



How to take care of your rabbits



If you are thinking of looking after rabbits, you've really researched their welfare needs and you're committed to taking care of them for the whole of their lives, please think about giving a home to some of the many rescue rabbits available for adoption at RSPCA animal centres across England and Wales.

There are no animals more deserving of loving owners, and we are always pleased to provide help and advice with choosing and caring for rabbits.

This booklet will help you find out what rabbits need to stay healthy and happy.



Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

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Owning and caring for rabbits can be great fun and very rewarding, but it's a big responsibility and a long-term commitment in terms of care and cost. If you own or are responsible for rabbits, even on a temporary basis, you are required by law to care for them properly.

The biology and behaviour of pet rabbits is very similar to that of wild rabbits. This means they have very complex needs and although traditionally thought of as good pets for children, this is not the case as they are not easy to look after well. Typically, rabbits live for 8-12 years, but some may live for longer.



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There is no one 'perfect' way to care for all rabbits because every rabbit and every situation is different. It's up to you how you look after your rabbits, but you must take reasonable steps to ensure that you meet all their needs.

Under the Animal Welfare Act, pet owners are legally obliged to care for their pets properly – as most owners already do – by providing the following five basic welfare needs.

- A suitable place to live.
- A healthy diet including fresh, clean water.
- The ability to behave normally.
- Appropriate company, including any need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals.
- Protection from pain, suffering, injury and disease.





Environment

Make sure your rabbits have a suitable place to live



Rabbits are active animals so they need to be able to hop, run, jump, dig, stand fully upright on their back legs, and stretch out fully when lying down. They need regular and frequent opportunities to exercise every day to stay fit and healthy, as well as an appropriate place to toilet.

To do all this, rabbits need lots of space – a well matched pair of medium-sized rabbits requires a living area where they can exercise and rest of at least three metres x two metres, and one metre high (groups of three or more rabbits and large/giant breeds will need larger accommodation). It can be difficult to buy purpose-built accommodation measuring these dimensions, but there's no reason why you can't build your own!

Many people are now using children's playhouses or sheds as rest areas for their rabbits and attaching them to a large secure area where they can exercise freely. Alternatively you can place a shelter within an exercise 'run'. For rabbits kept indoors,

their shelter could be an indoor pen or even a 'rabbit proofed' room in your house – you'll need to protect wires and cables by covering them or moving them out of reach as rabbits love to chew.

However you choose to house your rabbits, it's important their living area consists of an area where they can exercise and behave normally and a permanently attached main shelter where they feel safe and can rest together if they choose.

Giving rabbits permanent access to all areas of their accommodation (i.e. exercise area and shelter) provides them with the space they need to move about, as well as choice and control over their environment – so

they can perform the behaviours they want to, when they want to! Only if it is absolutely necessary should you secure rabbits in their shelter, preventing access to their exercise area. Rabbits are most active in the early morning and late afternoon, and overnight. This is when they like to graze, forage for food and be sociable, so ensure they can use a large area for exercising at these times in particular.

All areas of your rabbits' home must be well ventilated, dry and draught-free and they need to be protected from predators and extremes of weather and temperature. Living in draughty, damp, hot, poorly ventilated or dirty environments can cause suffering and illness.

Providing housing that meets your rabbits' complex environmental and behavioural needs is an important part of responsible ownership. A traditional small hutch is not

a suitable sole and permanent home for any rabbit as it will not meet their needs for exercise and stimulation and could cause health and behaviour problems.

Rabbits are inquisitive animals – they may easily injure themselves if there are hazards within their environment – so their home should be safe, secure and free from hazards.

Rabbits must be able to hide from things that scare them and – as they are a prey species – away from the sight and smell of predators such as foxes, cats, dogs, ferrets and birds of prey. So they need constant access to safe hiding places, as well as platforms from which they can scan their environment for threats. Rabbits are intelligent; if they are bored and do not have enough to do, they may suffer – see pages 14-17 for tips about toys and activities to keep your rabbits occupied.



Creature comforts

Your rabbits will need enough bedding to keep them comfortable and warm – it should be safe for them to eat so provide suitable insulating bedding materials such as dust-free hay and shredded paper.

They will also need regular (ideally constant) access to a suitable place where they can go to the toilet which should be separate to where they sleep.

If you provide litter trays, provide a tray for each of your rabbits (ideally, with one more in addition) and use absorbent materials such as newspaper, hay, shredded paper and/or paper-based, non-clumping, non-expanding cat litter.

House proud

Your rabbits' toilet area(s) should be cleaned every day. The whole home should be thoroughly cleaned regularly – approximately once a week. Cleaning is potentially stressful for rabbits so after cleaning, a small amount of the used but unsoiled bedding should be placed back into the toilet area and shelter as this will smell familiar to the rabbits and help to reduce the stress caused by cleaning.

Only non-toxic cleaning products should be used and the housing should be dry before the rabbits are replaced in it.

Holiday time

If you are going away, try to find someone to care for, and meet all your rabbits' welfare needs within their familiar home. If boarding your rabbits, try to ease the move by keeping paired/grouped rabbits together and leave them with familiar-smelling items, such as toys.

Transporting rabbits

When you transport your rabbits make sure they are comfortable and safe at all times. Putting familiar smelling items in the carrier and the new environment can help make your rabbits feel more at ease. Rabbits that live together and are friends should be transported together to give reassurance, and ensure the same scents are transferred to all rabbits, helping to avoid the potential problems associated with reintroducing rabbits after a period apart.



You can download an advice sheet on *Transporting rabbits* from:
www.rspca.org.uk/rabbitsenvironment



For information on the extra bedding and protection your rabbits need during the winter months, please download our *Winter care* advice sheet at:
www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits/health



We have lots of space in our secure, safe enclosure

We enjoy **relaxing** inside our **large shelter** but when we are active we like to **play, graze, and forage** for food so we love being able to go outdoors in our run, whenever we want to.



- 1 Our living shelter needs to be dry and protected from the wind and rain.
- 2 We eat lots and lots of hay and grass – using a rack above floor level helps our hay to stay clean.
- 3 We always need clean water to drink so, every morning and evening, please check we have a fresh supply.

- 4 We want to feel safe – we love having places to hide away and platforms to jump up on so we can check out what's going on around us.
- 5 We need to have some shade on a sunny day.

- 6 We love eating a handful of different leafy greens every day – cabbage, kale, and mint are some of our favourites!
- 7 We need each other for company but we also need you – please spend time with us so you can be sure we have everything we need to stay healthy and happy!

- 8 We need to have enough space to run around and we need to have lots of things to do – we'll get plenty of exercise and entertainment if we have a variety of safe toys, tunnels and cardboard boxes to play with.
- 9 We love to dig – a pit filled with child-friendly sand or earth is ideal.



Diet

Make sure your rabbits have a healthy diet

Rabbits are grazers and in the wild they eat only grass and other plants – in fact, your rabbits' digestive systems must have hay and/or grass in order to function properly.

Rabbits' teeth grow continuously throughout their life and need to be worn down and kept at the correct length and shape by eating grass, hay and leafy green plants – if they don't eat the right sorts of food they can suffer from serious dental disease. They produce two types of droppings – hard dry pellets, and softer moist pellets which they eat directly from their bottom and which are an essential part of their diet.

Rabbits tend to eat for long periods of time, mainly at dawn and dusk when they like to graze, forage for food and be sociable. How much an individual rabbit needs to eat depends on their age, lifestyle and general health. But if a rabbit eats more food than they need, they will become overweight and may suffer.



Food and drink

Your rabbits need fresh clean drinking water at all times – without access to water they can become seriously ill. Check their water supply twice a day and make sure it doesn't freeze if they live outdoors in winter.

Good quality hay and/or grass should make up the majority of your rabbits' diet and should be available at all times. Each rabbit needs at least a 'rabbit-sized' bundle of good quality hay every day which should be sweet-smelling and dust-free. Feeding some hay from a hay rack or hanging basket keeps it clean and above floor level. Placing a hay rack above your rabbits' litter tray may encourage them to eat more hay.

Find out which plants are safe to feed your rabbits. Offer them a variety of safe, washed leafy greens or weeds every day –



For more dietary advice, check out www.rspca.org.uk/rabbitdiet

ideally five or six different types. Safe plants include cabbage, kale, broccoli, parsley and mint. Don't feed them lawn mower clippings as these can upset their digestive system and make them ill. A rabbit's diet doesn't naturally include cereals, root vegetables or fruit but you can give them apples or root vegetables like carrots, in very small amounts as an occasional treat. Avoid feeding any other treats as these may harm your rabbits.

You can also feed a small, measured ration of good quality commercial rabbit nuggets to help to ensure your rabbits get a balanced diet, but remember that hay and/or grass are much more important and must be available at all times. Make sure that any nuggets you provide are high quality and contain high fibre levels.

If you feed nuggets, for a healthy adult rabbit, allow 25g (an egg cup-full) of nuggets per kg of each rabbit's body weight but take care to adjust the amount given according to individual rabbits' needs, based on their lifestyle, activity levels, age and state of health. Growing, pregnant, nursing or underweight rabbits may need a larger portion of nuggets. Make sure your rabbits have finished the whole portion before giving them more, i.e. don't keep topping up the bowl/food dispensers, as this may result in them not eating enough hay and/or grass.

Muesli-style foods are associated with health problems in rabbits and should not

be fed. Feeding muesli can increase the risk of rabbits developing serious teeth and tummy problems (including obesity), which can cause terrible suffering. If you currently feed muesli, you need to gradually transfer your rabbits onto a healthier diet. This change should be done slowly over 14-28 days to avoid potentially serious tummy upsets (the exact time-scale will depend on each individual animal). Mix a small amount of nuggets into their current food, gradually reducing the amount of muesli, until it has been completely replaced. Your vet can advise you on how to provide the best diet for each of your rabbits and how to safely transition them onto a hay, leafy greens and nugget based feeding plan.

Take note of the amount each rabbit eats and drinks every day, and watch out for any changes in an individual's eating, drinking or toileting habits. For example, if the number of droppings gets less or stops, or if there are soft droppings sticking to their back end, talk to your vet straight away as your rabbit could be seriously ill.

Don't make any sudden changes to your rabbits' diet – introduce new foods and make any necessary changes gradually to avoid upsetting their digestive systems. By keeping a careful eye on your rabbits you will be able adjust how much you feed them in order to make sure they don't become underweight or overweight.



For tips about how to provide your rabbits' food in interesting ways, visit: www.rspca.org.uk/rabbitsdietaryenrichment



Behaviour

Make sure your rabbits are able to behave normally



Rabbits are highly social, playful and inquisitive animals and need to interact and play with other friendly rabbits. Many rabbits also enjoy interacting with people through gentle petting and positive reward-based training (such as clicker training).

Rabbits need regular and frequent opportunities to exercise every day. Permanently attaching their main shelter and living enclosure gives rabbits choice and control over their environment and the ability to perform behaviours whenever they want. If permanent access to all areas of the accommodation really is not possible, provide access to a large exercise area during their most active periods (early morning, late afternoon and overnight).

The way a rabbit behaves will depend on their age, personality and past experiences but if one of your rabbits changes their behaviour, they could be distressed, bored, ill or injured. Rabbits that are frightened or in pain may change their behaviour

or develop unwanted habits, such as aggression or hiding. Signs that a rabbit may be suffering from stress or fear can include hiding, chewing cage bars, over-grooming, altered feeding or toileting habits, over-drinking or playing with the water bottle, sitting hunched, reluctance to move, and repeated circling of their enclosure.

Be observant. If your rabbit's behaviour changes or they show regular signs of stress or fear, talk to your vet or a qualified animal behaviourist. Never shout at or punish your rabbits – they are very unlikely to understand and may become more nervous or scared. If your rabbit's behaviour becomes an ongoing problem, talk to an expert.



For further information on finding a qualified animal behaviourist, take a look at the RSPCA website at: www.rspca.org.uk/findabehaviourist



RABBITS NEED TO HAVE LOTS TO DO

The size of your rabbits' home is very important, but what's in their enclosure is also key to their welfare. An interesting environment gives your rabbits mental and physical stimulation, which means that they are more likely to remain fit, healthy and happy as a result. You'll have fun too, spending time watching them exploring and enjoying themselves.

Hiding places and platforms

Remember, your rabbits must be able to hide from things that scare them (see page 7). They need to be able to hide in a secure place, away from the sight and smell of predators such as foxes, cats, dogs, ferrets and birds of prey.

Platforms allow rabbits to scan their environment for threats and can help them to feel safe. They can also help to build up a rabbit's physical fitness and bone strength, as jumping on and off a platform is an important weight-bearing exercise.

But if your rabbits have previously been kept in a restricted environment with little or no opportunity to exercise and jump onto objects, ask your vet for advice before providing platforms, so that you can make sure they don't injure themselves.



Find out more about the importance of providing constant access to hiding places at: www.rspca.org.uk/rabbitshidingplaces

Find out more about providing platforms at: www.rspca.org.uk/rabbitsplatforms

Play time

Toys allow rabbits to perform normal behaviours such as digging, chewing, chin marking and investigating. Different rabbits enjoy different types of toys, so try providing a variety of items until you find out which ones your rabbits like best!

Provide your rabbits with safe toys to play with and chew, and regular opportunities to play with other friendly rabbits and/or people. Rabbits tend to love the simple (and cheap!) things in life – here are a few suggestions for toys and objects that could be a hit with your bunnies:

PAPER shredded newspaper, paper bags with the handles removed and telephone directories (with the glossy covers removed). You could even bundle up your rabbits' favourite food item in brown paper as a parcel for them to unwrap!

CARDBOARD boxes with holes cut into them make great hiding places. Cardboard tubes can be stuffed with hay and healthy treats/part of their daily food ration.

TUNNELS plastic and fabric tunnels can be purchased commercially. Tunnels can also be made from cardboard boxes, cardboard tubes and large ceramic pipes (with a wide diameter).



You'll find lots more ideas for safe toys and objects that your rabbits may enjoy playing or interacting with at:

www.rspca.org.uk/rabbitstoys

Recognise and understand your rabbits' body language

A happy rabbit

These rabbits are relaxed and happy.

Rabbits 1–3 show ears close together, facing slightly backwards and pointing outwards. Eyes may be partially closed.

- 1 Rabbit is lying down, with a relaxed body posture and legs tucked under the body.



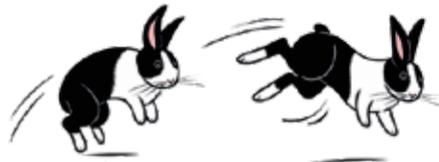
- 2 Rabbit is lying down, with front paws pointing forward and rear legs stuck out sideways. Body is relaxed and extended.



- 3 Rabbit is lying down with a fully extended, relaxed body. Back legs are stretched out behind the body and the front paws are pointing forward.



- 4 Rabbit jumps into the air with all four paws off the ground and twists in mid-air before landing.



A worried rabbit

These rabbits are telling you that they are uncomfortable and don't want you near them.

- 1 Rabbit is in a crouched position, muscles are tense, head held flat to the ground, ears wide apart and flattened against the back, pupils dilated.



- 2 Rabbits who are worried or anxious may hide.



An angry or very unhappy rabbit

These rabbits are not happy and want you to stay away or go away.

- 1 Rabbit turns and moves away flicking the back feet. Ears may be held against the back.



- 2 Rabbit is sitting up on back legs with front paws raised displaying boxing behaviour. Ears pointed upwards and facing outwards, rabbit may be growling.



- 3 Rabbit is standing tense, with back legs thumping on the ground. Tail raised, ears pointing upwards and slightly turned outwards, facial muscles are tense and pupils dilated.



- 4 Rabbit is standing tense with body down and weight towards the back, head tilted upwards, mouth open and teeth visible. Ears held back and lowered, tail raised, pupils dilated.



Digging and marking

Try to provide your rabbits with some form of 'digging box'. A large plant pot or litter tray filled with earth, a cardboard box filled with shredded paper or a sandpit filled with child-friendly sand provides a safe place for them to have fun.

Rabbits use scent as an important means of communication so provide objects and areas within your rabbits' home where they can scent mark using chin secretions, urine and droppings. This is a rabbit's way of marking their territory and making it smell familiar and reassuring to them. These scents are not detected or noticed by people

Safety first

Make sure any items you give your rabbits are safe and inspect them regularly to check for potential injury points. Repair, discard or replace any items that become damaged or dangerous. You should provide enough items for each rabbit to help prevent competition or monopolisation. Always ensure your rabbits can move away from a new object and keep a close eye on them when first giving new items. If they do appear stressed or frightened by a new item, remove it and watch their behaviour – talk to your vet if you're worried.

Regularly rotate the toys and objects that you give your rabbits to maintain their interest and prevent them from becoming bored. To make sure your rabbits get the most from the resources you provide, take a look at the RSPCA's advice on enrichment at: www.rspca.org.uk/rabbitenrichment



Company

Make sure your rabbits have appropriate company



Rabbits are naturally sociable and normally prefer to be with another rabbit. A rabbit left on their own can develop abnormal behaviour and may suffer if left without company and nothing to do for long periods of time.

So please keep your rabbit with at least one other friendly rabbit, unless advised otherwise by a vet or qualified animal behaviourist.

A good combination is a neutered male and a neutered female. It's best to get your rabbits neutered, unless they are intended for breeding and provisions have been made to care for both parents and offspring. Rabbits that are brought up together will usually get on with each other but, if introduced for the first time as adults, they may fight. Neutering reduces the likelihood of fighting in both male and female rabbits, and has other benefits (see page 21).

Rabbits kept together will naturally form a 'pecking order' with some animals being more dominant than others. A rabbit can be bullied if they cannot get away from other rabbits that they don't like. So make sure all your rabbits have constant access to places they can go to get away from each other if they want to and that there are enough hiding places for all your rabbits at all times.

Introduce new rabbits gradually and under supervision, preferably in a space that is new to both rabbits. Always talk to a qualified animal behaviourist if you are unsure or have problems.



For more information on introducing unfamiliar rabbits visit:
www.rspca.org.uk/bondingrabbits

Hands on

If you take the time to handle your rabbits regularly they will learn to see you as a friend and companion, so handle them gently every day from an early age. To hold your rabbits correctly, you should pick them up gently but firmly, making sure that one hand supports their back and hindquarters at all times and that they feel secure by having all four feet held against your body.

Avoid holding rabbits on their backs – this is actually a stressful experience for them.

For more detailed advice on how to handle and train your rabbits, visit www.rspca.org.uk/handlingrabbits. If you are unsure how to handle your rabbits, please ask your vet or a qualified animal behaviourist for advice.

If your rabbit has to be kept on their own for some reason it's especially important that you interact positively with them every day to provide companionship.

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. If you are concerned about your rabbit's behaviour, speak to your vet for advice. It's important to get your rabbit checked by a vet first to rule out any 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 is likely to depend on their past handling experience, so patience will be needed to help them grow more confident and comfortable around people.



IN GOOD COMPANY

When you are away, make sure your rabbits are cared for by a responsible person. Never leave your rabbits unsupervised with another animal or person who may (deliberately or accidentally) harm or frighten them.

Rabbits will usually be scared of cats and dogs because they are natural predators, but if introduced to them carefully, early in life, they can develop friendships. Never leave your rabbits unsupervised with a cat or dog, even if you know they are good friends.

Rabbits and guinea pigs have different needs so keeping them together is not advised. The best companion for a rabbit is another friendly rabbit.

For further information, including advice on what to do if you already have a rabbit and guinea pig living together visit:
www.rspca.org.uk/rabbitsandguineapigs



Health and welfare

Make sure your rabbits are protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease



Rabbits feel pain in the same way as other mammals, including people, but they are not very good at showing outward signs of pain and may be suffering a great deal before you notice anything is wrong.

A change in the way a rabbit normally behaves can be an early sign they are ill or in pain. If a rabbit is not eating or is more quiet than usual, they are highly likely to be ill, or in pain, in which case you should talk to your vet immediately.

Rabbits are vulnerable to many infectious diseases and other illnesses, especially dental disease. They can catch deadly infectious diseases from wild rabbits so you should prevent your rabbits from having

contact with wild rabbits or areas where wild rabbits have been.

Some breeds of rabbit have been selected for exaggerated physical features which can cause them to suffer and reduce their quality of life, while certain breeds are particularly prone to inherited disorders and diseases.

Feeding your rabbit the correct diet of mainly hay and/or grass will help prevent a lot of common diseases such as dental and gut disease.

Health check

Before deciding to buy/acquire rabbits, make sure you find out how they have been bred, what they have been fed and how they have been cared for. Also, check out if any of them have had (or may be prone to) any health or behaviour problems before you take them on and always ask a vet for advice if you are unsure about anything.

You should also think about taking out pet insurance so you'll be covered for unexpected vets' bills in the future and safeguard your pets' health. A one-off payment for microchipping your rabbit means you are more likely to be quickly reunited if they go missing and they will receive prompt veterinary care if injured.

The RSPCA also advises that you get your rabbits neutered, unless they are intended for breeding and provisions have been made to care for both parents and

offspring. Unneutered female rabbits are at a high risk of developing cancer of the womb, and unneutered rabbits are more likely to fight if kept together. If you are thinking of allowing your rabbits to breed, talk to your vet to make sure they are suitable for breeding in terms of their health and personalities and to get advice on how to care for the parents and offspring.

Feeding your rabbits the correct diet of mainly hay and/or grass will help prevent a lot of common diseases such as dental and gut disease. Check that your rabbits are eating every day and that they are passing plenty of dry droppings. If your rabbit's eating or drinking habits change or the number of droppings gets less or stops, talk to your vet straight away as they could be seriously ill.



Health checklist

- **Make sure your rabbits are vaccinated regularly – take them for a routine health check with your vet at least once a year.** Vaccinations protect them against myxomatosis and Rabbit (Viral) Haemorrhagic Disease (R(V)HD) There is also a vaccine available to protect against R(V)HD2, which is a new strain of the disease. Your vet will advise how often your rabbits should be vaccinated.
 - **Rabbits that are stressed are much more likely to become ill** so try to minimise unnecessary stress, provide constant access to safe hiding places and watch to see if their behaviour changes or they show regular signs of stress or fear, in which case, seek advice from your vet or a qualified animal behaviourist.
 - **Check your rabbits for signs of illness or injury every day.** Make sure this is done by someone else if you are away.
 - **In warm weather check the fur and skin around your rabbits' rear end and tail area twice a day,** as urine staining or droppings that are stuck will attract flies, which can lay eggs and cause 'flystrike', which is often fatal.
 - **Front teeth and nails should be checked at least once a week** as these can grow quickly but only a vet should correct overgrown or misaligned teeth.
 - **Give your rabbits treatment for external and internal parasites** (e.g. fleas and worms) as necessary, as advised by your vet.
 - **Only use medicines that have been specifically recommended for your individual rabbit by a vet** – some medicines used for other animals can be very dangerous to rabbits.
 - **Groom your rabbits' coats regularly to keep them in good condition.** If you are unsure how to groom your rabbits properly, ask your vet for advice.
- Consult your vet immediately if you suspect your rabbit is in pain, ill or injured.**

Poisoning

Never 'watch and wait' in any case of suspected poisoning. If you think your rabbit has been poisoned, act fast and contact a vet for advice immediately.

Some of the most common, potentially severe rabbit poisons are rodent poisons ('rodenticides'), ivy, rhubarb, foxgloves

and glyphosphate herbicide products. Preventing your rabbit from coming into contact with poisonous substances and treating any accidental poisonings quickly and appropriately are an important part of responsible pet ownership.



For more detailed advice on what to do if you think your rabbit has been poisoned and how to prevent poisonings go to: www.rspca.org.uk/poisoning

Find out more...

Rabbits are amazing animals with complex needs that must be met if they are to be kept healthy and happy.

There's loads more to learn about rabbits on the RSPCA website – from our rabbit factfile to detailed advice sheets on various aspects of rabbit care. So make sure you visit www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits

