

## Common Rabbit Ailments

**Consult your vet if you think your rabbit may be ill.**

**Teeth:** Rabbits can't eat if their front or back teeth are too long. If food is being left, they are losing weight, they have a wet chin or are producing less/smaller faecal pellets, then get your vet to check their teeth. They may need filing, often under a general anaesthetic.

**Fly strike:** It is very important, especially in the summer, to check your rabbit's bottom daily for sore areas or maggots. Fly strike can happen within hours, by the flies laying eggs which hatch into maggots that rapidly eat the flesh. Seek immediate veterinary advice as it can be rapidly fatal.

**Pasteurella multocida:** This bacterium causes snuffles, sneezing, coughing, nasal discharge and pneumonia, and is very hard to cure. Infections can result in death. Take the rabbit to the vet as antibiotic treatment may be required.

**Myxomatosis:** This virus is spread by fleas, causing puffy swellings around the eyes, face or ears or genitals. Take to the vet immediately. Virtually all rabbits die with this horrible disease although vaccinations are available.

**Viral Haemorrhagic Disease:** This virus is deadly and infectious. It can cause breathing problems, high temperatures, lack of appetite, bleeding and death. Seek immediate veterinary advice if you have cause for concern.



**Vaccinations — It is very important to get your vet to vaccinate for Myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease. Seek veterinary advice.**

## Rabbit Facts

Rabbits are sociable and like to have a companion. Males should be neutered to prevent fighting or unwanted litters. Females should be neutered to prevent fighting and uterine cancer. They are easy to keep, but need a correct diet as well as daily handling and exercise, rather than being left in a small hutch. They have a relatively long life-span of 6-10 years. There are over 65 breeds and they range in weight from 1 to 10kg.

**Pregnancy:**  
28-30 days

**Litter size:**  
6-8

**Maturity:**  
12 weeks

**Weaning age:**  
4-6 weeks

**Eyes open:** 10-12 days

**Respiratory rate:**  
32-60 breaths per minute

**Body temperature:**  
38.6-39.4°C

**Heart rate:**  
130-325 beats per minute

**The Environmental Animal Sanctuary & Education (EASE)** is a registered charity (no. 1089160) which promotes all aspects of the human/companion animal relationship. Our services include rescuing and re-homing companion animals, pet fostering, pet bereavement counselling and providing educational presentations on animal welfare to local schools and children's organisations. For more information about our work, contact:

EASE  
PO Box 292  
Hatfield  
Hertfordshire AL9 6ZJ  
Phone: 01707 261028  
Fax: 01707 258716  
Email: [info@ease-animals.org.uk](mailto:info@ease-animals.org.uk)  
Website: [www.ease-animals.org.uk](http://www.ease-animals.org.uk)



**Environmental  
Animal Sanctuary  
and Education**

## The EASE Guide to Caring for RABBITS



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Rabbits are delicate animals, with a life-span of 6-10 years. The low purchase cost must be considered in relation to the time commitment and vet fees for annual vaccinations and treatment. Rabbits should visit a vet at least once a year, for a check up and to discuss vaccinations and diet.

## A Home for your Rabbit

Rabbits can live outdoors or, as is becoming more popular, indoors.

**Outdoors** — Rabbits need a weatherproof hutch, raised above the ground to keep off the damp and to protect them from rats and mice. A sloped roof is ideal to allow the rain to run off. It should be large enough to allow the rabbit room to rise up on its hind legs and to stretch out and perform at least three hops. The rabbit needs a sleeping area where it feels safe and is hidden from view. Place the hutch away from draughts and extremes of temperature. In the winter it can be placed in a shed or garage and in the summer in a cool, shady position. The hutch should be strong to protect it from predators. Foxes can be clever so the wire mesh on the front needs to be very strong. For comfort and hygiene the bottom of the hutch needs to be lined with newspaper, covered with wood shavings (not sawdust, which can irritate its eyes) and hay or straw for the bedding. It must be cleaned once a week and the toilet area every other day. They must have daily access to a run or pen for exercise.

**Indoors** — Plastic cages can be purchased or use a cardboard box. Rabbits can be trained to use a litter tray. Your home will need to be rabbit-proof as they can chew through wiring etc. Check with the House Rabbit Society's website at [www.rabbit.org](http://www.rabbit.org) for more detailed information.

**Indoors and outdoors** — A rabbit needs frequent exercise, company and fresh air. A covered garden run is an ideal solution and it must prevent escape and give safety from predators. Move it regularly to provide fresh grass, making sure there are no chemicals on the grass such as weed-killer. Keep it away from poisonous garden plants such as chrysanthemums, clematis, cowslips, geraniums, hemlock, laburnum, laurel, ivy, poppies and yuccas.



## Food and Drink for your Rabbit

Rabbits can be fed a basic 'all in one' pellet mix every morning and evening, but should always have access to hay or grass which is essential for their digestive system and teeth. Fresh water must always be available. They need leaf green vegetables several times a week, to keep them healthy and to wear their teeth down. Avoid apple seeds, potatoes, rhubarb or tomato leaves and, contrary to popular belief, lettuce, as well as too many treat foods. Do not feed high carbohydrate items such as bread or breakfast cereal. Mineral licks are also a good idea. The food bowl and water container should be cleaned daily.



## Handling your Rabbit

Begin to get your rabbit used to you by feeding it from your hand and gently stroking the top of its head. Once it is relaxed, you can pick it up, although they prefer to be stroked at floor level. As rabbits are delicate and can easily sustain spinal injuries it is best to sit down. Place one hand under the chest and the other over the body of the rabbit and under its rump, supporting its hind legs, and then lift the rabbit towards your body. Taming your rabbit will take time and patience.

- Never pick a rabbit up by its ears.
- Don't offer your hand for a rabbit to sniff - this is seen by them as aggression.
- Rabbits don't like their noses or chins touched.
- Never chase it or it won't be able to trust you.
- Hold it securely but gently, and reassure it by stroking and talking to it.

When they are laid on their backs rabbits often freeze. This stems from fear of predators and is a ploy in order to escape. It is therefore not relaxing for the rabbit and should only be done if you need to clean your rabbit's tail or to do a teeth check.

## Grooming your Rabbit

Rabbits need to be groomed 2-3 times a week to keep their coats clean and to remove excess hair, which could form hair balls in their stomachs. Claws should be clipped regularly, preferably by a vet, and this is a good time to perform an all over health check.

## Rabbits

The domesticated rabbit is a lagomorph and not a rodent. They originated in Spain and parts of Europe over 2,300 years ago. In the wild they live in colonies in underground warrens. Hearing is the prime rabbit sense although their sight is also good. They can run to avoid danger at speeds up to 21mph.



## Rabbit Body Language

**Licking your hands or nudging:** Expression of affection and wanting to be petted.

**Squatting with ears folded back:** Content with life.

**Shaking the ears:** Mild irritation.

**Lying on side with hind legs extended:** Tired or hot.

**Nipping with the teeth:** Annoyed or in pain, or territorial behaviour. May need to seek behavioural or veterinary advice.

**Sitting on its haunches:** Curious about its surroundings.