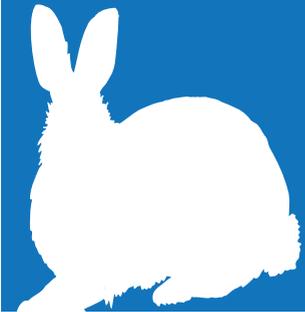




USPCA
ANIMALRESCUE



Caring for
Rabbits

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A Good Home

The hutch

A well designed, properly constructed, carefully maintained and roomy rest area is vital to a rabbit's welfare. It should be at least 150cm long, 60cm wide and 60cm high (5ft x 2ft x 2ft) and divided into two compartments. One should have a strong wire mesh door to let in air and light; the other a solid door to provide a retreat at night, and from the weather.

Areas exposed to the outside should be protected so that insects cannot enter. Net curtaining or mosquito/fly mesh are suitable. The rest area should be on raised legs (23cm/9in) to give protection from rising damp and other animals.

The roof – which must slope backwards – should be covered with overhanging roofing felt which will also keep the sides dry.

The accommodation needs to be in a sheltered position and should not face directly into the mid-day sun or the prevailing wind. In severe weather it will need to be put in an outhouse; in hot weather it will need to be in the shade.



Home comforts

Rabbits need a warm, dry and comfortable floor surface. This should consist of a lining material and an overlay of shredded paper or straw to provide warmth and insulation. A 5cm layer of peat, cat litter, natural wood fibre chippings or white wood shavings (not pine) make a good absorbent lining. Put a really deep layer of straw on top so that the rabbit can bed down comfortably.

Make sure your rabbit has something hard to chew on. A piece of deciduous wood will exercise the rabbit's teeth and stop it gnawing through the walls of its rest area. This will keep its teeth in good condition and help keep the incisors the correct length.

House proud

Rabbits urinate heavily and need to be cleaned out regularly – wet litter and droppings should be removed daily and the floor will need cleaning about once a week. Rabbits defecate only in certain areas so this will make cleaning easier. A lined litter tray can also be used to help keep the rest of the area dry and clean.

Bedding should be renewed every ten to 14 days. Three or four times a year you should wash and disinfect the living area. Rinse it well and allow it to dry before rehousing the rabbit. Good hygiene will keep a rabbit comfortable and healthy. Remember to check your rabbit every day – good hygiene will prevent flystrike and other infections.

Easy lifting

Rabbits need firm but gentle handling and **must never be picked up by their ears**. To lift, simply turn the rabbit to face you, put your left hand on the scruff and your right hand around the rump. Lift the rabbit towards you and either cradle it or rest it against your body.

When returning a rabbit to its rest area, lower it in hind feet first to prevent it kicking.

Exercise Time

Permanently caging a rabbit condemns it to a life of boredom and may cause unnecessary suffering. Rabbits must have daily physical freedom so they can hop around and play, generally rummage about and, ideally, graze.

Run around

Putting its living quarters into an enclosure is a good idea. During the day the door can be left open and, by the use of a ramp or stairs, the rabbits can be left free to come and go as they please. The enclosure fencing must be at least 1m/3ft high and sunk well into the ground to stop them burrowing out. It should also have a fine mesh cover to keep out cats, dogs, weasels and stoats. It should not be placed near dog kennels/runs nor near ferrets.

If space is limited, a portable ark would give the rabbit access to grass and the chance to run around. This ark should be at least 2m long and 1m wide, with a solid wooden area at one end, so the rabbit can shelter. The ark should be high enough for the rabbit to stand on its hind legs. Always make sure your rabbits are safely locked away in their rest areas at night.



Feeding Well

Rabbits are herbivores and need a nutritious and interesting diet. This should include green-stuff, root vegetables and fruit, good quality hay and 'concentrates'. These can be commercially prepared rabbit pellets or a home-made mix including crushed oats, mixed corn, bran, etc.

Rabbit pellets are convenient and nutritious but should not be fed more than once or twice a week as they offer no variety. Foods should be put in heavy-duty earthenware dishes which are difficult to tip over and can be easily washed each day.

It is perfectly natural for a rabbit to eat its own droppings. This is called refection and is essential for digestion. The drier and harder pellets produced during the day are not eaten. Refection is essential to the rabbit's health and must not be prevented.

Bare essentials

1. *Hay is the staple part of a rabbit's diet so make sure it is fed liberally.*
2. *A mineral lick should be easily available at all times.*
3. *A drip-fed water bottle with a stainless steel spout is the best way of offering fresh water to a rabbit. Bottles should be washed weekly and sterilised with boiling water.*

Health Matters

Rabbits should be examined regularly and carefully, especially the ears, eyes, nose and genitals. If you know how your rabbit looks and acts when it is in good health, you will be quick to recognise any change in its behaviour.

During warm weather, check the rabbit's tail area every day to ensure it is clean. This should prevent flies laying eggs there and causing flystrike – a disease which causes immense suffering and death.

Grooming marvellous

Rabbits groom themselves regularly and are capable of keeping their fur in good condition, with the exception of the Angora which must be groomed daily. Most rabbits seem to appreciate brushing, especially during their spring and autumn months.

Regular grooming also gives you the chance to check your rabbit's health – whether claws need trimming or teeth are overgrown.



Diseases And Complaints

Myxomatosis

Rabbits that constantly scratch may be infested with fleas. These – and mosquitoes – can carry the virus which causes myxomatosis. The first symptoms are severe eye inflammation and discharge (conjunctivitis). In advanced cases, the whole face becomes swollen and there is a discharge from the nose and the rabbit has great difficulty in breathing. Death may take one to two weeks. Vaccination will give immunity within three days and lasts six to nine months.

Rabbit Haemorrhagic Viral Disease (RHVD)

Several thousand rabbits have died from RHVD since 1992. Symptoms range from a loss of appetite to sudden death. By the time owners realise something is wrong it's usually too late. Your rabbit doesn't even need to have been in contact with an infected rabbit – the virus can be transported via people, clothing, accommodation and animals which have been in contact with the disease. Your veterinary surgeon can give your rabbit an annual vaccination against RHVD.

Coccidiosis

This is a very serious disease which has two forms, one attacking the intestines and the other the liver. Symptoms include loss of appetite, dullness, persistent diarrhoea and a yellow jaundiced look. Suspected coccidiosis should be dealt with immediately by isolating the rabbit and getting veterinary help. If diagnosed early, the disease can be controlled. Otherwise death is inevitable.

Other Complaints

Flystrike

A major summer problem is the 'strike fly' which lays its eggs in faeces-soiled fur. Within 12-24 hours, the maggots hatch out and bore into the flesh ultimately killing the rabbit. Check your rabbit daily to ensure the area under its tail is clean.

Parasites

All rabbits are sometimes prone to fleas, lice and mites. Symptoms of fleas include scratching, especially around the head and neck. Your veterinary surgeon will be able to treat these. If fleas are present, you must clean, disinfect and dry the living quarters thoroughly.

Lice infestation often displays the same kind of symptoms as fleas. Lice lay their eggs (nits) in the fur and can be dealt with using a special insecticide available from your veterinary surgeon.

Mites which affect the ears causing ear mange or canker, should be dealt with by a veterinary surgeon. Symptoms include much head shaking and ear scratching.

Pneumonia

A rabbit huddled in a corner with laboured breathing, loss of appetite, a lacklustre coat and runny nose probably has pneumonia. It is caused by damp accommodation and bedding and the rabbit must be seen by a veterinary surgeon immediately.

Snuffles

This respiratory tract condition, similar to the common cold, is a highly infectious disease which could lead to pneumonia. Rabbits sneezing and with a discharge from the nose should be isolated well away from other rabbits and veterinary advice sought.



Overgrown incisors

Overlong teeth must be cut back regularly by your veterinary surgeon, or the rabbit will not be able to eat. Make sure your rabbit has sufficient hard food and a gnawing block – see page 4.

Overgrown claws

Domestic rabbits' claws may need clipping from time to time. Ask your veterinary surgeon to do this for you initially. S/he may demonstrate the technique so that you can do it yourself in future.

Obesity

Rabbits which have inadequate exercise are most at risk. Symptoms can include a goitre-like dewlap beneath the chin. Reduce food intake and increase exercise until the right weight is achieved.

Constipation and diarrhoea

Constipation may be a simple dietary disorder, cured by feeding more greenstuff; diarrhoea may be cured by withholding greens for 24 hours and feeding only hay and water.

When persistent, or combined with other symptoms, both conditions may indicate more serious illness needing veterinary diagnosis. For example, constipation could be due to a blockage caused by furballs – this needs to be detected early so it is important to check your rabbit's faeces daily.

A Kind End

Well cared for rabbits can live to a good age – sometimes eight years or more. But if a rabbit shows signs of a painful disability, has an incurable illness or severe injury, it should be gently put to sleep.

This can be a very difficult decision to make and you should always talk to your veterinary surgeon, but it is one of the kindest things that an owner can do for a suffering animal.

No untrained person should ever put a rabbit to sleep and it is an offence to kill an animal by improper means.





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