

Rabbit Care

Diet

- 🥕 Rabbits are herbivores and require a **high fibre** diet which is critical for the health of their digestive tracts and is also very important for dental health (see later).
- 🥕 The bulk of rabbits' diet should comprise of grass (fresh/freeze-dried) and/or good quality hay (meadow/Timothy) which should be available at all times. This will best mimic the natural feeding pattern of rabbits in the wild.
- 🥕 Green leafy foods are also important and a variety should be fed daily, such as **spinach**, **curled leaf kale**, **carrots** (with the green tops on are best), **green beans**, **celery** and **rocket**. Herbs such as **parsley** and **coriander** are a great treat.
- 🥕 Commercial concentrate rabbit foods are not essential if plenty of grass, greens and hay are provided at all times. Some commercial rabbit foods can be too low in fibre and too high in protein, fat and carbohydrates (which can cause your rabbit to put on weight). The **pelleted** commercial rabbit food is better than the coarse mix as it prevents your rabbit just picking out the bits that it wants and usually leaving the most important bits untouched!

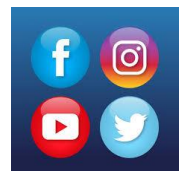


Commercial coarse mix



Commercial pellets

- 🥕 Wild and garden plants to try – dandelions, clover, chickweed, roses, geraniums, cow parsley.
- 🥕 Foods to avoid:
 - Fruit should be regarded as a treat item and fed in limited quantities only. They are high in simple sugars and can cause your rabbit to gain weight and disturb the health of their digestive tracts.
 - Potatoes, bread, seeds, beans, peas, nuts, cereals and chocolate!
 - Lettuce (this can cause sedation and possible death in rabbits).
 - All other plants.
- 🥕 Sudden changes in diet should be avoided. Any change in diet should be made gradually over several days or weeks, starting with small amounts of the new item and gradually increasing them, whilst making a decrease in the unwanted item.
- 🥕 Rabbits produce two types of faeces, the first being small firmer pellets, and the second being a softer pellet coated in mucus – these are known as caecotrophs. You will not normally see these caecotrophs as they are eaten by the rabbit directly from their bottom, in order to re-absorb more nutrients from them. This act is called coprophagia. If your rabbit is overweight it will not be able to carry out this act of coprophagia and the caecotrophs will collect around the rabbits' bottom, predisposing them to flystrike (see later).



Teeth

- 🥕 Rabbits have teeth which **continue to grow** throughout their lives. The crowns (the visible parts of the teeth) will double in length in 4-5 weeks if they are not worn down and at the same time the roots will grow into the skull and jaw bone which can lead to tooth root abscesses (a very serious condition in rabbits).
- 🥕 To keep this under control, rabbits need to do lots of tooth grinding to wear the crowns down and keep the roots at the correct length, which is why the **grass** and **hay** part of their diet is important as chewing on these will grind down their teeth.
- 🥕 *Dental problems caused by incorrect feeding are the most common rabbit health problems seen by vets*

Vaccinations

- 🥕 There are two diseases that we can vaccinate our rabbits against:

Myxomatosis

- This is common in wild rabbits and can be spread to pet rabbits through biting insects e.g. fleas.
- It causes swelling of the eyelids and other parts of the body.
- There is no treatment for the disease and most infected rabbits will die or have to be euthanised.
- Vaccinations can be given from 6 weeks of age and boosters are required every 12 months.

Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD)

- This is caused by a virus which can be spread by contact, e.g. On clothes, hands and/or feet, but also some biting insects.
- VHD usually causes problems with rabbits' lungs and is usually fatal. There is no treatment.
- Vaccinations can be given from 10 weeks of age and boosters are required every 12 months.

Worming

- 🥕 Worming should be done in rabbits every 3-6 months using Panacur paste which is given once daily for 9 days.
- 🥕 Panacur protects against routine worms and also treats a parasite called *E. cuniculi* which can cause head tilt/ renal failure and blindness. This parasite is found in >50% of rabbits and is latent, much like herpes virus in humans who suffer from cold sores.
- 🥕 *E. cuniculi* can flare up when the rabbit has been under stress – eg from another disease, travel, addition of a new companion or pregnancy. It is recommended that rabbits are routinely treated with a 9 day course of panacur during times of stress to prevent flare ups of *E. cuniculi*.

Flea/ Mite prevention

- 🥕 Rabbits can become infested with fleas and ear, fur or mange mites. These are generally easily treated by appropriate veterinary spot on solutions.
- 🥕 Signs of an infestation include head scratching, fur loss, dandruff and itching.
- 🥕 House rabbits are more likely to be exposed to a flea burden if housed with other pets. A monthly spot on such as **Advantage** can be used as a preventative.

Flystrike

This is generally a problem in summer and is caused by rabbits not cleaning their bottoms or sitting in dirty bedding, attracting flies to the area. The flies then lay their eggs around the bottom which will turn into maggots and eat from the rabbits' skin. If not caught and treated early then deep wounds can be created and it can be fatal.

🥕 PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE!

- Keep your rabbit in a clean, dry environment.
- Examine your rabbit's bottom every day to ensure it is kept clean.
- "Rearguard" is a product that you can apply to your rabbit and will prevent flies from laying their eggs on your rabbit for up to 8 weeks (ask your vet).



Neutering

- 🥕 Female rabbits (does) can be spayed (removal of uterus and ovaries) from **4-6 months** of age to prevent *unwanted pregnancy*, *cancer of the womb* and *nesting behaviour* which can cause the unmated doe to become distressed and aggressive.
- 🥕 Male Rabbits (bucks) can be castrated (removal of the testicles) from **16 weeks** of age to prevent *urine spraying* and *dominant behaviour* leading to *aggression* towards other rabbits and owners.
- 🥕 Males are not sterile until **4 weeks after castration**, so it's important to keep them separated from any females during this period.

General Husbandry

- 🥕 Rabbits need space: the bigger the area you can offer the happier your rabbit will be.
- 🥕 A secure, dry, draft free environment with adequate ventilation to prevent respiratory problems is essential.
- 🥕 Avoid extreme temperatures.
- 🥕 Hutches provide traditional accommodation; ensure there is sufficient space for separate resting, toileting and feeding.
- 🥕 Rabbits like to be able to sit in an elevated position to look out for predators as they would in the wild. Hutches with exercise runs attached provide sufficient room to enable the rabbit to do this.
- 🥕 Hay or straw make a good absorbent floor covering as does Supreme Carefresh, which is made from high quality virgin wood pulp. It is specially designed to eliminate urine odours, and lasts twice as long as traditional bedding. Carefresh is virtually dust free so it won't irritate you or your pet's respiratory system.
- 🥕 The hutch, feeding and water bowls must be cleaned out every day and the bedding changed at least once a week.



Behaviour

- 🥕 Rabbits are prey animals and their natural instinct is to run and hide. They need gentle handling from an early age to become comfortable around humans.
- 🥕 Offer your rabbit bolt holes/hiding places. Open spaces with no protection will cause your rabbit to feel under threat.

- 🥕 Rabbits that show aggressive behaviour towards you and/or other pets may often be in pain, distress and/or suffering emotionally (stress).
- 🥕 Pet rabbits often lack mental stimulation leading to behavioural problems and poor health.
- 🥕 Create a 'wild' environment – tunnels, tree stumps, unsprayed twigs, compost for digging, platforms for hiding under and climbing on.
- 🥕 Rabbits quickly become bored of toys so rotate items regularly to keep them interested.
- 🥕 Rabbits love to dig so provide a child's sand pit filled earth or sand to prevent damage to the garden.
- 🥕 Rabbits are very protective of their territory marking out anything they see as theirs using chin secretions, urine and droppings. These markings also help them to feel reassured as their environment smells familiar.
- 🥕 Rabbits naturally stress easily as they are prey animals and can be very sensitive to their environment and fellow rabbits. A trip to the vets can be very stressful. A calming spray called '**pet remedy**' is now available and may be useful before a trip to the vets or in cases of behavioural issues. Please ask your vet for more information.

Company

- 🥕 Rabbits are very sociable animals and can suffer from loneliness.
- 🥕 Best combination is a neutered male and a neutered female.
- 🥕 It is difficult to introduce a new rabbit and needs to be done very gradually and under owner supervision.
- 🥕 Guinea pigs should not be kept as companions for rabbits. They have different dietary requirements and communicate differently too. Rabbits can often bully the guinea pigs and pass bacteria onto them causing respiratory disease.
- 🥕 Humans can provide company with lots of fun playing, bonding and interacting, it is important that rabbits have the companionship of another friendly rabbit.
- 🥕 When handling rabbits remember they are ground living creatures who can find being lifted and carried distressing. Whenever possible interact with your rabbit at ground level.
- 🥕 When picking rabbits up ensure that all four legs and bottom for securely supported at all times.
- 🥕 Never pick rabbits up by their ears or scruff of the neck.



Insurance

- 🥕 Disease in any animal can cause quite high bills and rabbits can be covered by pet insurance just like cats and dogs. For peace of mind with your rabbit we would recommend thinking about taking out pet insurance. Pet Plan can provide a lifetime policy which means any ongoing illness will be covered for life.