

# All About Pets

*The national pet care information service*



## CARING FOR YOUR RABBIT



THE BLUE CROSS

*Britain's pet charity*

*Rabbits are rewarding and popular pets. They can become part of the family, but as sensitive animals they are best suited to teenagers and adults. Children should only look after a rabbit under supervision.*

Naturally sociable, rabbits like companionship and prefer to live in pairs or compatible groups. There are many breeds to choose from, though a pet of mixed breeding can be just as much fun. Longhaired rabbits take more looking after than those with short coats.



Most rabbits are happy living indoors or outside, provided they have space to exercise, plus suitable accommodation, feed and bedding. Think carefully about whether you have the time, money, facilities and knowledge to care for a rabbit – they can live for up to ten years.

The best time to buy a rabbit is when it has been weaned at about two months old, although once a rabbit reaches puberty its temperament can change. The Blue Cross has rabbits of all shapes and sizes waiting for a good home. Alternatively, try a good pet shop or reputable breeder.

## Home comforts

The outdoor rabbit needs plenty of room. Rabbits like to get up on their hind legs, so any hutch must be large enough for them to stand up in. It should have a walk-in run and a closed-in part for privacy.

Site the hutch to allow sunlight in the morning and evening, but shade during the hottest part of the day. It must be sheltered from strong winds and secure from predators. The best type of bedding is clean straw, available from most pet shops. Clean the hutch and change the bedding weekly – more frequently in hot weather. The indoor rabbit also needs a quiet area and somewhere you can leave it safely at night, or when no one is around. Large dog cages with plastic floor trays are ideal – again, your rabbit should be able to stand up in it.

Add a straw-filled box as a private place. Rabbits are naturally clean animals and you should be able to train any rabbit to use a litter tray with organic litter.

Before your rabbit moves in, it's important to 'rabbit-proof' your house by moving plants – some of which may be poisonous – out of reach. Encase cables in heavy-duty tubing and, if necessary, rearrange furniture to remove potential 'burrows'.

## Food for thought

Hay should make up 75 per cent of a rabbit's daily diet, along with plenty of fresh water. Rabbits also need a varied mix of vegetables and fruit, which should be washed thoroughly before feeding. Think natural – grass, carrots, spinach, watercress, broccoli, celery, apples and dandelion leaves. Rabbit food in the form of cereal is best avoided as it tends to provide insufficient fibre. Plus, rabbits will only eat the bits they like – which may not provide the nutrients they need.

Never feed your rabbit grass clippings, lettuce or potatoes as these can cause digestive and intestinal problems.

## Health matters

A healthy rabbit is alert and lively. Check your rabbit at least twice a day and look out for any changes in appearance or behaviour. Symptoms of poor health include scaly patches inside the ears, a discharge from the eyes or nose, overgrown teeth, swellings and diarrhoea.

All rabbits should be vaccinated against the potentially fatal diseases, myxomatosis and viral haemorrhagic disease (VHD). It's also best to have pet rabbits neutered or spayed as this lessens the risk of cancers in females and means that males are less stressed and aggressive. Neutered rabbits are also easier to house train.

All rabbits are vulnerable to the potentially fatal disease fly-strike, caused by flies laying eggs in soiled fur. Daily grooming is essential for longhaired rabbits. Short-coated rabbits should be groomed on a weekly basis. If you are at all worried about any aspect of your rabbit's health, always seek veterinary advice.

## Exercise and entertainment

All rabbits need daily exercise to maintain their weight and bone strength, so encourage your rabbit to practise its natural behaviour. It will enjoy going through a pipe in its hutch as if it was a burrow and gnawing on pieces of edible wood such as apple or willow.

Another idea is to set up a cardboard box for your rabbit with an entrance and an exit it can hop in and out of. Fill the box with shredded paper for it to dig into and hang some root vegetables on a string for it to nibble. Outdoor exercise is great for rabbits, but block any potential escape routes and keep an eye on your pet at all times.

## Company

In the wild rabbits live in large groups, so one rabbit on its own will become very lonely. The best option is to keep a compatible pair or group. Neutering and spaying as necessary will prevent unwanted litters and fighting. The Blue Cross generally rehomes neutered males together, un-neutered females together if they get on well, or a neutered male and an un-neutered female.

## Getting to know you

Rabbits are individuals. Some like to be handled, while others prefer to be left alone. Animals that have been regularly, correctly handled from an early age will usually enjoy the experience.

Remember that it is not natural for a rabbit to be lifted up with its paws off the ground. If you sit quietly, most will happily come over and see you – especially for the occasional treat!

When you need to pick a rabbit up, the safest way is with a reasonably firm grip on the loose skin on the back of its neck and your other arm around its hindquarters, supporting its bodyweight. Place the rabbit against your body with its head towards your shoulder. Always put a rabbit down gently, hind legs first, on a non-slip surface.

## Don't forget

- Rabbits need time and attention. They must be checked twice a day.
- Keep two rabbits or a compatible group, not just one
- Neutered rabbits are happier and healthier
- Vaccinate your rabbit against myxomatosis and VHD

## Further information

For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit [www.allaboutpets.org.uk](http://www.allaboutpets.org.uk), the national pet care information service. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is provided by The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity. We rely entirely on your support to enable us to continue our vital work. Any contribution would be most welcome. Thank you.



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