

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

The first thing is to try to find out why your rabbit is being aggressive. If this leaflet hasn't helped, contact the RWA National Helpline on 0870 046 5249, or visit our Website [www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk](http://www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk)

If your rabbit is showing aggression towards you when you try to pick him up and you think this is due to fear or nervousness then you will need to introduce a gentle programme designed to teach your rabbit that you are not a threat. This involves the following:

- Stop trying to stroke or pick up your rabbit for a period of two weeks. In that time start to hand feed your rabbit its treats and speak calmly to him.
- If your rabbit is now more relaxed start to stroke him whilst he is eating the treat.
- If your rabbit will take a treat but won't let you stroke him, you may have to spend longer on the first stage. If your rabbit tries to bite you when you stroke him then replace your hand with a long handled brush so that the rabbit bites that instead. When the rabbit bites the brush, stop touching the rabbit until it goes back to the treat and then repeat.
- Once your rabbit will accept stroking (by hand or brush) increase the time and the areas that are being touched. If you are using a brush, try to introduce your hand (this may take several days)
- You are now ready to start picking your rabbit up. This should also be introduced in daily stages using treats at each level i.e. initially your rabbit can be scooped onto your lap to eat his treat.

Never use punishment as a training method. In most cases of aggression, the problem worsens as soon as the owner tries to reprimand the rabbit as the owner appears threatening.

Most forms of aggression can be improved by giving a rabbit more space, daily exercise and access to a stimulating environment with lots of toys and areas to climb on or hide under. More information is available on our SECS leaflet.



This leaflet is brought to you by the Rabbit Welfare Fund - the charitable wing of the Rabbit Welfare Association.

If you love rabbits, please consider supporting the Rabbit Welfare Fund. You can make a donation, or you may like to join the RWA. As well as fund-raising activities, most RWA members kindly make a small donation to the RWF in addition to their annual RWA membership fee. RWA members receive a fabulous quarterly magazine packed with health, behaviour and care advice to help you to build a wonderful relationship with your bunny - whether she/he lives indoors or out.

To contact the RWA/Rabbit Welfare Fund:  
**Ring the RWA National Helpline on 0870 046 5249**

**Write to us at PO Box 603, Horsham,  
West Sussex RH13 5WL.**

**Log onto our websites**  
<http://www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk>  
<http://www.rabbitwelfarefund.co.uk>

Contact the National Helpline to order bulk supplies of leaflets or send SAE for single copies.



Rabbit Welfare Fund  
Write to us at PO Box 603,  
Horsham, West Sussex RH13 5WL.  
e-mail: [hq@rabbitwelfare.co.uk](mailto:hq@rabbitwelfare.co.uk)  
Registered Charity Number 1085689

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# BITING THE HAND THAT FEEDS



## The Rabbit Welfare Fund Guide to Aggressive Rabbits



It's a sad fact that many rabbits are rehomed for aggressive behaviour because many owners feel that there is nothing they can do. This leaflet explains how aggressive behaviour can be prevented and what to do if your rabbit is trying to bite you.



### WHEN AGGRESSION IS NORMAL

Rabbits in the wild are prey animals. If they feel under threat from a predator they have three options - to freeze, to run away or to fight. Having eyes on the side of the head for all round vision and large ears for picking up the slightest sound helps the rabbit to spot a predator and get away as quickly as possible. If caught, the rabbit will use its teeth, long claws and powerful back legs to fight for its survival.

Wild rabbits also use aggression to defend territories against rival groups of rabbits. Female rabbits will sometimes fight to the death for nest sites and can be very aggressive in the later stages of pregnancy or when they have young in the nest.

### AGGRESSION IN A DOMESTIC SITUATION

If a rabbit has not been accustomed to handling when it was young, it can view its owners as a threat when they try to pick it up or stroke it. In these situations, rabbits will use similar behaviours to those shown in the presence of a predator. They will either freeze, try to run away or show aggression. When the hutch controls the movements of such rabbits, they cannot avoid contact altogether so they can be very aggressive but this rabbit is scared and is using aggression as a last resort.

Some rabbits can show aggression towards their owner when a hand is placed into the hutch to fill their food bowl or to remove dirty bedding. To the rabbit this is seen as an invasion of their territory so they treat the owners hand as a threat and display territorial aggression.

Female rabbits can display aggressive behaviour towards their owners or perhaps companions during the spring - the rabbits' natural breeding season. This aggression is hormonal and indicates a normal desire to defend her territory and ward off any rivals. This behaviour can often disappear by the end of the summer and may not reappear until the following spring.

The development of aggression in rabbits can often be prevented.

Rabbits can often be aggressive when they are in pain. Regular check ups with your veterinary surgeon can ensure that your rabbit is not unwell or suffering from any condition that may make handling uncomfortable.

Provide rabbits with sufficient space to enable them to exercise regularly with areas to explore and hide to keep them stimulated. This can prevent any problems associated with frustration but also gives the rabbit the option of getting away from us. Everybody needs some time alone!

A rabbit that is used to being around people and handled regularly from a young age is less likely to become aggressive towards its owners.

Learning to pick up a rabbit correctly can prevent the rabbit feeling scared and trying to avoid contact at other times. There are many right and wrong ways to pick up a rabbit but as a general rule one hand should be across the shoulder blades, fingers gently supporting the chest of the rabbit whilst the other is under the rabbit's bottom, taking the bulk of the weight. Never scruff a rabbit (holding by loose skin on back of the neck) or forget to put a hand under its bottom - if a rabbit feels unsafe it will struggle and if dropped, may suffer severe injuries.

Neutering a rabbit when it is young can prevent the development of certain types of aggression. This can be discussed with your veterinary surgeon or refer to our 'Having your rabbit neutered leaflet'.

