

RABBIT CARE

Rabbits 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 9-12 years. The world record for the longest-lived rabbit is 18 years!

Rabbits can **free roam** indoors and don't need a hutch

- It is important to **rabbit-proof your home**. Rabbits tend to chew on various items. Electric cords and house plants are the most important hazards.
- Rabbits are easily toilet trained. A litter tray can be filled with hay, straw or recycled paper litter. If your rabbit doesn't have mobility problems, 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 the accumulation of bladder sludge.
- 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, wooden boxes, a covered corner or similar.

Outdoor exercise allows beneficial **sunshine exposure** 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 as rabbits are prone to heat stroke.

A hutch should be a temporary home **only** for your rabbit

- Hutches are not suitable permanent homes for rabbits and many commercially available hutches are too small to allow rabbits to exercise or express normal behaviours.
- If using a hutch, it 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. Rabbits are **sensitive to hot weather** and can quickly die from heat stroke.
- A hutch should be cleaned out completely at least once weekly and spot-cleaned daily.

Binkies and zoomies

- **Opportunities for exercise** should be provided daily, which is essential for physical and mental health. Gastrointestinal disease, urinary tract disease and obesity are common in sedentary rabbits.
- **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 is one of the most important aspects of rabbit health

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, including dental and gastrointestinal disease, and obesity.

~ 80% of the diet (size of rabbit's body) should be **grass hay** and/or **fresh grass**

- Examples of grass hay are timothy, oaten, teff, orchard, meadow. This should always be available to your rabbit. Lucerne/alfalfa is NOT a grass hay; it is a legume, which is too high in protein and calcium for adult rabbits.
- Fresh grass and garden plants, such as dandelions, are very nutritious and enjoyed by rabbits.

~ 20% of the diet should be a variety of **green leafy veggies**

- Examples of suitable green leafy vegetables include Bok choy, other Asian greens, kale, spinach, carrot tops, dark-coloured lettuce, celery, broccoli, parsley, basil, mint and other herbs. As a guide, 1-2 cups per kg per day of at least 3 different varieties should be provided.

Bugs Bunny is a fictional rabbit

- A carrot is a treat! **Treats** should be restricted to **1 tablespoon per day**. Other suitable treats include a piece of fruit, such as an apple or strawberry.
- DO NOT feed foods high in carbohydrates, fat or simple sugars, such as cereals, grains, seeds, nuts, bread, biscuits, chocolate, corn, beans. Some rabbit mixes may contain these ingredients, which can predispose to health problems.
- If feeding pellets to a healthy rabbit, opt for high-quality grass-based pellets and limit the amount to ¼ cup per 2kg rabbit. This may vary for rabbits with existing health problems or geriatric rabbits.

Water should be available from a heavy-based ceramic **bowl** that can't be tipped

- A sipper bottle should not be the sole water source as most rabbits prefer drinking from an open bowl.

Handling & Health care

- Rabbits can kick 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 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.
- Rabbits can be brushed, particularly long-haired rabbits. Some rabbits may need to be groomed/clipped. Nails may need to be clipped occasionally.
- 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.
- Vaccination against Calicivirus is highly recommended.
- Due to the **high incidence of uterine cancer in female rabbits**, desexing female rabbits is highly recommended.
- Rabbits are social creatures and benefit from having companionship. Desexing is recommended before bonding rabbits.