

Housing and companionship for your rabbits



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity



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An ideal way to house your rabbits is in a spacious hutch such as a small shed or Wendy house construction. You can then put up a fence, either completely surrounding the hutch or continuing its two outer sides, to provide a permanent run area. In this way you can spend time with your rabbits safely and comfortably, whatever the weather!



Generally, rabbits dislike being picked up off the ground, as they are prey animals and need to feel able to get away when necessary. They are, however, social creatures and there will be ideal situations for you to spend time happily interacting with your companions.

Hutches

A hutch should be raised off the floor to allow air to circulate and prevent surface water being absorbed into the floor. It should have a waterproof roof, but please be aware that hutches become hot during the summer months and should be sited in a shady position.

The hutch must be secure against any predators, but you must also guard against your rabbits getting out. For this reason, bolt fastenings are better than turn buttons etc as they cannot be opened accidentally.

Wire floors are not considered a suitable surface since sore feet can quickly develop, and overlaying a wooden floor with wire makes cleaning difficult.

If you obtain a second-hand hutch, please scrub it out thoroughly with a recommended animal cage cleaner. This must be done some days before you expect to house new rabbits, as the timber must be allowed to dry properly before you prepare the hutch for its new occupants.

No hutch can be too large, in fact the bigger the better! We recommend the minimum 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. If your rabbits are of differing sizes, please provide the sort of hutch and run in which the largest will be comfortable. They need to be able to stretch out lengthways, hop around, and stand up on their hind legs, otherwise they may experience skeletal aches and pains from being too cramped.

There should be at least two rooms in your hutch. The main hutch area should have a wire front and be spacious enough for your rabbits to hop around. Their food should be kept to this area and, if they toilet there, a litter tray could be placed in an appropriate corner, space permitting. A sleeping area with access onto the main hutch should have solid walls and a door where your rabbits can retreat and relax with some privacy.

Outside runs

Ideally a run should be attached to the hutch so that the rabbits can choose whether to be in or outdoors. The run should be as spacious as possible to allow the rabbit's to hop, jump, and have total freedom of movement. We recommend that the minimum size for two rabbits is at least 200cm x 200cm. It needs to be secure (this includes the underside) as a rabbit's natural behaviour is to dig. Equally importantly, it must be kept safe from predators at all times. Fresh water must always be available both inside the hutch and outside in the run.



We strongly recommend that the run should be attached to the hutch, however, if this is not possible a large free-standing run should be obtained which gives shelter, shade, and a place within to hide from would-be predators. Remember the sun moves, so a run that starts in shade may be in full sunlight a few hours later.

Cleaning

Your rabbits' health depends a great deal on their environment, and a daily cleaning regime is really important. You will soon get to know where your rabbits like to toilet and this area can be underlaid with newspaper to provide not only more absorbency, but also ease of cleaning.

Some rabbits use litter trays (these should be large enough for the rabbit to get its whole body into) and various substrates are available. Daily removal of any faeces and wet or soiled bedding is important. Any underlying newspaper should be replaced.

How much time your rabbits spend in their hutch will dictate how often you should give it a total clean but try to salvage a little of their unsoiled bedding to replace afterwards, so that the place still smells of home! Spilled food or uneaten fruit or vegetables should be removed daily, but any uneaten food in your rabbits' bowl should be mixed in with fresh food unless it is contaminated with bedding, faeces or otherwise inedible.

Rabbits kept in dirty hutches are susceptible to snuffles (a respiratory illness), sore feet, urine scalding and, most importantly, dirty bottoms – which can easily result in fly strike. The eggs of the fly are laid in the surrounding area and, within approximately 12 hours, can hatch into maggots which will invade the rabbit's body.

Once this process is underway the condition is often fatal, so regular checking of your rabbit's bottom is absolutely vital, especially during the warmer summer months. Please take your vet's advice about the best sort of preventative treatments, and never assume that your rabbit is healthy if you have not actually checked that day.

Company

Rabbits are naturally sociable, so they need companionship of their own kind. They will be much happier living in pairs or compatible groups, and will become very lonely if kept on their own.

It is easiest if rabbits are kept together from birth, but rabbits less than 12 weeks old will usually live together happily. The best combination is a neutered male and a neutered female. Two litter brothers or two litter sisters will also get on well, but it is important that they are both neutered to prevent fighting.

Happy rabbit relationships

If you have a single rabbit that you would like to pair with another rabbit, it is good to bear in mind the following information when introducing them to each other.

There are two main ways of introducing an unrelated male and female pair, and it will depend on how much space you have and the character of the rabbits as to which you decide to try. Whichever way you choose, it is important to follow five golden rules:

- Do not try to pair adult rabbits that are not neutered, regardless of sex. Neutering has many benefits (*see the All About Pets leaflet Rabbits and surgery (S10)*), however, if the female rabbit is not a suitable candidate for spaying, she could still be paired with a neutered male. In this case, it is important to wait three weeks after he is castrated before they are introduced, to ensure that he can no longer produce viable sperm.
- Also avoid breeding season if pairing an un-neutered female and a neutered male, as her raised hormone levels will make the introduction difficult.
- It is advisable to choose rabbits of the same age and size. Also consider the rabbits' personalities; two very confident and strong spirited rabbits may not be compatible.



- Scent is the primary way that rabbits communicate with each other. Prior to the introduction, it is a good idea to swap furniture and bedding between hutches and also to brush or stroke each in turn; this way each rabbit will already know a bit about the other before they meet, simply by smell.
- Start the introduction early on in the day, so that you have the whole day to supervise their interactions.

Introducing rabbits on neutral territory

- Use a large neutral territory (ie an area unfamiliar to both rabbits). This could be an escape proof area of a garden, a large run or a spare room such as a utility room.
- Provide lots of hiding places so that the rabbits can get away from each other if necessary. As rabbits are territorial,

- be careful not to include items that can be defended. Open ended boxes, open beds and plastic tubes are best.
- Scatter tasty and interesting items of food (such as fruit, vegetables and hay). This not only serves as a positive distraction when they first meet, but also each rabbit will associate the other with something pleasant.
- Place the rabbits at opposite ends of the neutral area and let them meet in their own time. Some chasing, circling and mounting behaviour is normal and to be expected, but you may have to intervene if either rabbit starts to look stressed or they start to become aggressive. This is really important as a rabbit's skin is very thin and could tear easily if a fight was to occur. Signs that the rabbits are getting on are mutual grooming, eating together and lying down next to each other.

- If the rabbits have bonded sufficiently over the course of the day, it may be possible to house them together overnight. Ideally the housing should be unfamiliar to both rabbits, but if you are using the existing hutch and run, make sure it is thoroughly cleaned and preferably moved to a different patch of grass. It is also far easier to introduce the female rabbit to the male rabbit's accommodation than the other way round, as females are more territorial than males. If you have any concerns at all, it is a good idea to keep them separate at night (as they cannot be supervised) and carry on with the introduction on the following day.
- In some cases, the pairing may have to be much more gradual

Introducing rabbits using two runs

- This method allows the rabbits to slowly get used to each other's presence. It is also useful if you do not have a separate neutral area, or are unable to supervise all interactions between the two rabbits.
- Put the two rabbits in separate runs, and arrange it so they are near or directly next to each other. During the course of the day, swap the rabbits over to prevent the rabbits establishing separate territories. As with the previous method, add some tasty treats as a distraction.

When the rabbits' behaviour suggests they are happy with each other (eg lying down relaxed, side by side), you can then introduce them to a joint hutch/pen area, following the previous guidelines. Take care not to rush this stage. Some rabbit pairs may take just a day to bond, whereas others may take several.

Remember...

If rabbits are not given daily opportunity to exercise as they wish, they may suffer from skeletal pain and be bad-tempered as a result.

The Blue Cross aims to promote responsible pet ownership to those of all ages, however, animals are not rehomed solely as pets for children. If the adoption of any animal by a family with children is to be considered, it is essential that an adult is the person who wishes to take on the responsibilities of companion and animal carer.



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.

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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.**



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