

Rabbit care

Rabbits can make great pets, but they have certain needs that need to be met for them to live a healthy life. Life span of a rabbit is on average 8-12 years. The world record for the longest-lived rabbit is 18 years!

Housing

- Pet rabbits can be kept both indoors and outdoors. Rabbits can be given **free roam** of the house, but it is important to **rabbit-proof your home**. Rabbits tend to chew and scratch on various items. Electric cords and house plants are the most important hazards. **Outdoor exercise** is great as it allows **sunshine exposure**, which is beneficial to health, and grazing on grass. If given free roam of the backyard, it is important that the yard is **escape-proof and predator-proof**, and that shaded areas are provided.
- Rabbits need a **burrow** to run and hide in, where they feel safe and secure. A burrow can be provided in the form of a cardboard box, commercially available wooden boxes, a covered corner or a similar feature where your rabbit can escape to.
- A hutch should be a temporary home only for your rabbit. Hutches should be wire-topped to allow ventilation. Bedding should be provided with a thick layer of soft substrate such as hay or straw, replaced regularly. Wire-bottomed flooring is not appropriate. A hutch should be secure, predator-proof, and weather-proof (from rain, wind and extreme temperatures). Rabbits are **sensitive to hot weather** and can quickly die from heat stroke. A hutch should be large enough to allow your rabbit to express normal behaviours. A hutch should be cleaned out completely at least once weekly and spot-cleaned daily.
- **Opportunities for exercise** should be provided daily. This is essential for physical and mental health, particularly gastrointestinal and urinary tract health as diseases of these systems are common in sedentary rabbits.
- Rabbits can be toilet trained. A litter tray can be filled with hay, straw or recycled paper cat litter. It may be beneficial for the litter tray to have a tall lip to encourage your rabbit to jump in and out. This may reduce accumulation of bladder sludge.
- **Enrichment** can be provided by offering toilet paper/paper towel cardboard tubes, cardboard boxes, wooden toys, wooden branches and more, with food items hidden throughout. This encourages exercise, exploration and normal digging behaviour.

Diet

Appropriate diet is one of the most important aspects of pet rabbit health. In the wild, rabbits spend many hours a day grazing on grass and wild plants. Rabbits' digestive tract, including their continuously growing teeth, are adapted to spending many hours a day eating and chewing fibrous vegetation. Poor nutrition is a significant cause of disease in rabbits, in particular dental and gastrointestinal disease, and obesity.

Pet rabbits should be provided a hay/grass and green leafy vegetable based-diet.

- **80% of the diet should be grass hay and/or fresh grass.**
 - Examples of grass hay are timothy, oaten, wheaten, meadow. This should be available to your rabbit **at all times**. Lucerne/alfalfa is **NOT** a grass hay; it is a legume, which is too high in protein and calcium, and is not suitable for adult rabbits.
 - Fresh grass and garden plants, such as dandelions, are also very nutritious, high in fibre and enjoyed by rabbits.

- **20% of the diet should be green leafy veggies.** Examples of suitable green leafy vegetables include Bok choy, other Asian greens, spinach, kale, carrot tops, dark coloured lettuce, celery, broccoli, parsley, basil, other herbs. As a general guide, 1-2 cups per kg per day of at least 3 different varieties should be provided.
- Many commercial rabbit pellets/mixes are not nutritionally balanced for rabbits and can predispose to health problems, including dental disease, gastrointestinal upsets and obesity. If feeding pellets, then opt for a high-quality grass-based pellets (eg. Oxbow Bunny Basics) and limit the amount to ¼ cup per 2kg rabbit.
- Suitable treats include pellets, fruits, carrot. **Treats** should be restricted to **1 tablespoon per day**.
- **DO NOT** feed food high in carbohydrates, fat or simple sugars, such as cereals, grains, seeds, nuts, bread, biscuits, chocolate, corn, beans, peas.
- **Water** should be available from a **bowl** (heavy-based ceramic bowls are less likely to be tipped over). A sipper bottle can also be provided. However, a sipper bottle should not be the sole water source as most rabbits prefer drinking from an open bowl.
- Diet change should occur gradually over a few weeks to avoid digestive upsets.

Handling

- Rabbits can kick very powerfully with their legs and scratch, so it is important to handle them properly to avoid injury to yourself or your rabbit. When picking up and handling your rabbit, support the hind end from underneath and support the front of the body under the chest and forelimbs.
- Do not pick up a rabbit by its ears or around the belly.
- Long-haired rabbits can be brushed regularly. Nails may need to be trimmed occasionally.

Health care

- Newly acquired rabbits should be checked by a vet. Annual check-ups are recommended thereafter.
- Discuss with your vet the requirements for desexing, Calicivirus vaccination and parasite control.
- Due to **high incidence of uterine cancer in female rabbits**, desexing female rabbits is highly recommended.