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# How to care for your Rabbit

## Rabbit Nutrition

Feeding is perhaps the single most important factor in maintaining a healthy rabbit. Your rabbit is a herbivore, which means they eat only plant material and typically graze 6-8 hours per day. Herbivores need to have food constantly moving through their digestive systems to avoid health problems. A diet of mostly meadow hay (at least 75%) provides the fibre necessary to do this. The rest of your rabbit's diet should consist of high quality, dry food, vegetables and a small amount of select treats.

Fresh water needs to be provided 24 hours a day. Available options include: a water bottles that hangs on the side of the cage (it is a good idea to have two inside the cage in case one gets blocked) or a ceramic bowl that can't be tipped over. Rabbits are very prone to heat stress (temperatures above 28°C). It is recommended to keep them inside or in the shade outside and provide frozen water bottles to cuddle up to on hot days (rabbits can't sweat). A salt lick is equally important in hot weather because they drink more water which can disrupt their salt balance. By having a salt lick available your rabbit can regulate salt intake according to their needs. Salt licks should be replaced every 3 months if not eaten already.

### Hay

Meadow hay is vital to the digestive health of your rabbit. It is a mixture of grasses which is similar to what they would normally eat in the wild. Expect the colour and consistency to change from one batch to another. Feeding the right amount of meadow hay prevents obesity, dental disease, diarrhoea and boredom. Your rabbit should have unlimited access to meadow hay to graze on all day. Unless the hay in your pet's habitat is soiled, do not replace it. Replacing it could encourage picky eating! This is not to be confused with straw (yellow, made from wheat stalks) which is used for bedding.

Lucerne (aka alfalfa) is a legume and not a proper grass hay designed for them to graze on all day. Lucerne is high in protein and calcium which is beneficial supplement to a young rabbits diet in addition to meadow hay. Lucerne may also be beneficial to rabbits

who are pregnant/nursing, or recovering from illness that have higher nutritional requirements. After one year, gradually wean your rabbit off Lucerne hay (some may not like the change) and only give lucerne as a treat every now and then. Rabbits fed too much lucerne as an adult can become overweight and have a higher chance of developing bladder stones.

### **Pellets**

A small amount of complete, fortified pellets helps you make sure your pet is getting all the vitamins and minerals required for a healthy diet. Please note that rabbits should never be fed solely on pellets.

### **Treats**

Treats are a great way to bond with your rabbit. You love giving treats and they love eating them! Offering too many treats can encourage your pet to refuse basic foods and rob them of nutrition. As a guide only offer 1 – 2 table spoons of treats a day. Popular treats to give your rabbit are: Nibble-O's, Rudducks Tropical mix, and various fruits.

### **Vegetables and Herbs**

Vegetables provide an abundance of health boosting benefits. As with most things, variety is the spice of life. As a guide, feed around ½ a packed cup of mixed vegetables per kilogram of body weight per day. Over feeding of vegetables may result in your rabbit eating less hay which is not ideal.

Some examples of suitable vegetables include:

Broccoli, cabbage, celery, endive, carrot tops, brussel sprouts, spinach leaves, bok choy, other Asian greens, dark leafed lettuce varieties, parsley, dandelion, coriander, basil, dill, mint etc.

### **Foods to Avoid**

Onions or anything that comes from a bulb, lawn mower clippings, rhubarb, nuts, breads, biscuits, sweets, sugar, breakfast cereals, grapes, watery fruits and vegetables (watermelon, iceberg lettuce etc), chocolate or any kind of dairy.

\*This is not an complete list. If in doubt don't feed to your rabbit.

## **Rabbit Health**

### **Vitamins & Minerals**

To be sure that you rabbit is getting all the vitamins they need, a vitamin supplement can be added to their water once or twice a week. Especially for when they may not be getting a wide variety of vegetables.

### **Mites and Lice**

Rabbits can be affected by mites and lice even if kept indoors. It is much easier to prevent than to treat once affected. We recommend spraying the rabbit and the hutch with Rudducks Mite & Lice Spray fortnightly. Be sure to remove any food and water from the hutch beforehand.

### **Fleas**

Some rabbits can be affected by fleas; especially in the summer months. Advantage for small dogs or cats can be used to prevent and control this problem. It is a waterproof

topical treatment that is squeezed on the back of the neck once a month.

### **Worm Prevention**

Intestinal worms can cause digestive disturbances and make your rabbit feel uncomfortable. Prevent worms by dosing their drinking water for 2 consecutive days with Rudducks Worm Syrup every 3 months.

### **Dental Health**

Rabbits' teeth are continuously growing so many different approaches can be used to prevent them from overgrowing. Other than providing hay for grazing, offer them hard wooden chews (rabbit safe only), mineral blocks, lucerne cubes, and treat bars to gnaw on.

### **Calici-virus vaccination**

Calici-virus causes a rapid, and inevitably fatal disease in rabbits. Vaccination protects from this disease. Rabbits can be vaccinated at 10 weeks, and then annually.

### **Myxomatosis**

Rabbits are at highest risk when they live near wild rabbit populations (such as on golf courses or nature reserves). Unfortunately there is no vaccine available in Australia. Myxomatosis is spread by mosquitoes and the only prevention is with fly screens to the house or if outdoors, fly wire or fine shade cloth over the hutch. Avoid letting your rabbit roam around outside the hutch between dusk and dawn (when the mosquitoes are most active).

### **Desexing**

Spaying or neutering your rabbit is important to help your pet live a longer, healthy life. Desexing rabbits prevents aggression, spraying and difficulty with litter training. It also means they can easily live with another rabbit for company. De-sexing female rabbits also reduces digging behaviour. When your rabbit is getting de-sexed, it is worthwhile to get them micro-chipped and registered to you in case they escape. They don't need to be registered to the council. Rabbits can be registered to the Australasian Animal Registry ([www.aar.org.au](http://www.aar.org.au)).

## **Grooming**

Rabbits shed all year round, especially if kept indoors. Outdoor rabbits will lose the most of their fur at the end of winter and throughout the summer to keep cool. Rabbits can get hairball build-up in their digestive system but are unable to vomit like cats do, so make sure they have plenty of hay available to keep their digestive system clear.

Rabbits will occasionally need their nails trimmed. This must be done with special claw clippers as human ones can splinter the nail. Do not attempt to clip your rabbits nails if you are unsure how to do it properly. Our friendly staff will demonstrate the correct technique.

To keep your rabbits coat in top condition, groom at least twice weekly and possibly more during shedding season. The most suitable brush will vary depending on your rabbit's coat type. A good brush for most short coats is the 'zoom groom' (cat version) and the

Furminator. The Zoom-groom picks up loose hair, massages the muscle, and stimulates the skins oil glands for a fantastically shiny coat. The Furminator is the best thing on the market to greatly reduce shedding.

Most rabbits do not need to be washed very frequently. They do a good job of keeping themselves clean and bathing can be quite stressful for everyone involved. Longer haired rabbits may need more frequent bathing. Only use a rabbit suitable shampoo such as Rudducks Cute 'n' Clean. Place a rubber mat at the bottom of the tub to prevent your rabbit from slipping. Rabbits can not swim, so don't fill the bath water past their head and never leave them unattended while in water. Avoid getting the head wet; if it needs cleaning, use a damp face cloth. Gently place cotton balls in your rabbits ears to stop any water from getting in and causing problems.

When finished, wrap your rabbit up in a towel and take the time to towel and blow dry them in a box on the 'warm' setting. Be sure that your rabbit is completely dry before returning to an outdoor hutch and keep inside for a couple of hours if cold outside. Remember to give your rabbit their favourite treat after the bath!

## **Rabbit Housing**

It is recommended that rabbits are kept as indoor pets. However, your rabbits will want a place to call their own. Choose a large cage with a solid floor that is well ventilated and tall enough for your rabbit to stand on their hind legs and stretch out. Place your rabbit's home near household activities, but away from drafts. Remove soiled bedding daily (ideally the litter tray) and totally clean the hutch at least once weekly with a rabbit safe cleaner such as Rudducks Hutch Clean. Do not use house hold cleaners for your rabbit hutch because it can cause irritation to their sensitive airways.

Rabbits can be litter trained! Your rabbit will usually choose a particular corner of the hutch to toilet. We recommend Rudducks corner tray which is a great space saver. Place the tray in the favourite toilet area and your rabbit will become accustomed to toileting in a litter tray. Only use rabbit safe litter such as recycled paper litter, or shavings. If you are still having trouble, don't hesitate to call us for advice.

All pet rabbits should be given the opportunity to roam around outside of their hutch each day. If your rabbit has access to roam around outside, it is best not to let them out between dusk and dawn as this is the time mosquitoes will be most active (even in winter). Be sure to rabbit-proof your cage with bitter tasting deterrent sprays (such as Fooey). If inside, check cords and make sure outlets are covered. Place plants out of reach, because some can be poisonous. Be prepared for your rabbit to chew on just about anything, including curtains, carpets and furniture.

Unless your house or backyard is very rabbit proof, it is recommended to use an exercise pen or a rabbit harness and lead to ensure safe play time.

Providing your rabbit with 'play time' promotes good physical & mental health.

Recommended toys include: Treat balls, Kongs, play tunnels, veggie patch chew toys and veggie baskets. Try hiding treat items amongst the toy or hay for a fun game of hide and seek.

Wild rabbits live in burrows underground. The burrow is a 'safe' place for rabbits to be. A similar form of 'safe' place should be provided for your rabbit at home. A frightened rabbit

will 'bolt' into their burrow if they feel threatened. At home this 'burrow' can be imitated by the presence of a rabbit house that can be purchased in many different shapes and sizes. By providing these 'bolt holes', rabbits may feel more secure in their environment. More security = less stress = healthier rabbit! Straw is an excellent form of bedding as it is more resistant to moisture than paper, insulating and provides some digging activity for your rabbit. In winter time extra bedding is needed so they can burrow in and stay warm.

If kept outdoors ensure that the hutch is rain and predator proof. Avoid extreme weather conditions as rabbits can succumb to heat stroke very easily in hot weather. Hutches need to be well ventilated. Mosquito proof the hutch using fly-screen wire (try your local Bunnings) to prevent myxomatosis. As outdoor rabbits generally spend more time in their cage, their hutch needs to be at least 4ft by 2ft (bigger is always better).

## **Rabbit Behaviour**

By nature, rabbits are inquisitive and curious. They don't usually like to be picked up or carried. The best way to interact with your rabbit is to get down on his level and play with him on the floor. Be sure you always are present when your rabbit is out for playtime.

Some rabbit behaviours can seem rather strange. Rabbits often leap up into the air and this is known as a 'binky'. This means they are happy.

Unhappy rabbits will display their displeasure through grunts and other noises (it is otherwise unusual for rabbits to be vocal). They may also thump their hind legs. Give your rabbit some space to calm down and move the thing or person that is causing their distress.

It is not advisable to permanently mix guinea pigs with rabbits as they may bully each other. Rabbits are sociable animals so housing them with other rabbits is encouraged. Neutered rabbits of opposite or same sexes can be housed together. Any attempted introductions should be monitored closely.

## **Handling Rabbits**

When lifting your rabbit you should use two hands, one supporting the chest and one supporting the bottom. Hold the rabbit facing you with all four feet against your chest. Place one hand supporting the bottom, holding it against your body to stop it kicking out and the other hand across the rabbits shoulders. If you put your thumb in front of the rabbits front leg it helps prevent attempted escapes over your your shoulder. When putting your rabbit back into its house or on to the floor you need to be careful not to let it jump out of your arms. Many rabbits will attempt to leap down once they see their hutch. Hold the rabbit firmly until its feet are on the ground. Be careful as you let go as some rabbits kick out backwards when released.

# New Rabbit Check List

## Housing

- ❑ **Hutch** – Keep you rabbit safe and secure
- ❑ **House/hiding hole** – Provides a safe 'burrow'
- ❑ **Straw/Bedding** – Comfy sleeping material
- ❑ **Hutch Clean** – Safe odour controller and disinfectant
- ❑ **Litter Tray** – Train your rabbit to eliminate in one spot
- ❑ **Litter** – Rabbit safe and absorbent

## Feeding

- ❑ **Pellets** – Quality pellets provide extra nutritional value
- ❑ **Hay** - Meadow, Lucerne, Oaten or Timothy Hay for digestion
- ❑ **Food Bowl** – Heavy and chew proof
- ❑ **Water Bottles** – Keeps water clean
- ❑ **Vitamin & Mineral Supplement** – Make sure your rabbit is getting all the nutrients they require
- ❑ **Treats** – encourage good behaviours with treats

## Health

- ❑ **Mite & Lice spray** -Spray once a fortnight
- ❑ **Worm syrup** – Once every 3 months
- ❑ **Salt Lick** – For self regulating salt levels
- ❑ **Mineral Stone** – Supplies extra minerals
- ❑ **Wood Chews** – Provides good chewing habits for dental health

## Grooming

- ❑ **Brush** – To remove excess hair and encourage healthy hair
- ❑ **Nail Clipper** – Trim excess nail length when needed
- ❑ **Shampoo** – Gentle and rabbit safe

## Exercise & Behaviour

- ❑ **Toys** – Chew toys, Tunnels, Treat balls etc
- ❑ **Bitter Chew deterrent sprays** – Protect your hutch, power cords and other house hold items.
- ❑ **Rabbit harness and lead** – A fun way to exercise your rabbit
- ❑ **Exercise Pen** – A safe area for your rabbit's play time
- ❑ **Carry crate** – For transporting your rabbit safely

*We hope you enjoy your new addition to the family. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions about caring for your new pet. Nothing is more important to us than insuring that you and your pet have a happy life together.*