



Village Vet

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Your Rabbit

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Introduction

Rabbits have been domesticated for so long that there is now the inevitable variation from their ancestors, but all except the lop-eared retain the most recognisable features of the wild rabbit, the long erect ears, long hind legs and their short distinct tail. There are some 35 breeds. Normal breeds have short dense coat and Rex breeds have magnificent velvet-like coats. Fancy breeds include lops, angoras (long hair which requires daily grooming), dwarfs and Dutch.

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Basic Information

Rabbits can leave their mothers from the age of 6 weeks by which time they should be fully weaned. Their lifespan in captivity averages 6-10 years. The male is known as the buck and the female as a doe. When sexing young rabbits it should be noted that the distance between the anus and the genital opening is greater in the male. The male has a round genital opening which contains the penis and the female has a slit that is V-shaped. With maturity the male's testicles appear. They are usually fully developed by the age of 4 months, from which age the male can be castrated.

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Housing

It is important when homing a rabbit that consideration is given to its natural behaviour patterns and needs. Rabbits are sociable animals that like to jump and burrow. Ideally, rabbits should be with a companion, preferably another rabbit and have plenty of space to exercise and explore. They need a weatherproof hutch (approximately 60" wide x 24" high x 24" depth per rabbit) with a separate sleeping area with a solid wall to protect the rabbits from the elements. The rest of the hutch should have an open area with a wire mesh door. Consideration must be given to the positioning of the hutch so that it is sheltered and away from the prevailing winds and it should be raised slightly off the ground to avoid rising damp.

The hutch should have plenty of bedding provided. This can be either straw or fresh meadow hay. It should be thoroughly cleaned once a week, but checked daily to ensure no excessively damp or dirty areas are developing.

Rabbits need exercise and they should either have access to their runs at all times or allowed to have daily access for at least eight hours per day. It is important that the run allows the rabbit to stretch out properly and use its powerful hindlimbs. A wooden frame covered with chicken wire measuring 4ft wide x 8ft long and 3ft high minimum is required. The chicken wire should be sunk at least 15 inches into the ground to stop the rabbits burrowing out. If the rabbits are unable to burrow within the enclosure it is important to provide sections of pipe of approximately 6" diameter so that

the rabbits can run and hide in them as substitute burrows. Items such as wooden boxes should be added to give the rabbits something to jump on (which helps strengthen their muscles) and gives variety to the floor area. Make sure that the sides of the pen are at least one meter higher than the highest box to prevent the rabbits jumping out (unless the pen has a mesh cover).

It is possible to litter train rabbits and to allow them in your house but you must bear in mind that they are likely to chew wires and furniture.

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Co-habitation

Rabbits can live happily with other rabbits providing consideration is given to compatibility of the animals. Female rabbits from the same litter can live happily together; males from the same litter can also live happily together provided that they are castrated at about 4 months. If males are kept together and they are not castrated they will fight, causing each other serious injuries. Females not from the same litter will fight if introduced to each other. Another possible combination is to have a castrated male with one or more females (remembering that the females must be from the same litter, and that a castrated male does not become sterile until 4 weeks after neutering). Sometimes, especially with a mature male rabbit which has been castrated, it can take up to 6-8 weeks for his testosterone to reduce to a level at which he will no longer persistently try to mate the female rabbit. It is important to give the male and female or females a chance to get used to each other without having direct physical contact, as quite serious fighting may ensue. Start by putting them in individual pens separated by wire mesh partitions so that they can form a relationship through the mesh without risk of injury. Eventually after a few weeks they should have become familiar with each other and can be put together. There may be a little chasing around but as long as there are no serious injuries they should be alright.

Rabbits are best kept with other rabbits for companions. Guinea pigs may make successful mates but because rabbits are much stronger they may harm the guinea pigs if they do not get on.

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Food and Drink

Rabbits are herbivores. Ideally they should be allowed to graze on fresh grass, which is their main source of food in the wild, but their diet should also include fresh hay, concentrates (Russell Rabbit food or rabbit pellets), carrots, apples, cauliflower leaves, and cabbage. Concentrates form an important part of a balanced diet for the rabbit but it is essential that the rabbits learn to eat all the components of the mix to avoid dietary deficiency. They can also be given fresh dandelions and clover (make sure they have not been sprayed with anything toxic and didn't grow too near a road and that they have not been contaminated by dogs). The concentrates should be put in heavy duty earthenware dishes that the rabbits cannot tip over. Grass lawn mowings and more than the occasional lettuce leaf may cause diarrhoea so should be avoided. Water should also be freely available.

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General Health Advice

It is important to check on rabbits daily to ensure that they are bright and lively and they are eating their food often. All the teeth keep growing throughout the rabbit's life and an incorrect diet can cause them serious problems, especially if the wrong food is given when the animals are very young.

Pet rabbits must be able to gnaw on pieces of wood, e.g. branches of willow, pear or apple. Animals fed on a low fibre diet, or unwell animals, may accumulate soft faeces around the backside, which can lead to fly strike in summer. With fly strike the flies lay eggs on the rabbit which quickly hatch into maggots. The maggots will feed on the faeces and then on the rabbit itself. This is a very distressing and often fatal conditions for the rabbit which requires immediate veterinary attention.

Domestic rabbits are susceptible to the same diseases as the wild rabbit population. Your rabbit should be vaccinated against both myxomatosis and VHD (viral haemorrhagic disease). Myxomatosis is a virus transmitted by biting insects, particular the rabbit flea, which can be carried into your garden by a wild rabbit, birds, cats, dogs or even in the straw for bedding. The VHD virus is present in the saliva and nasal secretion of the rabbits. It is spread either by direct contact with infected rabbits, or by viruses from infected rabbits being inadvertently transported on people, clothing, objects, birds and other animals. Rabbits can be vaccinated from 6 weeks of age. The VHD vaccine is given 2 weeks after the myxomatosis vaccine.

Hopefully, as long as your rabbits have the correct diet, plenty of fresh air and exercise, and avoid heat stress in summer, they should remain healthy.

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Emergency care

If your pet is in distress, whether through the sudden onset of an illness, or through accident, it's important to get vet care as soon as possible. Waiting until 'normal business hours' not only prolongs the animal's suffering, but it may make the complaint worse, or cause permanent damage.

We are available at all times for [24 hour accident and emergency care](#).

[More information on your pet](#)

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