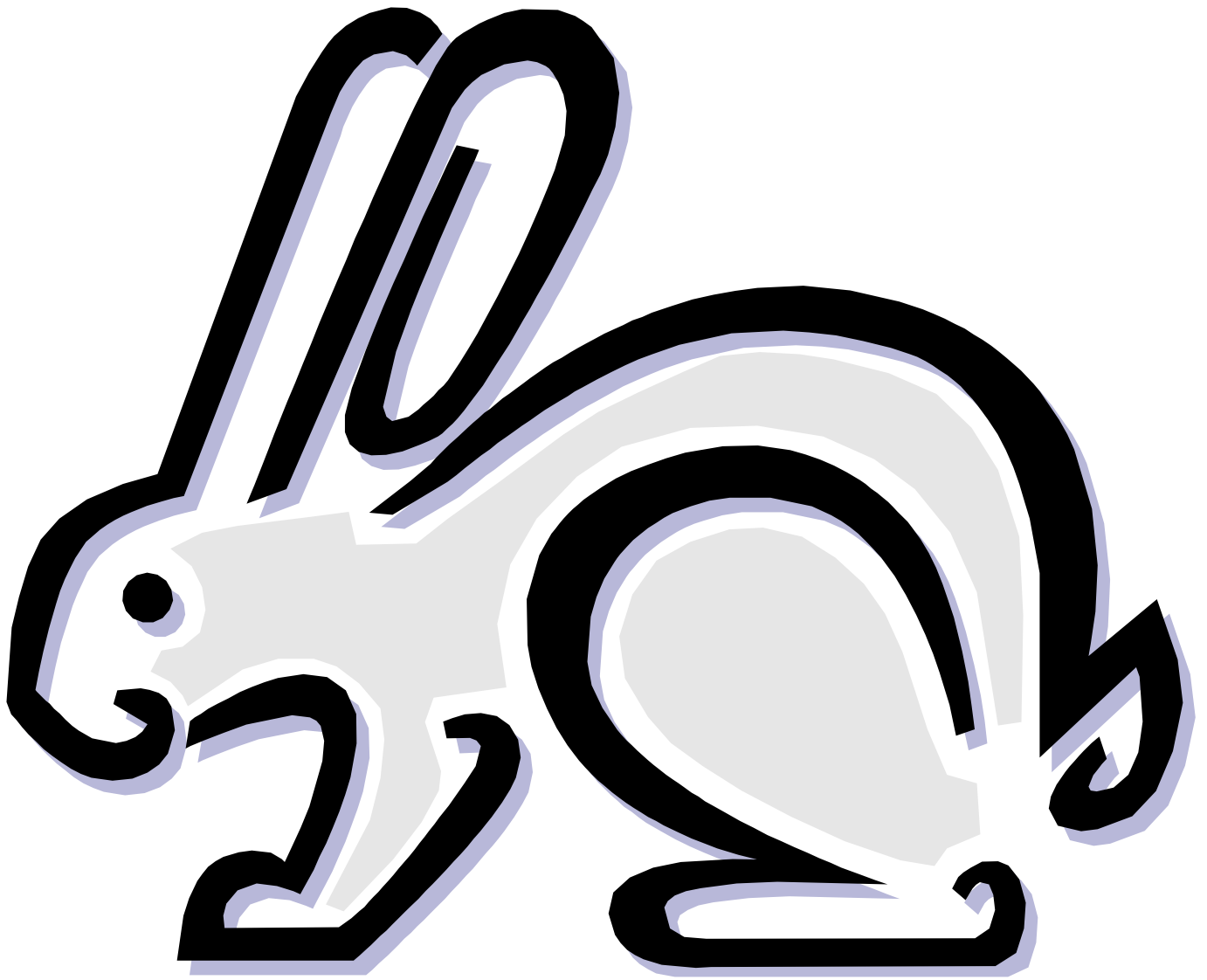


How to care for your rabbit



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Hopefully this information will answer some of the questions you may have about your new rabbit.

Breed: English

Housing

Rabbits need plenty of room to hop around and stand up on their back legs, and this can only be provided with a suitably sized hutch and run. They will grow into medium-sized rabbits, weighing around 3 kg (6-7 lb). As adults, the hutch should enable him/her to be able to take three hops lengthways and be wide enough for him/her to stretch out and tall enough for him/her to stand up on their back legs. Many hutches sold in pet shops are meant for small rabbits weighing 3-5 lb, and will be unsuitable for these bunnies. A single rabbit will need a minimum hutch size of 120 cm long by 60 cm wide by 60 cm tall, as well as access to a daily run. The run should be at least 120 cm by 90 cm to allow your rabbit to get plenty of exercise, you may need to put wire on the bottom of the run if he/she starts to burrow!

If rabbits are kept in cramped conditions, they suffer chronic stress resulting in serious debilitating respiratory, eye, bone and skin conditions. Access to a large run that can be moved around is essential. Rabbits can be kept outside all year round if given adequate bedding and housing. Provision of a blanket or tarpaulin over the hutch on really cold nights in winter, and a sheet over the hutch for shade on hot days is a good idea. Rabbits can be allowed out into their run throughout the year, but if the grass becomes too wet in the winter, the run should be moved onto a patio or other hard-standing area. They can cope with cold weather, but not damp or draughts, so ensure the hutch has a sloping roof and an overhang at the front and sides to prevent rain from getting inside.

Caution! When you put your rabbit onto the grass in its run for the first time each year, make sure that you only let him/her out for a short time to allow his/her digestive system to get used to eating a lot of grass again - even adult rabbits can suffer with diarrhoea if allowed to suddenly eat a lot of grass.

Even free-range house or garden rabbits will need a hutch/pen to go into should they wish. If you have a free-range garden rabbit, there are undoubtedly more risks with regards to predation, toxic plants and escape, but organised carefully it can provide an excellent quality of life. Alternatively it is becoming increasingly popular to keep rabbits as house pets as they can be easily house trained. They often receive more exercise and stimulation than usual this way, and can even cohabit well with cats and dogs. It may take a long time for you to train your dog to get used to your rabbit, and certain breeds, e.g. terriers would probably never learn that they are not food!

Do not be tempted to buy a guinea pig as company for your rabbit, as the rabbit will grow to be much bigger than a guinea pig and could seriously hurt the guinea pig with his/her back legs or teeth! Also, guinea pigs cannot be fed rabbit food as they need Vitamin C added to their food, and although guinea pig food can be fed to rabbits, it will not be as good for them.

Rabbits will only get on with each other if they have been neutered, are litter sisters or mother and daughter, but even then they may fight. If this happens you must separate them or have them both neutered - see page 6.

Bedding and cleaning out the hutch

Sawdust should be used on the floor of the hutch, with hay provided for bedding in the sleeping compartment. Plenty of fresh hay should always be available as this is an essential part of your rabbit's diet. We do not use straw as it is of little nutritional value and because it is very coarse it can injure the rabbit's eyes, etc. Rabbits are naturally very clean animals and will usually choose one corner of the hutch to use as their toilet area. It is then possible to provide a tray in this place and empty it regularly. Some of our rabbits use a tray in the run and don't mess in the hutch at all! It is possible to house train a rabbit if you want to keep it indoors. Regular cleaning of the dirty areas of the hutch and replacement of soiled bedding will be necessary at least once a week. Hutch cleaning sprays are available to kill germs and keep the hutch smelling fresh.

We give our rabbits plastic balls and plastic flower pots to throw around and balls which you can fill with pellets which have a small opening to allow them to fall out when the rabbit nudges the ball around - they soon learn how to get the food out! You can also buy willow rings and balls for them to chew.

Handling

It is very important to handle your rabbit as much as possible in order for it to remain tame. Your rabbit has been handled regularly since birth. Rabbits should be lifted and carried carefully, making sure the back legs are supported. If a rabbit does not feel secure, it will struggle. Never pick them up by the ears or scruff of the neck! Rabbits often do not appreciate being restrained and may not be suitable for small children to handle, often inflicting scratches. A daily inspection of your rabbit is vital, as many diseases are treatable only in the early stages and handling will enable you to detect early symptoms such as sore hocks, diarrhoea, skin problems, etc.

On bringing your rabbit to his/her new home it is best to leave him/her to settle into his/her new surroundings without further disturbance until the following morning, making sure there is plenty of food and water available. This will help your rabbit to adjust to its new environment and help prevent the move from being too stressful.

Feeding

Young rabbits are extremely vulnerable to gastrointestinal upsets and need careful, consistent feeding.

Dry food / pellets

Your rabbit is presently fed on Burgess Supa Excel Rabbit pellets. These are available in 2, 4 or 10 kg bags from most good pet shops. There are a range of more colourful rabbit foods available that contain a muesli-type mix of food. We do not feed these as rabbits tend to pick out their favourite bits and leave what they do not like, meaning that they are not getting a balanced diet, may develop teeth problems and food will also be wasted. While they are growing they should receive a large handful of pellets twice a day, this will be until they are around six months old (fully grown). From then on the amount of food should be reduced to just what the rabbit will clear in 30-45 minutes. Feeding ad-lib will lead to a very fat / unhealthy rabbit! Provide dry food in heavy bowls which the rabbit cannot easily tip over.

If you do decide to give a different dry food from the one we use, this must be done very gradually over a 10 day period, mixing 10% of the new food to 90% of the pellets we have provided on day one, increasing the amount of new food by 10% each day until the diet has been changed over.

Hay

This is a very important part of your rabbit's diet, accounting for up to 75% of your rabbit's daily food intake. Make sure hay is available all the time (ideally in a hay rack to keep it fresh and clean). **Like horses, rabbits need hay that is not too fresh - at least six months old, otherwise you will encounter digestive problems.** It is also possible to feed Burgess Supa Forage or Spillers Readigrass which is chopped dry grass - useful in the winter when no fresh grass is available.

Green food

Your rabbit has been gradually introduced to fresh-cut grass, spring greens, apple and carrots, receiving small quantities of some of these each day. Feed hand cut grass rather than that from lawn cutting (from a lawn mower) as it may contain oil. Make sure that if you collect grass from fields, etc. that it has not been contaminated by dogs or other animals and that there are no poisonous plants in the grass, as rabbits cannot tell what is poisonous and what is OK. It is possible to introduce a wider range of green food, e.g. dandelions, celery, etc. but as he/she will never have had these before, only give a very small portion to begin with. It is a good idea to wash green food before feeding it to your rabbit.

Be aware that when you first put a young rabbit out in its run on the lawn, you will need to limit the time it spends eating grass, otherwise you could get problems with diarrhoea. This will also be true when you put your adult rabbit out on the lawn for the first time each year.

Poisonous plants

Foodstuffs to avoid include lettuce (will give your rabbit bad diarrhoea), ivy, buttercups, honeysuckle, potato leaves, tomato leaves, rhubarb, live fruit tree material, too much spinach, lawn mowings (hand cut grass is fine), toxic plants, e.g. foxgloves, plants which grow from bulbs, e.g. bluebells, daffodils, tulips, crocuses, sugary treats and mouldy food.

Water

Your rabbit is used to drinking from a water bottle rather than a bowl. The water should be changed regularly and in winter you will need to check that it doesn't freeze. If your rabbit suddenly stops drinking or starts to drink excessively, it can indicate a health problem. The same is true for food as well.

If you are going away for a day or two, it is possible to leave the rabbit behind as long as the hutch is well stocked with pellets, hay and green food as well as extra water. In winter you may need to get someone to come and check that the bottles are not frozen.

Health

Routine care

When handling your rabbit, things to keep a check on are:

Ears - any waxy deposit, head shaking, etc.

Eyes - discharge or inflammation

Mouth - dribbling, overgrown teeth

Nose - discharge, sneezing

Fur - scratching, signs of parasites such as fur mites

Tail area - should be clean and dry - beware fly strike!

Claws - these will need to be trimmed as they grow continuously. I will have cut them just before you pick your rabbit up, but they will need trimming every few months. It is possible to do this yourself with a pair of nail clippers. Cut the top of the claw off, taking great care not to cut the quick as it will be very painful and bleed a lot. It is easy to see the pink coloured quick in rabbits with white claws, more difficult with dark claws. We can show you how to do this rather than you having to pay for it to be done at the vet!

Common Diseases

Diarrhoea

This may be caused by a sudden dietary change, a low fibre diet, many infectious organisms and stress. The normal gut flora has a delicate balance and the smallest dietary change can allow nasty bacteria to gain advantage and take over, some producing toxins which can lead to flystrike, dehydration and death. All new food should be very gradually introduced and a high fibre diet should be provided.

Tooth Problems

This is one of the most common problems and can occur at any age. The signs to watch for include dribbling, fur loss under the chin, weight loss, and difficulty eating hard foods.

There are many different causes, the most common being poor breeding and nutrition. This condition may only affect the front teeth initially, and can be easily seen as brittle, curly teeth growing at an abnormal angle. However in more advanced cases the back teeth also become affected, developing sharp spurs that grow into the side of the tongue or cheeks. This cannot be easily seen but the other symptoms may be recognised instead. It is relatively straightforward to keep trimming the front teeth if they alone are affected, but if the back teeth are involved this may require repeated general anaesthetics. In the most severely affected individuals the back tooth roots can start to grow up into the eye sockets or down through the bottom jaw giving rise to eye problems or abscesses, and these animals have a very guarded outlook. It is important to choose a baby rabbit

carefully from a reputable breeder who is aware of tooth problems and has not had a problem with this. You should look for someone giving good dietary advice. Thereafter you should provide a diet high in fibre as detailed above, to try to prevent this distressing problem.

Hairballs

A low fibre diet can also predispose a rabbit to over-chew on its own fur, which can become impacted in the stomach leading to loss of appetite, weight loss and reduced number of faeces. Grooming of your rabbit when it is moulting will help to prevent the formation of hairballs.

Flystrike

This is a distressing problem of the summer months. Any soiling of the rabbit's rear will attract blowflies to lay their eggs in the fur. These can hatch into maggots within 12 hours, which will then burrow into the skin causing the rabbit great distress, and life threatening damage. It is therefore particularly important to check your rabbit over AT LEAST ONCE A DAY, especially in summer and this means looking underneath and around the tail area for any evidence of diarrhoea or little white eggs stuck to the fur. Any soiling MUST be quickly washed away and the fur dried again. It is also an idea to consider draping mosquito netting over the enclosure in the summer to keep flies out.

Pasteurellosis

Known as 'snuffles', this often has symptoms such as conjunctivitis or breathing problems but may also show as sudden balance problems or abscesses. The bacterium responsible lives in the respiratory tract of most healthy rabbits anyway and only causes disease in some individuals. As the organism is impossible to eradicate, the only prevention is to ensure that everything about the rabbit's care and environment is as good as it can be, particularly with regards to hygiene.

Myxomatosis

This is a viral infection spread by rabbit fleas (and not therefore requiring direct contact with wild rabbits) which, after an incubation period of 1 - 2 weeks produces puffy swellings of the eyelids and genitalia, a discharge from the eyes and nose, blindness and pneumonia. It sometimes mimics other diseases such as conjunctivitis in the early stages. Recovery is extremely rare.

The disease is preventable by vaccination which can be done from six weeks of age onwards, and requires a booster injection annually. (In areas of high risk it may be appropriate to increase this vaccination to twice a year.) The best time of year for the injection would ideally be May/June, giving the best protection over the summer months when the disease is at its worst.

Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD)

This viral disease is relatively new in Britain. It is spread by direct contact with infected rabbits and also indirectly via food, hands, insects etc.

The signs of illness include bleeding, convulsions, coma and death. The incubation period is 12 hours to three days and it is usually fatal. **The disease is preventable by vaccination** from 10 weeks old, requiring an annual booster. However, at the moment it cannot be given at the same time as the other injection, so a return visit is required for the VHD shot, at least 14 days apart from the myxomatosis shot. It may be convenient to have the myxomatosis injection in the spring and the VHD injection in the autumn, allowing a twice yearly check up to be performed.

Neutering

Reasons for neutering does:

Prevention of uterine cancer (some statistics suggest that as many as 80% of entire does may develop uterine cancer in later life).

To eliminate aggression which may develop at puberty.

To eliminate false pregnancy.

To prevent spraying if kept indoors.

Prevention of pregnancy if kept with male and fighting if kept with another female.

The best age is at about six months old.

Reasons for neutering bucks:

To prevent pregnancy if kept with a doe.

To reduce aggression.

To prevent spraying if kept indoors.

The best age is at around four months old.

Remember that bucks may still be fertile for about a month after castration.

Anaesthetic considerations:

It is generally appreciated that rabbits are more problematical to anaesthetise than many other animals, and unfortunately have a higher anaesthetic death rate (around 3.5 - 4.0%) compared to dogs and cats (0.25%). Although this risk is still very small it does need to be considered. The reasons for this increased risk are as follows;

There may be pre-existing pneumonia without the rabbit ever having shown clinical signs. In combination with the rabbit's particularly narrow airways this can produce breathing difficulties under anaesthesia.

Observation of these patients is not always as good as it might be and sometimes rabbits may inevitably be over or underweight when presented for surgery.

Rabbits are unusually susceptible to stress and the huge surge of adrenaline they produce when stressed can affect the heart.

Having said this, rabbit anaesthesia is safer than it has ever been before, with improved knowledge and skill and state-of-the-art anaesthetics. We had a male rabbit castrated when he was around 10 months old with no problems whatsoever - he was eating and acting as normal within a couple of days.

Recommended books

Rabbitlopaedia by Virginia Richardson and Meg Brown

The Really Useful Bunny Guide by Carolina James

All About your Rabbit by Bradley Viner

Useful Addresses

Fur and Feather Magazine

(Printing for Pleasure Ltd)

Elder House

Chattisham

Ipswich

Suffolk

IP8 3QE

Tel: 01473 652 789

British House Rabbit Association

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NE99 IFA

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British Rabbit Council

Purefoy House

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Nottinghamshire

NG24 IAD

Tel: 01636 76042

www.thebrc.org

Rabbit Welfare Association

PO Box 603

Horsham

RH13 5WL

01403 267658

www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk

If you have any further questions, we would be happy to help!

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(If you email me pictures of your rabbit in his/her new home, I can put them on my website!)