



## House rabbits

RSPCA COMPANION ANIMALS PET CARE FACTSHEET



### Keeping rabbits indoors

The keeping of rabbits as indoor pets is still relatively uncommon, but many rabbit owners are realising they can develop a deeper and more rewarding relationship with a rabbit kept indoors. One reason for this is that we tend to spend more time with our pets if they are in the warmth of our homes than if we keep them in the garden. Increasingly people are moving their rabbits into the home to improve their relationship whilst potentially also increasing the rabbits' health and mental wellbeing (through more frequent health observations and more positive interactions).



The RSPCA is not against rabbits being kept in the home, provided this is right for the individual rabbit(s) concerned, the rabbit's individual needs are met, and the rabbit is healthy and happy. Rabbits' five basic welfare needs (as outlined on our website at [www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits](http://www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits)) must be met however they are kept, including the need to protect them from hazards, and this may require some additional thought before acquiring rabbits or bringing them into the home.



Each rabbit is an individual and so the decision of whether to keep a particular rabbit in the home must be made based on the animal's temperament, previous lifestyle and experience, and whether the owner feels able to meet the rabbit's needs within the home - i.e. the owner must decide whether it is in the best interests of the individual rabbit(s) concerned.

### **Safety and wellbeing**

A key issue to consider is safety. There is no 'perfect' way to do all this, as every rabbit, owner and situation is different, but owners must ensure rabbits are safe and protected from hazards. All areas that the rabbits will have access must be fully rabbit-proofed (e.g. electric cables and wires should be covered and/or put out of reach, access to dangerous areas (such as near the oven in the kitchen) should be prevented/blocked off, houseplants should be non-toxic or placed out of reach where petals (etc) will not fall into areas the rabbits have access to. (For more information on preventing accidental poisoning, please see: [www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/pets/rabbits/health/poisoning](http://www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/pets/rabbits/health/poisoning)). It's advisable that owners supervise rabbits when they are let out of their secure enclosure/room.



You should consider how to gradually get rabbits used to common household sights, noises, sounds and smells, if they have not previously been kept inside. If necessary, seek expert help in helping rabbits adapt to an indoor environment, from a rabbit expert, such as staff at a rescue centre, a vet knowledgeable about rabbits or a qualified animal behaviourist. There are lots of stimuli which could be stressful and/or frightening for rabbits, such as noisy/flashing household appliances (e.g. the vacuum cleaner, washing machine, TV, stereo) and increased contact with people and other household pets.



You should also ensure that if you have other pets, they will not harm/frighten the rabbits. Rabbits will usually be scared of cats and dogs because they are their natural predators, but if



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introduced to them carefully early in life they can develop friendships. Never leave your rabbits unsupervised with another animal or person who may (deliberately or accidentally) harm or frighten them. Never leave your rabbits unsupervised with a cat or dog, even if you know they are good friends.

#### **Enclosure**

Rabbits will need a large, safe enclosure in a quiet part of your home. This enclosure must include a main shelter and a large, secure exercise area, with additional hiding places. This could be a large, adapted dog pen/crate, a large hutch & run complex or a rabbit-proofed room (with at least one shelter to act as a sleeping/resting area). This provides the rabbit with a safe, familiar place to rest. If the rabbits are to be kept in this enclosure when you are not around to supervise them, it must be large enough & interesting enough for the rabbit to be able to behave normally, exercise and play. The floor of the rabbits' enclosure (and ideally all areas the rabbits have access to) should be non-slip – please note that shiny/polished laminated flooring and tiles can be slippery and therefore stressful for rabbits, so should be covered/avoided in areas the rabbits have access to, where possible. When the rabbits first move into the home, we suggest that they are left within their enclosure for at least 48 hours to allow them time to acclimatise to the sounds and smells of the new environment, whilst feeling safe. This will also help rabbits get used to where their litter trays are located (if provided) and assist in litter training.



#### **Opportunities to graze and dig**

Ideally house rabbits should have daily access to a secure outside enclosure (with a main shelter & hiding places), where they can exercise, dig and graze on growing grass. Owners should think about how to provide for needs which cannot easily be met inside the home, including grazing and digging. Provision of kiln-dried grass and growing grass in trays/pots will allow rabbits to show normal grazing behaviour. Providing opportunities to dig (in suitable places) should also be encouraged, e.g. by giving rabbits a 'dig box' filled with earth or child-safe play sand. If rabbits are provided with suitable toys and activities (which are regularly rotated to avoid boredom) they will be less likely to chew/dig furniture. Owners may need to prevent access/use welfare-friendly deterrents (such as covering table legs with a safe material) to protect valuable furniture. More ideas about enrichment and guidance on how best to provide it can be found at: [www.rspca.org.uk/rabbitenrichment](http://www.rspca.org.uk/rabbitenrichment).



#### **Litter training**

Rabbits are intelligent and can be taught to respond to commands via clicker training. They can also be litter trained. In the wild rabbits naturally create 'latrine' areas for urine and droppings and these are used to communicate with other rabbits and mark territory, so rabbits will often choose a particular corner(s) of their home to use as a toilet. The toilet area(s) should be separate to where rabbits' sleep. Rabbits may need to be confined to their enclosure area while they are being litter trained. Adding some used litter material and droppings to the trays will help rabbits learn to toilet in these areas. Adding a hay rack above the litter tray(s) may encourage the rabbits to eat more hay. We advise that you provide at least one tray per rabbit (with ideally one more in addition). Suitable litter materials are outlined on our Environment webpage





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([www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/pets/rabbits/environment](http://www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/pets/rabbits/environment)) and the downloadable housing advice factsheet.

#### **Companionship benefits**

Potential benefits of keeping rabbits in the house include increased human companionship for rabbits, as owners are more likely to spend time with the rabbits if they are within their own home. Another potential benefit is that due to the increased contact rabbits have with their owners, owners may be more likely to notice, or notice earlier when something is wrong (i.e. spot symptoms of illness/injury or changes in behaviour).



For rabbits that are fearful of humans (e.g. under-socialised rabbits, such as some rescue rabbits), being in the home could be extremely stressful, particularly if they were used to living outdoors previously, so being house rabbits might not be in the best interests of such animals (although we would advise that owners of such rabbits work with a qualified animal behaviourist ([www.rspca.org.uk/findabehaviourist](http://www.rspca.org.uk/findabehaviourist)) to gradually build the rabbit's confidence around people).



The RSPCA advises that all rabbits (whether kept inside or outside) should be kept in compatible, neutered pairs/groups (unless a vet/qualified behaviourist advises otherwise), as rabbits are highly social animals and most rabbits prefer to be with another friendly rabbit. A good combination is a neutered male and neutered female of similar age and size, ideally that have grown up together. Unfamiliar rabbits should be introduced gradually, under owner supervision, in a space that is new to both rabbits. Advice should be sought from a vet or qualified animal behaviourist if owners are unsure how to introduce unfamiliar rabbits or have problems.



#### **FURTHER INFORMATION:**

- For an overview of rabbits' welfare needs, please visit: [www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits](http://www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits) and click on each welfare need (Environment, Diet, Behaviour, Company, Health & welfare). Rabbits' five welfare needs remain the same however rabbits are kept, so they apply to house rabbits as well as those kept outside.
- More detailed care advice is provided under our welfare need webpage, including information & ideas for enrichment: [www.rspca.org.uk/rabbitenrichment](http://www.rspca.org.uk/rabbitenrichment), an overview of the recommended diet for rabbits and common diet myths: [www.rspca.org.uk/rabbitdiet](http://www.rspca.org.uk/rabbitdiet).
- The factsheets on current rabbit housing advice (on the Environment webpage) and rabbit winter care advice (on Health webpage) contain sections with care advice specific to house rabbits, including keeping them safe and the best ways to go about bringing outdoor rabbits into the home.
- The Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund (RWF) website ([www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk](http://www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk)) also contains advice regarding house rabbits' needs, litter training, etc. Their 'Information, leaflets & advice section' contains leaflets and factsheets and their magazine 'Rabbiting on' contains lots of articles on house rabbits. The RWF care booklet (available on their website) 'Hop to it' also contains information on caring for house rabbits and deciding whether to keep rabbits inside or outside.





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