and faeces around the tail that results in skin infections and subsequent fly strike. Ulcerations on the feet can also occur.

Disclaimer: This information is of a general nature only, and must not be used as veterinary advice except where directed by your veterinarian. Hall Veterinary Surgery does not warrant the suitability of this information for specific cases. If your animal is unwell or you want to act on this information, please contact us on 6230 2223.

Eye problems

Rabbits can develop eye infections and show a milky discharge from the corner of the eye with a skin rash below. Tear ducts can become blocked, sometimes associated with abnormal molar tooth growth. Dusty litters, wood shavings or accumulated odours from urine and faeces, can irritate eyes. Eye infections and injuries require immediate attention.

Diarrhoea

Severe diarrhoea can quickly cause serious dehydration and should be treated quickly. A high fibre diet (hay or grass) has a protective effect against diarrhoea. It is normal for rabbits to produce softer droppings at night, which they then eat. Rabbits suffering from obesity or back problems may be unable to clean their droppings away from their tail area and are in danger of becoming fly blown in summer unless checked daily.

Pasturellosis

Rabbits have a bacteria living in their nasal sinuses called Pasturella. Whilst they do not cause a problem in a rabbit with a healthy immune system, stressful situations can result in these bacteria to multiplying rapidly causing Pasturellosis or “Snuffles”. This disease may affect the respiratory tract, uterus, skin, kidneys, bladder, tear ducts, middle ear or spine. Clinical signs depend on the location of the infection and include discharges from the eyes and nose, loss of appetite, lethargy, head tilt, loss of balance, paralysis and laboured breathing. The infection can only be controlled, not eliminated and early treatment is required.

Obesity

Obesity can lead to matted droppings and maggot infestations as well as fatty liver syndrome. Obesity is easier to prevent than treat and strict attention to diet and plenty of exercise are essential.

Some rabbit behaviours

- Allogrooming – rabbits grooming each other or their owners as a means to strengthen relationships between them
- Chin Rubbing – rabbits have scent glands under their chin that they rub on anything that doesn't smell like them to indicate the extent of their territory. This may be seen doing this in the home on new furniture or even their owners legs!
- Circling – Female rabbits circle male rabbits sometimes with grunting during courtship. Rabbits kept alone may exhibit this behaviour towards their owner.
- Foot thumping –wild rabbits thump their foot to alert the others of danger. Domestic rabbits may do this if they feel under threat.
- Fur Plucking – generally a sign of pregnancy or false pregnancy when a female plucks her own hair to line the nest. Domestic rabbits may also pull out their own hair or over groom a companion through stress or boredom.
- Growling – rabbits growl when they feel threatened.
- Teeth chattering or grinding may be a sign of pain or discomfort.