

Caring for your pet Rabbit



Is a Rabbit the Right Pet for You?

Rabbits can live for around 10 years, making them a long-term commitment.

Rabbits need a spacious, secure enclosure, a healthy diet, veterinary care, and plenty of time, attention, and enrichment to keep them happy and healthy. Before bringing a rabbit home, it's important to consider whether you can meet their needs throughout their lifetime.

Diet

A rabbit's diet should be made up of approximately 85% hay and grass, 10% fresh vegetables and herbs, and 5% pellets. Their digestive system is very delicate and relies on fibre to function properly. Providing a balanced and appropriate diet is essential to maintaining a rabbit's overall health and wellbeing.

Rabbit droppings are an important way to monitor their overall health.

Your rabbit should produce plenty of dry, round pellets—these are the normal droppings you'll see most often. They also produce caecotrophs, which are softer, darker, and often stuck together with a stronger smell. You may not notice these very often, as rabbits usually eat them immediately after passing them. This is completely normal and plays a vital role in their digestion and nutrient absorption.

If you begin to find caecotrophs left on bedding or stuck to your rabbit's bottom, it may indicate an underlying issue and it would be a good idea to seek advice from your vet.

If your rabbit has runny or watery poo it is important your Rabbit sees a vet straight away.

Housing and Habitat

Appropriate housing is one of the most important factors in maintaining your rabbit's health and welfare. Rabbits are active, intelligent, social animals that need sufficient space, companionship, and environmental enrichment to express their natural behaviours every day.

Space to Live and Exercise

Rabbits require **permanent access to a large, secure living area** that allows them to move freely at all times.

Their accommodation should allow them to:

- Stand fully upright on their hind legs without their ears touching the roof.
- Lie fully stretched out in any direction.
- Hop, run, jump and perform energetic behaviours such as "binkies" and zooming.
- Explore, forage and investigate their surroundings.

A hutch alone is **not** sufficient accommodation. Outdoor rabbits should have a permanently attached, predator-proof exercise enclosure, while indoor rabbits should have access to a rabbit-proofed room or large indoor pen.

Indoor and Outdoor Housing

Rabbits can thrive indoors or outdoors when their needs are met.

Outdoor housing

Outdoor accommodation should:

- Be weatherproof, well ventilated and waterproof.
- Provide protection from wind, rain, snow and direct sunlight.
- Offer both sunny and shaded areas.
- Be secure against predators or your pet escaping.
- Include sheltered 'sleeping' area where rabbits can hide and rest.

Indoor housing

Indoor rabbits should have:

- A spacious pen or dedicated rabbit-safe room.
- Non-slip flooring to reduce the risk of injury.
- A quiet area away from excessive noise and the business of your home. hazards.
- Safe access to exercise for several hours each day, or even better .

Temperature

Rabbits cope well with cool temperatures but are highly susceptible to over heating.

During warm weather:

- Provide constant shade.
- Ensure good ventilation.
- Offer cool ceramic tiles or frozen water bottles wrapped in towels.
- Provide unlimited fresh drinking water.

Outdoor accommodation should remain dry throughout the year, with warm bedding available during cold weather while maintaining adequate ventilation.

Bedding and Flooring

Provide clean, dry, absorbent, dust-extracted bedding with comfortable resting areas.

Suitable materials include:

- Paper-based bedding.
- Dust extracted shavings
- Straw for warmth and nesting.
- Plenty of good-quality hay, which also encourages natural foraging and feeding behaviour.

Avoid:

- Dusty bedding.
- Wire mesh flooring as the main surface, as it can cause sore hocks (ulcerative pododermatitis).
- Cedar or non-dust-extracted shavings.

Solid flooring with bedding provides the best support and comfort.

Environmental Enrichment

Rabbits need a stimulating environment that allows them to express natural behaviours.

Provide:

- Constant access to good-quality feeding hay.
- Tunnels and hide boxes.

- Platforms or shelves for climbing and observation.
- Cardboard boxes for exploration.
- Safe chew toys and untreated rabbit-safe branches.
- Digging opportunities, such as boxes filled with shredded paper, soil (free from pesticides), or child-safe play sand.
- Scatter feeding and foraging opportunities to encourage natural feeding behaviour.

Regularly changing the layout or rotating enrichment items can help maintain interest.

Social Companionship

Rabbits are highly social animals and should normally be kept in bonded pairs or groups.

The ideal companion is usually a neutered rabbit of the opposite sex.

Rabbits should **not** be housed with guinea pigs, as the two species have different dietary, behavioural and health requirements. Rabbits also have strong back legs and can easily injure a guinea pig.

Hygiene

Clean toileting areas daily and thoroughly clean the enclosure regularly while retaining some familiar scent to minimise stress.

Ensure rabbits always have:

- Unlimited fresh hay.
- Fresh drinking water available at all times.
- Clean feeding and resting areas.

Good hygiene helps reduce the risk of flystrike, parasitic disease and other health problems.

Exercise

Rabbits should have continuous opportunities for exercise within their permanent living area.

Daily activity helps:

- Maintain a healthy body weight.
- Support normal gut movement.
- Promote healthy bones and joints.
- Reduce boredom and frustration.

- Allow rabbits to express normal behaviours.

Outdoor exercise areas should always be secure and protected from predators.

Daily Health Checks

Observe your rabbit every day for:

- A normal appetite.
- Regular production of droppings and urine.
- Bright eyes and a clean nose.
- Clean fur around the tail.
- Normal movement and behaviour.
- Signs of pain, injury or illness.

Rabbits can deteriorate rapidly if unwell. If your rabbit stops eating, produces fewer droppings, appears quiet, shows signs of pain, or has difficulty breathing, contact your veterinary practice immediately.

Grooming

Regular grooming is an important part of maintaining your rabbit's health and welfare. Grooming helps keep the coat clean, allows early detection of health problems, and provides an opportunity to monitor your rabbit's body condition. The amount of grooming required varies depending on your rabbit's coat type, age, and health.

Coat Care

Healthy rabbits groom themselves frequently, but most rabbits benefit from regular owner-assisted grooming.

- Short-haired rabbits should be brushed approximately once a week.
- Long-haired breeds, such as Lionheads, Angoras and Jersey Woolly rabbits, require daily grooming to prevent matting.
- Increase grooming frequency during seasonal moults, when rabbits shed large amounts of fur.

Use a soft brush, grooming mitt or fine-toothed comb suitable for rabbits. Groom gently, taking care not to pull on the skin, which is delicate and easily damaged.

Moulting

Most rabbits undergo seasonal moults, during which they lose large amounts of fur.

Regular brushing during this time helps:

- Remove loose hair.
- Reduce the amount of fur swallowed during self-grooming.
- Keep the coat clean and comfortable.

A rabbit that is eating well, consuming plenty of hay and remaining active is usually able to pass ingested hair through the digestive system. Hair itself does not cause gut stasis, but excessive fur can contribute to problems if normal gut movement slows.

If your rabbit stops eating, produces fewer droppings or appears quiet during a moult, seek veterinary advice promptly.

Preventing Matting

Matted fur can be uncomfortable, restrict movement and trap moisture, urine or faeces against the skin.

Pay particular attention to:

- The hindquarters.
- Under the tail.
- Around the dewlap (if present).
- Long-haired areas behind the ears and around the neck.

Small tangles may be gently teased apart with a comb. Large or tight mats should not be cut with household scissors, as rabbit skin tears very easily. Seek veterinary or experienced nursing assistance if mats cannot be safely removed.

Nail Care

Rabbit nails grow continuously and should be checked regularly.

Nails may require trimming if they:

- Become excessively long.
- Curl.
- Affect normal walking or posture.

Many active rabbits naturally wear their nails down on suitable surfaces, while older rabbits or those housed on soft flooring may require more frequent trimming.

If you are unsure how to trim your rabbit's nails safely, ask your veterinary practice to demonstrate the correct technique.

Eyes, Ears and Nose

Check your rabbit daily for:

- Bright, clear eyes.

- Clean ears without excessive wax or discharge.
- A clean, dry nose without discharge.

Never insert cotton buds or other objects into your rabbit's ears.

If you notice discharge, swelling, redness or a head tilt, arrange a veterinary examination promptly.

Keeping the Rear End Clean

Your rabbit's fur around the tail and hindquarters should remain clean and dry.

A dirty bottom is not normal and may indicate:

- Dental disease.
- Obesity.
- Arthritis.
- Urinary disease.
- Digestive problems.
- An inappropriate diet.

Urine scald and faecal soiling can quickly lead to painful skin disease and increase the risk of flystrike.

If your rabbit is regularly becoming dirty, they should be examined by a veterinarian to identify and treat the underlying cause.

Bathing

Rabbits should **not** be routinely bathed.

Bathing can:

- Cause significant stress.
- Damage the natural coat.
- Increase the risk of hypothermia.
- Lead to injury if the rabbit struggles.

If cleaning is necessary, gently remove soiling using a damp cloth or seek veterinary advice. Severely soiled rabbits should be assessed by a veterinary professional.

Flystrike Prevention

Flystrike is a life-threatening emergency, particularly during warm weather.

Reduce the risk by:

- Checking your rabbit's rear end at least once daily, and twice daily during warm weather.
- Keeping housing clean and dry.
- Feeding a high-fibre diet to promote normal droppings.
- Maintaining a healthy body weight.
- Seeking veterinary advice promptly if your rabbit becomes unable to keep themselves clean.

If you see fly eggs, maggots or notice a foul smell, contact your veterinary practice immediately.

Daily Grooming Checks

While grooming your rabbit, look for:

- Lumps or swellings.
- Hair loss.
- Red or sore skin.
- Parasites such as fleas or mites.
- Wounds or scabs.
- Changes in body weight or muscle condition.
- Pain or sensitivity when handled.

Regular grooming allows many health problems to be recognised early, when treatment is often simpler and more effective.

Key Welfare Message

Grooming is more than keeping your rabbit's coat tidy. Regular coat care, nail checks and daily health observations help prevent disease, improve comfort and strengthen your ability to recognise when your rabbit may need veterinary attention.

Understanding Your Rabbit's Behaviour

Rabbits are intelligent, social animals with complex behavioural needs. Understanding their natural behaviour helps keep them healthy, happy, and reduces the risk of stress-related illness.

Rabbits Need Rabbit Companions

Rabbits are highly social animals and should normally live with another neutered, compatible rabbit. A bonded pair provides companionship, comfort, and opportunities for natural behaviours such as grooming, playing, and resting together. Rabbits kept alone are more likely to experience boredom, loneliness, and stress.

Allow Natural Behaviours

Rabbits need space and enrichment to express their normal behaviours. Every day they should be able to:

- Run, sprint, and perform energetic "binkies" (happy jumps).
- Stand fully upright on their hind legs.
- Dig and burrow.
- Forage for food.
- Explore new environments safely.
- Chew appropriate materials to maintain healthy teeth.

Providing toys, tunnels, cardboard boxes, platforms, untreated wood, hay-filled forage boxes, and digging trays helps keep rabbits mentally stimulated.

Recognising a Happy Rabbit

Signs that your rabbit is relaxed and content include:

- Binkying (jumping and twisting in the air).
- Flopping onto their side to rest.
- Gentle tooth purring (soft grinding when being stroked).
- Grooming themselves or their bonded companion.
- Curiosity and willingness to explore.
- Eating hay regularly throughout the day.

Recognising Stress or Fear

Rabbits are very good at hiding when they are scared or unwell but signs to look out for are

- Hiding more than usual.
- Freezing or crouching.
- Wide eyes or flattened ears.
- Aggression when handled.
- Thumping their hind feet.
- Reduced appetite or reluctance to move.
- Excessive chewing of cage bars or repetitive behaviours.

Behavioural changes are often an early sign of pain or illness. If your rabbit suddenly changes behaviour, stops eating, or appears quieter than normal, contact your veterinary practice immediately.

Gentle Handling

Most rabbits do not enjoy being picked up, better ways to interact can be

- Encourage your rabbit to approach you with treats
- Sit on the floor and allow them to investigate their environment and you
- Support their whole body if lifting is necessary.
- **NEVER** lift rabbits by their ears or scruff.

Positive, gentle interactions help build trust over time.

Housing Matters

Rabbits require far more space than a shop bought hutch provides. Their accommodation should allow continuous access to:

- A large secure living area with plenty of room to exercise.
- Shelter from extreme weather.
- Hiding places and elevated platforms.
- Fresh hay, clean water, and suitable enrichment.

Preventing Boredom

Rotate toys regularly and provide daily opportunities for exploration. Simple enrichment ideas include:

- Scatter feeding pellets amongst hay.
- Stuff cardboard tubes with hay and herbs.
- Create tunnels using cardboard boxes.
- Offer safe branches from rabbit-friendly trees for chewing.
- Hide healthy treats to encourage foraging.

Routine Health Care

Regular veterinary health checks, vaccinations, parasite control, neutering, and monitoring of weight and dental health all help keep your bunny healthy!

Neutering:

Our practice recommends neutering male rabbits from 12 weeks of age and females when they are around 18 weeks old. Neutering rabbits reduces aggressive behaviour in both sexes and urine spraying in males. It allows rabbits to be kept in pairs or groups without stress and without the risk of unwanted litters. Apart from the behavioural benefits, neutering also prevents common serious health issues in females like infection and cancer of the reproductive tract. While testicular cancer and prostate problems in males are not as common, they are potentially serious and can be prevented by castration.

<https://rabbitwelfare.co.uk/neutering-castration-and-spaying/>

Rabbit vaccination policy:

It is important to protect your rabbits against 2 potentially fatal infectious diseases; Myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD), for which vaccines are available. We have a combined Myxomatosis + VHD vaccine which covers 2 strains of VHD and can be given from 5 weeks of age, this should be repeated once per year.

A new strain of VHD has recently been discovered in Europe which is suspected to have entered the UK. This requires an additional vaccine called 'Yurvac'

To protect against all these diseases we recommend Nobivac Myxo-RHD plus from 5 weeks and then the new YURVAC vaccine to cover against the new strain of RVHD2 2-6 weeks later. After that an annual vaccination plan would be to have each vaccine every year maintaining the 2-week gap between them.

<https://rabbitwelfare.co.uk/vaccines/>

Rabbit Enrichment

Keeping Your Rabbit Happy and healthy!

Enrichment is anything that encourages your rabbit to express its natural behaviours. Rabbits are intelligent, active animals that need both physical exercise and mental stimulation every day. Providing enrichment helps prevent boredom, reduces stress, and supports good physical and emotional health.

Why Is this Important?

Rabbits that do not have enough mental enrichment may become bored or frustrated, which can lead to:

- Destructive chewing.

- Digging in inappropriate places.
- Repetitive behaviours such as bar chewing or pacing.
- Obesity due to lack of exercise.
- Reduced confidence and increased stress.
- Poor overall welfare.

Encourage Natural Behaviours

Your rabbit should have opportunities every day to:

- Run, jump and perform "binkies".
- Dig and burrow.
- Forage for food.
- Explore new objects and environments.
- Hide and feel safe.
- Climb onto platforms to observe their surroundings.
- Chew safe materials to help maintain healthy teeth.
- Interact with a bonded rabbit companion.

Feeding Enrichment

Food can provide excellent mental stimulation. Instead of feeding all food from a bowl:

- Scatter pellets around the enclosure.
- Hide herbs amongst hay.
- Stuff cardboard tubes with hay and forage.
- Use feeding balls or rabbit-safe puzzle feeders.
- Hang safe leafy greens for rabbits to stretch towards.
- Offer a variety of safe grasses and herbs throughout the week.

Remember that good-quality hay should make up the majority of your rabbit's diet and should always be available.

Toys and Activities

Simple enrichment ideas include:

- Cardboard boxes with entrances and exits cut into them.
- Paper bags filled with hay (remove any handles).

- Untreated willow balls and chew toys.
- Apple, pear or willow branches from untreated trees.
- Cardboard tunnels.
- Digging boxes filled with shredded paper, hay or child-safe play sand.
- Platforms and ramps for climbing.
- Safe plastic plant pots turned upside down for jumping onto.

Rotate toys every few days to keep your rabbit interested.

Create an Interesting Environment

Rabbits enjoy environments that change over time. Try:

- Rearranging tunnels and hideouts.
- Lots of different hiding places.
- Multiple levels.
- Hiding ares.

Always ensure any new items are safe and cannot trap or injure your rabbit.

Social Enrichment

The best enrichment for most rabbits is the company of another compatible, neutered rabbit. Bonded rabbits:

- Groom one another.
- Rest together.
- Play together.
- Feel more secure.
- Display more natural behaviours.

People cannot fully replace rabbit companionship.

Safe Chewing

Chewing is a normal and essential rabbit behaviour that helps wear down continuously growing teeth.

Suitable chew items include:

- Unlimited hay.
- Untreated willow.
- Apple or pear branches.

- Cardboard.
- Rabbit-safe wooden toys.

Avoid painted, varnished or treated wood, and do not offer items containing glue, staples or small plastic parts.

Signs Your Rabbit Is Enjoying Their Environment

Enriched rabbits are more likely to:

- Explore confidently.
- Spend time foraging.
- Perform binkies and zoomies.
- Rest comfortably.
- Interact positively with their companion.
- Maintain a healthy weight through regular activity.

Enrichment does not have to be expensive. Many of the best enrichment items are what you will find at home such as cardboard boxes, hay-filled tubes, paper bags, and safe branches.

Veterinary Care

Rabbits are a prey animal which means they can be very good at hiding when they are poorly. It is important to know what is normal for your rabbit and if watch for subtle changes that may be signs of underlying concerns.

Signs to look out for

Reduced appetite or not eating at all (this is an emergency due to gut stasis)

Not passing faeces

Diarrhoea

Lethargic or not carrying out normal daily behaviours or exercise

Crusty or wet eyes, nose or ears

Head tilt

Lameness

A wet, dirty smelly bottom – fly strike

Dental issues or difficulty chewing or eating

Lumps or swellings

Not grooming, fur soaked with urine or stuck with faeces

Breathing difficulties (Seek immediate help)

Bleeding from anywhere

Discomfort or straining to urinate

Heat stroke – Rabbits can overheat very easily