



Environment

Early socialisation of young rabbits affects how they respond to handling in later life. Rabbits that receive little handling at an early age, or rough handling at any age, may find human contact distressing. This can be expressed as fearfulness, escape behaviour and aggression. Regular, gentle handling from a young age can help rabbits learn to see humans as friends and companions.



Diet

Rabbits are naturally sociable and inquisitive animals. A good relationship with your rabbit can be rewarding for both you and your pet, particularly in easing the process of catching and transporting your animal, taking your rabbit for routine veterinary examinations and carrying out health checks. Being a prey species, rabbits are also on constant 'look out' for predators and their natural response to a perceived threat is to flee. Remember the only time they are picked up in the wild, apart from by their mother, is when they are about to be eaten by a predator! Correct handling is therefore important to ensure that your rabbit does not perceive you as a threat. Rabbits that are frightened may change their behaviour or develop unwanted behaviours such as aggression or hiding. Rabbits that are stressed are much more likely to become ill.



Behaviour

HANDLING YOUR RABBIT CORRECTLY

- You must move slowly and talk quietly around your rabbits, to avoid startling them. This will make any interactions less stressful and so potentially easier.
- Correct handling of rabbits is vital, as they have a fragile spine and if they feel insecure and struggle they can sustain serious, potentially fatal injuries such as fractures.
- To hold your rabbit correctly, you should hold him/her gently but firmly, ensure one hand supports your rabbit's back and hindquarters at all times and make your rabbit feels secure by having all four feet held against your body. Covering your rabbit's eyes (with a towel or in the crook of your arm) can help him/her to feel more relaxed, but you should ensure the nares (nostrils) are not obstructed.
- To reduce stress during handling and minimise the risk of injury, it is important to use the minimum effective level of restraint, according to the animal's temperament, health status and the procedure to be carried out.
- You must never pick your rabbit up by the ears. This would be extremely stressful and is highly likely to result in injury to your rabbit.
- Slippery surfaces should be avoided; for example, covering the veterinary examination table with a towel can help the rabbit feel more secure.
- Attempting to handle your rabbit from a standing position may scare him/her. Picking your rabbit up when you are positioned close to the ground is likely to be less



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Health and welfare



frightening for him/her and will reduce the risk of injury if your rabbit is accidentally dropped. We recommend that where possible, all interactions are carried out at ground level, as people are likely to be perceived as less threatening when in this position.

- Young children should be supervised at all times when interacting with rabbits, and ideally all interactions should take place at ground level. Only adults and responsible older children should be allowed to pick rabbits up, to reduce the risk of injury if the rabbit is mishandled or accidentally dropped.



If your rabbit shows any changes in behaviour, or shows regular signs of stress or fear (such as hiding or aggression), you should seek expert advice. It is important to get your rabbit checked by a vet first to rule out any form of illness or injury that could be causing the behaviour problem. Your vet can then refer you to a behaviour expert. Your rabbit's reaction to handling may also depend on his/her past handling experience, so patience will be needed to help your rabbit grow more confident and comfortable around people.

TRAINING YOUR RABBIT

Rabbits are intelligent and playful animals and can be taught a variety of tricks, including coming when called and going back to their cage on cue, which is a fun and less stressful method of catching your rabbit. Not only can training provide mental and physical stimulation for your rabbit, it can also enhance your bond with your pet.



- Only positive reward-based training methods, such as 'clicker training', should be used. Punishment techniques, such as shouting, must never be used, your rabbit is very unlikely to understand and can become more nervous or scared. If your rabbit's behaviour becomes an ongoing problem, seek expert advice from your vet and a behaviour expert as necessary.



- If you are inexperienced in rabbit training techniques, learn how to teach more basic commands first (such as encouraging a rabbit to come when called and rewarding him/her with a healthy treat) and see whether your rabbit responds to this positively, before attempting more complex activities. Consulting a behaviour expert may be useful in learning how to train your rabbit effectively.





Handling your rabbit

RSPCA COMPANION ANIMALS PET CARE FACTSHEET



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Health and welfare

OTHER USEFUL LINKS:

- **Rabbits' welfare needs:** www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits
- **Rabbit behaviour:** www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/pets/rabbits/behaviour
- **Rabbits' social needs:** www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/pets/rabbits/company
- **Find a vet:** www.rspca.org.uk/findavet
- **Find a behaviourist:** www.rspca.org.uk/findabehaviourist
- **Clicker training:** www.rabbitawarenessweek.co.uk/fun/how-to-clicker-train-your-rabbit

Links to the web pages of other organisations are provided for additional information only and do not imply any endorsement by the RSPCA of those organisations or of any content on the website.

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