

# Rabbit Care



“**Congratulations on adopting a rabbit from the SPCA. Rabbits bring enormous joy into our lives and we wish you many years of happiness together.**”

This guide has been developed to help answer some common questions about settling your new rabbit into your home. If you have any other questions or concerns after adoption, please call your local SPCA and they will be happy to assist.



## **Pet insurance**

The SPCA highly recommends buying pet insurance to cover the costs of unexpected illnesses or pet emergencies. Vet care can be expensive so we encourage all adopters to obtain suitable pet insurance to suit your needs and budget.

# Preparing for your new rabbit

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You will need some basic supplies before bringing your new rabbit home. Many SPCA centres have pet stores where you can purchase many of these items.

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When you buy from the SPCA, you receive quality products and expert advice. You also help support other animals in need as all revenue directly supports the SPCA.



## The journey home

Getting a new rabbit is exciting. Please don't be tempted to open the rabbit carrier on the journey home or try to play with your rabbit in the car. The rabbit may be scared and unpredictable in the car and may try to escape. It's safer to wait until you get home.

### Rabbit shopping list

- Large hutch and exercise run
- Indoor crate or large cage
- Food bowl
- Water bottle
- Food (hay, rabbit pellets)
- Suitable bedding (straw, hay or shredded paper)
- Brush or comb
- Litter tray and litter
- Scoop for litter tray
- Toys – e.g. treat balls, tunnels, slinkys
- Collapsible play pen

# Settling in

Rabbits can live happily either indoors or outdoors.

## If your rabbit lives outside

Your rabbit will need a roomy hutch and an exercise run that will allow it to stand up fully on its hind legs, plus allow plenty of room to hop around. Place the hutch facing the morning sun. Make sure the rabbit has access to shade during the summer and is protected from the rain and wind during the winter. Rabbits need lots of exercise and companionship. A hutch and exercise run is not enough – they also need time outside their pen every day as well as social time with you.

## Hutch and run size

- Many hutches sold in shops are far too small. Your hutch should be no smaller than 2m long. We recommend an ideal hutch size of 3m (length) x 1.5m (width) x 0.75m (height)
- The hutch should connect to a run (as large as possible) to allow your rabbit to hop, run, jump and stand fully upright on their back legs



## Hutch requirements

- The sleeping area should be slightly raised off the ground and must be weatherproof and draught-proof
- Strong mesh sides will allow air and light to enter
- Your hutch must be predator proof, as dogs and cats can kill your rabbit
- There should be areas to hide and play
- There should be raised areas for your rabbit to sit on, sunbathe and look out
- Digging is a normal rabbit behaviour. If digging is leading to problems such as escaping, refer to our website for advice.

## If your rabbit lives inside

You can litter train rabbits (see information on the following pages), and they can live inside with you as part of the family.

### They will need:

- A safe place for sleep and unsupervised play, with a water bowl, bedding, food dish, litter trays and toys
- Supervision when loose in the house
- A rabbit-proof environment:
  - Tape electrical and phone cords where they cannot be chewed (even if your rabbit is on its hind legs)
  - Consider getting cord protectors and covers for electrical outlets
  - Move potted plants where they cannot be eaten, as they are likely to be poisonous
  - Remove children's toys, clothing, etc. that you don't want chewed
- You can train your rabbit to use a cat door for easy access to a secure outside area

### Bedding

- Straw, hay or shredded paper on a layer of newspaper is best
- Do not use treated timber and wood shavings as bedding. They can be fatal

## Exercise

- Provide supervised exercise time in the backyard where they are free to hop around for at least one hour daily (this area needs to be secure and rabbit-proof) or use a large exercise pen

### Mental stimulation

- Rabbits also need mental stimulation
- Add ramps, tunnels, boxes, climbable objects and plenty of toys to your rabbit's home

### Safe spaces

- Rabbits in the wild use high points to check for danger. Provide objects to jump up on and sunbathe or sleep so that your rabbit can exhibit this natural behaviour
- Rabbits naturally live underground so provide protected areas and hidey holes where they feel safe and secure:
  - Cardboard boxes of different sizes
  - Wicker baskets (untreated ones) filled with hay
  - Tunnels

# Handling

Rabbits are naturally sociable animals and enjoy lots of attention and company. But it might take your new rabbit a little while to get used to you and their new home. Remember, too, that in the wild rabbits can be attacked by predators, so they are naturally fearful of a sudden approach, especially from above.

- Never sneak up on your rabbit
- Let the rabbit come and sniff you on their own terms. Then offer a treat and a gentle stroke

## HOW TO PICK UP YOUR RABBIT

- Place one hand under the chest
- One hand supporting back legs
- Hold gently but securely against your chest
- Rabbits' spines are fragile and can fracture easily. The hind legs need to be secure so they cannot kick out and damage their spine
- Supervise and train children to hold your rabbit properly

- Give your rabbit a few gentle strokes before picking up
- Do not rush contact or force your rabbit to be held. Use firm but gentle handling
- Spend some time on the floor hanging out with your rabbit so they get used to your presence
- The more you handle your rabbit the quieter and friendlier it will be



# Litter training

1 Start your rabbit off in a small room first. This will be their 'base' room where you can contain them when you have guests or if you are at work. This room should be a bathroom or laundry with vinyl, wood or tiled floors as these are easier to clean and you will avoid urine damage to carpets.

2 Rabbit-proof the room. Hide or protect any electrical cords, pot plants, toys, furniture, etc.

3 Place litter trays in an area that suits you, line with thick newspaper and fill with shredded paper, straw or litter.

Place fresh hay at one end of the tray, well clear of where it can be soiled. Hanging it up is best, so use your imagination or look for a hay manger at pet stores.

## TIP

Place the hay at the far end against the wall so the rabbit has to jump into the tray to reach it.

4 Keep your rabbit confined to this room until they are successfully using the tray, otherwise you may have unwanted accidents. Your rabbit is likely to return to any 'accident' spot to use it again. This will halt the litter tray training process.

5 Once your rabbit is using the tray, you can allow it into other rooms. If your rabbit is toileting in a room you would prefer they didn't, place a second litter tray in this room but without hay above it. Rabbits generally prefer a litter tray with hay above it. If your rabbit continues to toilet in this room, you may need to have multiple litter trays, or limit their access to the room.

Remember, your rabbit is not going to be perfect all the time. Don't take it personally when they make mistakes – just remember to praise them when they get it right.

For litter training in an outside hutch, follow steps 3 and 4 above. If the rabbit chooses another spot, move the tray and hay to the favoured area.

You can try slowly moving the litter tray in stages towards your favoured spot, but it is far less frustrating to accept your rabbit's choice than to get them to go where you want.

**Litter trays must be changed daily or twice daily. If you have two rabbits, provide each with their own tray.**

# Feeding

Hay and grass should form the basis (80%) of your rabbit's diet. The remainder of your rabbit's diet should be fresh vegetables (15%) and a small amount of pellets (around 5%).

## Hay

- Hay is a vital part of a rabbit's diet (do not confuse with straw which is for bedding only)
- Provide a good-sized handful of fresh hay every day
- Hay provides fibre and helps wear down a rabbit's teeth
- Purchase fresh hay from feed stores or some pet shops
- Make sure it is not damp, dusty or mouldy as this could cause respiratory illness

## Grass and garden greens

- Rabbits love grass, dandelion leaves, thistle/ puha, plantain leaves and dock leaves
- Ensure the leaves haven't been sprayed with poison or repellents
- Rabbits love fresh herbs which provide health benefits. A herb garden can lead to a happy, healthy bunny

## Fresh vegetables

- Feeding a variety of fresh vegetables provides essential nutrients. See our website for rabbit-safe fresh foods
- Introduce vegetables slowly, one at a time. If they cause diarrhoea, stop feeding them immediately
- Rabbits under 12 weeks have sensitive stomachs so introduce all new foods very gradually from 12 weeks. This prevents diarrhoea which can be fatal at a young age

## Pellets

- Avoid pellets with dried fruits, nuts, grains and coloured pieces which are high in fat, sugar and salt
- Choose pellets with high fibre content (>15%) and less protein than fibre
- The SPCA or your vet can recommend a good pellet food
- Refer to feeding instructions on the bag
- Overfeeding of pellets is a common cause of obesity in older rabbits

**If you don't know what it is or whether it is safe, don't feed it to your pet!**





### Treats and fruit

- Fruit and special rabbit treats are high in sugar and/or salt, so give only occasionally

### Foods to avoid

While most fresh vegetables, herbs and fruit are suitable for your rabbit, there are some foods to avoid altogether:

- Use kale, spinach and silver beet sparingly
- Some fruit tree branches and leaves are suitable to eat, but not all, so check our website for more details
- Give carrots only as treats as they are high in starch
- Celery must be cut into 1 cm pieces as it can get caught in their intestines
- Never feed your rabbit processed human foods such as: chocolate, cookies, crackers, cereal, yoghurt, milk, pasta or bread

## DO NOT FEED

- Avocado
- Beans
- Buttercup
- Cereals
- Corn on the cob
- Daffodil
- Foxglove
- Hemlock
- Iceberg lettuce
- Jasmine
- Kidney beans
- Leaves from evergreen trees
- Lilies
- Mushrooms
- Nightshade
- Nuts
- Oats
- Potatoes
- Privet
- Rhubarb
- Seeds
- Snowdrops
- Sweet peas
- Wheat or grains

### Water and bowls

- Fresh water must always be available and replaced daily
- Use heavy containers for food and water to avoid spillage, or use a pet sipper bottle or container that clips to the cage

### Changing foods

- Only introduce a new food or change to your rabbit's diet gradually to avoid digestive problems

# Health

If your rabbit has a healthy diet, lots of exercise and gets a lot of attention it should live a happy and healthy life. However, things can go wrong and if you are ever in doubt you should talk to your vet.

Rabbits are good at hiding their symptoms as a sick rabbit in the wild is easy prey. Pay close attention to your rabbit's appearance and behaviour – sometimes a rabbit that just looks a bit down is actually a sick rabbit. Handle and check your rabbit daily.

You should check:

## Weight

A healthy rabbit should be slim and sleek. You should be able to feel (but not see) their ribs just under the skin without a thick layer of fat. A monthly weigh-in is a good idea. Any sudden decrease in weight is likely to be health-related and you should take your rabbit to the vet. An overweight rabbit is likely to suffer from ongoing health issues so it is important not to overfeed your rabbit.



## Eyes, ears and nose

These should be clear, clean and bright looking with no discharge. If your rabbit is shaking their head a lot and scratching around the ears, this could be a sign of ear mites and they will need to see a vet.

## Coat

The coat should be shiny, flat and smooth. Dandruff most likely means your rabbit has mites, which will require vet treatment. Rabbits can also get fleas – your vet or the SPCA can advise a safe flea treatment for rabbits. Brush your rabbit with a soft brush to keep the coat looking nice and healthy. Angora and cashmere rabbits need a lot more grooming than other breeds. Your rabbit will moult a few times a year and will require brushing – they may look quite scruffy at this time.

# CONSULT YOUR VET IF YOU SEE:

## Droppings

Rabbits have two sorts of droppings – hard fibrous pellets and soft green caecotropes. Rabbits will reingest their caecotropes but usually do this at night in private. This is a normal and important part of a rabbit's digestion and does not indicate ill health.

## Teeth

Rabbits' teeth grow throughout their lives and dental problems are common. Make sure you provide your rabbits with adequate chewing material. Branches from trees such as willow, apple, pear, poplar and citrus, or other untreated wood treats, will keep their teeth worn down. Avoid trees which have been chemically treated or are close to sources of pollution. Any reluctance to eat or drooling may indicate a dental problem that should be checked out by a vet.

## Vaccinations

Calici Virus is now present in New Zealand and is fatal. Most rabbits don't show a lot of symptoms and can die within a few hours. A vaccine is available from vets but ring around first as prices differ.

- A sudden decrease in appetite
- A large number of soft green droppings in the cage or stuck to your rabbit's fur
- Diarrhoea
- Your rabbit's head tilting, any circling or wobbling
- Maggots anywhere on your rabbit
- Sneezing or nasal discharge
- Excessive scratching
- Wounds
- Blood or mucus in urine or droppings
- Worms in droppings
- Sore or bald hocks
- Overgrown teeth, wetness around the mouth or problems closing the mouth
- Overgrown nails
- Anything else out of the ordinary

## Claws

Rabbits' nails need clipping regularly (about once every six to eight weeks). Ask your vet to show you how, as you can easily cut through the blood vessel. A paving stone or a flat river stone placed in an area your rabbit regularly travels over may help reduce the need to trim nails as often.

# Happiness

A happy rabbit will be a healthier rabbit. In the wild a rabbit will live with other rabbits and have a home range of around two hectares. By keeping a rabbit in a hutch or your home you are taking away some of their natural instincts and pleasures. To compensate, spend time with your rabbit as often as possible and create a space where they can munch on grass, run around and dig to their heart's content.



## Exercise and enrichment

Rabbits need lots of play and enrichment to stave off boredom and for physical and mental health. Use your imagination when enriching your rabbit's environment. Just ensure everything is safe, non-toxic and unable to cause injury.

## Training

Many people have great success in training their rabbit to do all types of tricks – fetch, sit, roll over, or even jump through hoops. You can also buy a rabbit harness and lead and train your rabbit to use this, which can be useful in keeping your rabbit safe when in unsecured outdoor areas.

## Toys

Toys are a fantastic way for you to interact with your rabbit. Toss a ball and get them to toss it back before feeding. They will also appreciate having toys to play with purely by themselves. Rabbits love to investigate, push, pull and play with toys. Alternate toys regularly to keep them interested.

### Here are some toy ideas

- Fill toilet paper rolls with hay and treats
- Hide a slice of fruit or vegetables in a treat ball
- Hard plastic baby toys make great enrichment items for rabbits to throw around
- Untreated wicker baskets, wooden ‘fiddlesticks’, cartons and untreated fruit tree limbs make great shredding fun and are also important for wearing down teeth
- Telephone books, boxes, cat tunnels and blocks of untreated wood are excellent for stretching, climbing or sitting

Remember to let them destroy these toys if they want to – that is part of the fun!

### Outside enrichment

Rabbits are naturally outdoor animals and they will love the chance to kick up their heels in their own exercise area.

- Invest in an exercise pen or buy several and link them together to make a mega outdoor play area
- Add a variety of toys to the pen
- Ensure they have access to fresh water
- They can eat fresh grass
- Sandpits filled with soil or sand make for a very spoiled rabbit. Pushing sand and digging encourages natural behaviour

## CAUTION

Ensure you are monitoring playtime to protect your pet from:

- Attacks from other animals, such as cats or dogs
- Escaping – rabbits may dig and they can dig fast
- Theft – keep your rabbits out of sight from pedestrians if possible, as rabbits make a tempting lure
- Exposure – add some shelter, such as a tarpaulin or kennel and ensure they are not left in direct sun without shade or in wet, cold weather



# Rabbit bonding

*Rabbits form a bond for life. They must not be separated as this would cause a great deal of emotional trauma to them both.*

Rabbits are very sociable and often crave the companionship of their own kind. Having a bonded pair is often a recipe for happiness, especially if you cannot spend much time with your rabbit.

## Rabbit bonds

- Rabbits form powerful bonds
- The loss of a companion can cause depression and illness
- Bonding may take patience, time and commitment from you
- You will need separate housing for each animal until successfully bonded
- Both rabbits must be desexed to avoid breeding or fighting
- The best match is a neutered male and spayed female

## Introducing rabbits

- Get them acquainted by sight and smell first:
  - Position their hutches beside each other
  - After a week swap the rabbits over to the other's hutch

- After another week try putting them together
- This is best done in neutral territory where neither has been before
- Rabbits are extremely territorial and may use territorial droppings, urinating and aggressive behaviour
- An initial fight could hinder future bonding success
- Have a water bottle handy to squirt them if they begin to be aggressive
- Have a towel handy so you can use it to pick one rabbit up if a serious fight breaks out
- Consider wearing gloves and a long-sleeved shirt
- DO NOT put your hand between fighting rabbits



- Work with your rabbits daily for at least 15 minutes:
  - The more often you work with them the faster the bonding process will be
  - Rabbits that are not fully bonded need to be kept separate when you are not with them
  - It can take from a few weeks to a few months to combine two rabbits into a bonded pair
- Once the rabbits have bonded do not separate them:
  - If one goes to the vet, take both, to prevent stress and to aid recovery
  - Get both checked as anything contagious will most likely affect both
  - If they are apart and one comes back with a different smell or change in health they may reject each other and begin fighting

### Guinea pigs and rabbits

- Do not get a guinea pig as company for your rabbit
- Guinea pigs and rabbits are two different species

## SOME GOOD RABBIT WEBSITES

These websites hold all sorts of information on caring for your new rabbit. The more you know, the more you can enrich your rabbit's life. Some sites may have slightly differing information so use your discretion.

- [www.rabbit.org](http://www.rabbit.org)
- [www.bunnybusiness.org](http://www.bunnybusiness.org)
- [www.myhouserabbit.com](http://www.myhouserabbit.com)
- [www.fuzzy-rabbit.com](http://www.fuzzy-rabbit.com)
- [www.rabbitcare.org](http://www.rabbitcare.org)
- [www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk](http://www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk)
- [www.nzhoppergroup.org](http://www.nzhoppergroup.org)
- [exoticpets.about.com/od/rabbitcare/tp/rabbitcareguide.htm](http://exoticpets.about.com/od/rabbitcare/tp/rabbitcareguide.htm)

\*We have provided these websites as a helpful guide only. We are not contributors and take no responsibility for any of the information on these sites.

- They have different nutritional and living requirements
- A kick from a rabbit can kill a guinea pig and a bite from a guinea pig can lead to infections

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