

RABBIT CARE GUIDE

Owning rabbits is great fun and very rewarding, but it is a big responsibility and a long-term commitment.

Did you know rabbits live on average 8 – 12 years?

Providing for all your rabbits' needs is the best way of ensuring their physical and mental wellbeing, resulting in a long, healthy life. Here are some guidelines for offering your rabbits the best care:



Provide a suitable and stimulating living environment



Our housing requirements aim to ensure the best welfare standards for rabbits and follow the Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund (RWF) guidelines. Our team are happy to offer advice when purchasing or adapting your set-up to provide the best home before adopting.

Outdoor rabbits need constant access to a secure, predator-proof enclosure measuring at least 10ft x 6ft x 3ft (equivalent of 60sqft). Within this enclosure there should be an indoor area measuring a minimum of 6ft x 2ft x 2ft where they can hide from predators and shelter from poor weather. This could be provided in the form of a hutch, shed or Wendy house. The indoor area should be inside the run or permanently



attached; rabbits are crepuscular meaning they are most active at dawn and dusk and need to be able to access their exercise areas during this time. All external doors should be locked using bolts, as swivel clips or latches are not predator proof.

Predator proof runs can be bought or constructed at home using good quality wood and 12–16-gauge welded wire or aviary panels, these should be attached securely to the hutch and other runs to prevent predators from moving the enclosure for access. 12g wire is rat and predator proof, 16g is predator proof – any gauge over 16 is not strong enough to stop predators biting through. For added security, using a skirt of mesh, metal grids or paving slabs around the perimeter of the enclosure, this will prevent predators from digging into the enclosure. Using the same method on the inside of the enclosure will also reduce the chances of rabbits digging out.



Rabbits need space to run, jump, stretch, and stand upright on their back legs so it is important to have an enclosure high enough to allow for these behaviours (3ft). Outdoor enclosures should be weather proofed to ensure sleeping areas

do not become wet or the enclosure becomes waterlogged. Rabbits can be housed outdoors all year, providing they have been given the chance to grow a winter coat before the cold weather starts. Heat pads can be provided during the winter months, however, having a rabbit companion acts like a hot water bottle!



Indoor rabbits also need to be provided with a space of at least 10ft x 6ft x 3ft (equivalent of 60sq ft), this could be in the form of free-roaming rabbit proof room/s or providing a secure pen. Rabbit proofing requires removing or covering up any wires, moving any objects that could cause injury to a rabbit and putting house plants out of reach. It is important to remember that digging and chewing are natural rabbit behaviours, this could include chewing walls and digging up carpets! Providing appropriate outlets for these behaviours can reduce any “destructive” behaviours however rabbits have the potential to cause damage to household furnishings

and this should be kept in mind when considering housing rabbits inside.

House rabbits can be provided outdoor access to a secure, predator proof run during the warmer weather but this should be avoided during the colder months. Moving rabbits between extreme temperatures and to new environments can result in stress and illness.

Whether your rabbits are kept indoors or outdoors, there are a few essential things they will require in their enclosures, such as hay-filled litter trays, tunnels, and hides. All rabbits should be provided with the opportunity to express their natural behaviours, this includes items for chewing (safe, pesticide-free branches) and providing dig boxes filled with topsoil or chipped cardboard.

Your rabbits’ bedding needs to be spot cleaned daily to prevent health issues such as urine scald and fly strike. Each type of bedding has pros and cons and should be researched to see what would suit you and your rabbits most. We do not recommend wood shavings or sawdust for small animals as this type of bedding is known to cause respiratory and fungal issues. Cotton wool-style bedding and clay or clumping cat litter should also be avoided as this can cause blockages if ingested.

If you are not sure on which bedding is safe, please ask a member of the Small Animals team for advice.

Below is a list of bedding types that are safe for use in your rabbit enclosure:

- Hay: newspaper topped with hay is a cheap option for enclosures and can help to litter train rabbits as they like to toilet where they eat.
- Carpet or blankets: can be used to line your rabbits’ flooring to prevent slipping. This will need to be replaced or washed regularly if soiled.
- Straw: soft, dust extracted straw (such as barley) is a good bedding for outdoor enclosures in the winter as it is a good insulator. When providing straw, plenty of hay must be provided to prevent the straw being eaten.
- Shredded cardboard such as Ecobed or Bedkind: can be used to line the enclosure and provides opportunity for foraging when scatter feeding.
- Paper based bedding such as Back 2 Nature or Megazorb: can come in various shapes and sizes.
- Woodchip bedding such as Pillow Wad or Aubiose: often marketed as horse bedding can also be used as this negates the issues found in other wood chip or sawdust products. Ensure that any products are kiln-dried and dust extracted.

Is your property rented? If so, we will need to see permission from your landlord that you are allowed to keep rabbits.



Preserve their health by protecting them from pain, injury, and disease



Rabbit veterinary care can be expensive so having adequate insurance is recommended. Finding a rabbit-savvy vet may require some research. We suggest checking that your vet is experienced in treating rabbits or checking the RWA website for recommended rabbit vets in your area: [Rabbit Friendly Vet List | Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund \(RWA\)](#).

Check your rabbits for signs of injury or illness every day and seek veterinary advice if necessary:

- Check for normal appetite (**poor appetite requires immediate veterinary attention**)
- Check teeth and nails are not becoming overgrown
- Check coat and skin for signs of mites, bald patches, sores, or lumps
- Check for a clean bottom to reduce the risk of flystrike
- Monitor faeces and urine for any changes from the norm
- Check for a normal, relaxed posture

Please consider ongoing costs when adopting rabbits; a pair of rabbits can cost £11,000 over their lifetime from yearly vaccinations for myxomatosis, RVHD1 and RVHD2, other vet trips, food, hay, insurance, enclosure maintenance and holiday care.

Some rabbit breeds are more prone to certain conditions and illnesses than others. For example, lop-eared rabbits are more prone to ear infections and deafness, while short-faced (brachycephalic) rabbits can suffer from dental issues and overheating. Giant breeds can experience arthritis from a young age and dwarf breeds can experience respiratory conditions. We recommend researching your chosen breeds so that you can be prepared and spot signs of these conditions so that they can be treated early by an experienced vet.



Provide a nutritious diet and fresh water



Rabbits' teeth grow continuously throughout their life. The teeth need to be worn down every day by eating grass and hay. Failure to provide the right diet can quickly result in serious dental disease which may be difficult to correct.

The diet should include:

- **85% hay:** the best diet consists almost entirely of good quality hay and dried or fresh grass/weed forages which should be available at all times. They should consume their body size in hay daily and will pick out their favourite strands while leaving the rest, providing fresh hay daily is essential.
- **10% fresh vegetables and herbs:** leafy greens and herbs should be the majority of fresh food provided, small quantities of fennel, broccoli, celery, and cauliflower leaves can be added for variety. We don't recommend providing any fruit or vegetables high in sugar (such as carrots and peppers) due to the health issues that these can cause. Clean, hand-picked grasses, safe weeds and safe fruit wood are an important addition to any rabbit's diet.
- **5% complimentary feed:** this should be in pellet form with good quality ingredients, high fibre content and balanced nutrients. We recommend Science Selective or Burgess pellets. Any muesli mixes should be avoided as this promotes selective feeding, can contain unsuitable ingredients and is usually high in sugar.
- **Fresh water, available at all times.** This should be provided in a heavy, ceramic bowl to allow natural and more efficient drinking and should be changed daily.
- **Treats:** If treats are given, avoid commercial treats containing seeds, nuts or honey as these are not suitable for rabbits. Look for treats with grass or hay as their main ingredient.





Rabbits are inquisitive animals and benefit from being allowed to promote their natural behaviours safely.

Foraging – most of a rabbit's life is spent foraging and grazing so providing new ways to present their food and trying different types of forage can make a big difference to their mental wellbeing. Scattering dried forage amongst their hay, providing constant access to graze in a secure, predator-proof run, using pellet food as training treats or using toilet tubes and feeder toys can all be valuable forms of enrichment.

Chewing – it is important to encourage rabbits to chew appropriate items to ensure their teeth are kept in good shape. The safest and cheapest way of encouraging chewing is providing lots of fresh, good quality hay & home-grown grass pots. Safe twigs such as willow, hazel, apple, pear, and hawthorn will help keep their front teeth trim.

Digging – rabbits, particularly females, are natural diggers. This behaviour can be considered destructive but providing an appropriate digging space helps to reduce stress, provides a cool place to lie and naturally keeps their nails trim. Using large litter trays or children's paddling pools filled with soil or loose bedding works well.

Security – rabbits are prey animals and are naturally fearful of potential predators or unexpected movements and noises. It is important to provide safe, secure areas for rabbits to retreat to should they feel in danger as a stressed rabbit can become ill very quickly. Providing hides, tunnels and platforms allows rabbits to hide from danger and allows them to see it! Rabbits do not like being picked up or carried as this makes them feel vulnerable, so they do not always make the most suitable animals for young children. If rabbits must be handled for health checks, keep handling low to the ground and hold them securely against your body.

Behaviour – rabbits mostly express themselves using body language and occasionally vocalisations. A thumping or hiding rabbit is likely to be fearful while one that is binkying or flopped on the floor is likely to be relaxed. Knowing the signs of an unhappy rabbit is important to prevent long-term stress and resulting illnesses.

Social – rabbits are social animals and should live in pairs or groups. A lone rabbit is often a stressed rabbit as they cannot express natural social behaviours such as grooming. The best pairings tend to be a neutered male with a spayed female although other pairings can work well with the right individuals. All rabbits should be healthy, neutered/spayed and fully vaccinated before bonding. Raystede provides a bonding service for those looking to adopt a companion rabbit and we are happy to discuss the best pairing for your rabbit. When rabbits require vet treatment or transportation, it is best to take the bonded rabbits together in the same carrier to keep their bond strong and to reduce stress. Rabbits should never be kept with other animals such as guinea pigs, chickens, or tortoises due to the risk of injuries and diseases.

