

# Caring for your rabbit



THE BLUE CROSS

*Britain's pet charity*



## Caring for your rabbit

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



Naturally sociable, rabbits like companionship and prefer to live in pairs or compatible groups. There are many breeds to choose from, although a rabbit of mixed breeding can offer just as much fun and companionship. Rabbits with long fur take much more looking after as the fur can become matted quickly and therefore requires daily grooming.

Most rabbits are happy living either indoors or outside but, if choosing to keep them as house rabbits, extra care must be taken to keep them safe in their indoor environment. All cables must have a protective covering, and house plants should be removed as they may be poisonous. It is most important that rabbits are able to exhibit their natural behaviour, so they must be kept in accommodation which allows them to hop, stretch and play. Think carefully about whether you have the time, money, facilities and knowledge to care for rabbits as they can live for up to ten years.

The best time to buy rabbits is when they have been weaned from their mother at about six to eight weeks old. Rescue centres such as The Blue Cross usually have all ages of rabbits ready to be placed in the right homes, and adults can also make rewarding companions – some people prefer to take on an older animal. The other alternative is to buy from a reputable breeder or a good pet shop where the staff are prepared to give as much time as you need in order to make the right decision.

Never place a rabbit with a guinea pig. The animals are different species, do not “speak the same language”, and often a rabbit will inflict severe injuries on a guinea pig. Some pet shops display these animals in the same cage when they are available for sale. Despite this, they should not be bought as a pair.

## Home comforts

Outdoor rabbits need plenty of room with a hutch large enough to be able to stand on their hind legs, have the opportunity to stretch out, and hop around. There must also be a private compartment for them to retire to when they wish for some privacy. The minimum hutch size for two small rabbits is 150cm x 60cm floor space, by 60cm tall. For two large rabbits this should be at least





185cm x 90cm floor space, by 90cm tall. Gone are the days when rabbits were kept at the end of the garden in a hutch with no facility for exercise.

A good choice of accommodation for rabbits is a small wooden Wendy house with either a large run attached, or a fenced area surrounding it to allow the rabbits to exercise as and when they feel the need. If this type of accommodation is chosen, it gives owners the opportunity to observe them exhibiting more natural behaviour. Rabbits kept in accommodation which is too small often become bad tempered and difficult to handle. This may be because they are suffering from skeletal pain as a result of being confined.

It is important that the accommodation is sited in a shaded area away from direct sunlight, strong winds, and rain.

The rabbits must have extra bedding and protection from the elements during the winter months. Ensure the accommodation has strong sliding bolts and is predator-proof as it is possible for a rabbit to die of shock from being harassed by domestic and wild animals.

## Bedding

The best type of bedding is clean, bagged straw, available from all good pet shops. The bedding needs to be checked on a daily basis and removed if soiled. Particular attention needs to be paid to the accommodation during hot weather as flies may quickly lay their eggs on soiled bedding and the resulting maggots may burrow into the rabbit's fur and body cavity. This could be potentially fatal to your rabbits and is known as fly strike.

It is easy to litter train a rabbit. Once you are aware which corner they prefer to use as a toilet, place a litter tray there big enough for your rabbit to use comfortably. This will make it far easier to keep the accommodation clean.

## Food

Hay or grass should be the basis of your rabbit's diet, and a few fresh vegetables should be offered as well. Remember cereal-based diets (the muesli-type) are high in sugar and low in minerals, and therefore should not be given. Small quantities of high-fibre pellets are a better choice.

There are also complete foods commercially available but hay should still make up to three-quarters of the rabbit's diet. They need

a daily variety of fresh vegetables and fruit, washed thoroughly before feeding. Think natural – good foods are carrots, spinach, watercress, broccoli, celery, apples and dandelion leaves. Never give rabbits grass cuttings as this will cause serious health problems. Dried ready grass is available from pet shops, and this is acceptable. Fresh water must always be available and changed daily. Make sure, if using a water bottle, that it is working properly.

## Health matters

A healthy rabbit is alert and lively. Check your rabbit every day without fail 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, swellings or diarrhoea. Your rabbit's back and front teeth must be checked regularly especially if they are beginning to lose weight for no apparent reason. Dental problems are common in rabbits.

All rabbits should be regularly vaccinated against the potentially fatal diseases, myxomatosis and viral haemorrhagic disease (VHD). Check with your vet who will decide how often this needs to be done. It is a good idea to have rabbits neutered as this lessens the risk of disease and behavioural problems. Neutered rabbits can also be easier to house train.





Remember that rabbits are at risk from fly strike if not regularly checked during the hot weather so care must be taken to ensure your rabbits' bottoms are kept clean.

Daily grooming is essential for long-furred varieties. Short-coated rabbits should be groomed on a weekly basis, as this will reinforce the human/animal bond. If you are at all worried about any aspect of your rabbit's health, always seek veterinary advice.

## Parasites

There are several parasites that may affect rabbits, but the most significant one is *E. cuniculi*, a microscopic organism that infects the nervous system. The infection is passed in the urine and picked up when rabbits eat contaminated feed, such as grass. Many of the rabbits that are infected do not have any serious symptoms, but some get eye problems or become unsteady on their feet. Diagnosis is via blood tests, but this can be tricky as

not all infected animals develop disease. Treatment is available from the vet, but has to be given continuously for one month. There are also medications that can help prevent infection. Ask your vet for advice.

## Exercise and entertainment

All rabbits need daily stimulation to maintain physical and mental well-being. Encourage your rabbits to practice their natural behaviour by providing safe things for them to chew such as apple wood or willow, or buy edible wooden chews from a good pet supplier. Also try to provide tubes for them to run through and hide in.

Another idea is to set up a cardboard box with an entrance and an exit your rabbit can hop in and out of. Fill the box with shredded paper. Also try hanging some root vegetables on a string for them to nibble.

Keep your rabbits safe at all times and make sure they have a secure environment.

## Company

In the wild, rabbits live in large groups, so one rabbit on its own will become lonely. The best option is to keep a compatible pair or group. Neutering them will prevent unwanted litters and potential fighting (see the *All About Pets leaflet, Housing and companionship for your rabbits (S9)*). The Blue Cross generally rehomes rabbits in pairs, but we also have single rabbits looking for partners.

## Getting to know you

Rabbits are individuals – some will enjoy being stroked while others prefer to be left alone. As they are prey animals, rabbits always prefer to interact with you on ground level, where they will feel far happier and safer. If you sit quietly, most will happily come over and see you – especially for the occasional treat!

Rabbits that are regularly and correctly handled from an early age can learn to tolerate the experience, but remember that most will never feel comfortable, as it is not natural for them to be lifted up with their paws off the ground.

When you do need to pick up your rabbit, the safest way is to slide one hand underneath the body and in-between the front legs, with your other arm around its hindquarters, supporting its body weight. Place the rabbit against your body with its head towards your arm. Never pick a rabbit up by its ears or by the scruff of its neck. Always put a rabbit down gently, hind legs first, on a non-slip surface.

## Don't forget...

- Rabbits, as with all other animals, need time and attention. They must be checked at least once a day, but preferably twice, without fail.
- Keep two rabbits or a compatible group, as they are not solitary animals
- Neutered rabbits are happier and healthier
- Vaccinate your rabbits regularly against myxomatosis and VHD



[www.allaboutpets.org.uk](http://www.allaboutpets.org.uk)

## The online community for you and your pets

*All About Pets* leaflets provide expert advice and support for pet owners. The lives of Britain's pets can be improved by increasing the knowledge of owners and promoting responsible animal care.

The leaflets are available to download from [www.allaboutpets.org.uk](http://www.allaboutpets.org.uk).

Why not visit the website to see the full range of leaflets and enjoy the many features, such as:

- articles
- events near you
- latest news
- photo sharing
- online chat and more

## The Blue Cross

*All About Pets* is brought to you by The Blue Cross – Britain's pet charity since 1897. Through our animal adoption centres we rehome thousands of animals each year, while our hospitals provide veterinary care for pets whose owners cannot afford private vets' fees.

## How you can help

The Blue Cross is a registered charity and receives no government funding, so we rely on the generosity of pet lovers like you for support. Any contribution you can give will make a difference to the animals in our care. **Please call 01993 822651 or visit [www.bluecross.org.uk](http://www.bluecross.org.uk).**



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