

# RABBIT BONDING GUIDE

## Before you start:

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** (at least 8 weeks before bonding to ensure full recover) and **fully vaccinated** before bonding.

Rabbits should never be kept with other animals such as guinea pigs, chickens, or tortoises due to the risk of injuries and diseases.



## Our guide

1. Create a **neutral space** for the bonding. The area should be large enough for the rabbits to move around, but small enough so that you can intervene if you need to. Keep it simple to start, with just some hay in a litter tray or pile and a water bowl. Scatter some pellets and **tasty forage** for the rabbits to snack on.
2. With someone there to assist, release both the rabbits into the neutral space at the same time.
3. Now, sit back and watch the behaviours.
4. Don't panic! Nipping each other, **fur pulling, chasing** and **humping** are incredible normal at this stage. These behaviours are due to excitement and working out the dynamics between the rabbits. It is very important not to disrupt these behaviours as this is a crucial stage in the bonding process.
5. If the rabbits are causing injuries to each other and drawing blood, it is unlikely they will make a good match and probably won't be able to be bonded unfortunately. In this instance, split them up permanently as soon as possible, using a towel or blanket over your hands as a safety measure. If your rabbits have fought, please seek veterinary assistance urgently.
6. Ensure you have someone watching for the first few hours.
7. If there have been no injuries, leave the rabbits together overnight.
8. Keep the set up the same for the first few days to reduce territorial behaviour, continue to scatter the pellets and greens when feeding. You may start to see positive behaviours such as **grooming each other and sleeping close together**. Don't worry if you are not seeing any of these behaviours just yet.
9. Add a food bowl to the area, after a few days and watch for if the rabbits are sharing the bowl and take turns to eat. Watch for territorial behaviours. If one of the rabbits is using the food bowl more at this stage, you can remove the bowl and continue scatter feeding until you feel they could share a bowl.
10. If the rabbits have successfully shared a food bowl for a few days, you can add some enrichment such as tunnels and wooden hides, ensure these have at least 2 entrances/exits, as well as increasing their overall space if you can. If you notice that one rabbit is **guarding** a hide, you can take a step back and remove this.



11. Whilst the rabbits are in their bonding pen, this is a good opportunity to deep clean their main enclosure and all their enrichment. Use a pet-safe disinfectant or white vinegar to remove any smells of the previous occupants.
12. Now it is time to move the rabbits back into their main enclosure. The minimum size recommendations for enclosures are **10ft x 6ft x 3ft (L x D x H)** or **3m x 2m x 1m (6m<sup>2</sup>)**. We recommend increasing these measurements as the number of rabbits increases (please contact us for advice). You can remove the enrichment to start with if you need to. As it was one rabbit's home before, they may feel territorial about this space. It is very normal for there to be some chasing and disagreements during the first few days or first week in their enclosure.



**Do not split the rabbits at any point during the bonding process, unless there has been physical injury.** Splitting and reintroducing can break down bonds, disrupting the bonding process.

#### **Common behaviours to look out for when bonding your rabbits:**

- Ignoring each other – this is a good sign as it means they are comfortable enough around each other to carry on as normal. If they are relaxed around each other, they may groom themselves and eat.
- Chasing – this is common so shouldn't be stopped. Food can be used a distraction to help ease tension and give rabbits a chance to have a break.
- Nipping – minor nipping and fur pulling is normal, if it does not break the skin, and the other rabbit moves away from the boss then it is fine.
- Mounting – this is a normal behaviour where one rabbit climbs on top of the other and can resemble mating. This is normally to display dominance and can also be due to excitement. This may be a repetitive behaviour. Try not to stop this behaviour; if the submissive rabbit dislikes being mounted, they will let the other rabbit know and should sort it amongst themselves.
- Grooming – this is often rare in the first few hours or days, but it is the best sign for bonding. You may see one of the rabbits putting their head under another, or some gentle nibbling or licking around the ears or eyes. These are all positive signs.
- Nose to nose contact – this is a positive sign and indicates bonding.
- Fighting – occasionally fighting can occur where the rabbits' ball up and often box one another. This behaviour requires immediate intervention (using a towel or gloves) and checking over for injuries. Separation is recommended, however once the individuals calm down and if no blood is drawn, introductions can be tried again. If this behaviour is recurring, it's unlikely that the bond will work.
- Freezing - this is a stress response for when rabbits feel threatened and can occur during bonding.

- Foot thumping- rabbits thump their feet when they feel threatened. This is normally signalling for the other rabbit to back off. Expect to hear lots of foot thumping during the early stages of bonding.
- Lunging- this is where one rabbit will quickly jump towards another but doesn't try to attack them, it is just a warning sign. It is important to close monitor to ensure the behaviour calms down.
- Grunting- rabbits often grunt or growl when they feel threatened. This is often accompanied by lunging or thumping their feet. It is very normal to hear lots of these vocalisations during bonding.
- Buzzing or honking- rabbits make a soft, low vibrating 'buzzing' noise when they are content or excited.
- Binkyng- this behaviour is unlikely to occur in the first stages of bonding but may happen later during the process. Binkyng is where a rabbit jumps, kicks out and flicks/shakes their tail and ears. It is a sign that a rabbit is happy and excited.

All these behaviours can be a normal part of the bonding process. Rabbits should **only** be separated if it looks like blood could be or has been drawn. For example, if they start fighting and one has bitten or scratched the other then please separate immediately. Unfortunately, there is very little chance that they will form a bond after this, and we would advise not putting them back together. For any wounds, please seek veterinary treatment.

### Successfully bonded!

Now you hopefully have a bonded pair or group of rabbits! Wherever possible, rabbits should always be always kept with their bonded partner, to ensure they are happy. 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.

### Unsuccessful bonding

Sometimes, bonding isn't successful. Like with people, not everyone gets on! If you have had an unsuccessful bond, please ensure you don't leave any rabbit alone permanently and consider your options of rehoming or introducing more rabbits into your household. It is advised to let them de-stress for at least a week before attempting bonding with a different rabbit.



Raystede provides a bonding service (this is at a non-refundable fee of £30.00) for those looking to adopt a companion rabbit from us.

We are happy to give bonding tips and recommend enclosure sizes/types for the bonding process.

Email: [smallanimals@raystede.org](mailto:smallanimals@raystede.org)

Telephone: 01825 880467 (Please leave a message if we are with the animals).