

Rabbits were introduced into Britain in the Middle Ages. Some rabbits escaped and colonised the countryside. Later fanciers bred rabbits for exhibition, which is why there is such a variety of rabbits available today.

Rabbits are traditionally kept in a hutch outdoors but are increasingly popular as house pets.

Rabbits are sociable animals, usually enjoying the company of other rabbits.

If you wish to keep 2 or more, the best option is to have them neutered.

Rabbits can live up to 8 years and are most suitable for older children.

## Choosing and buying your rabbit

There are many varieties of rabbits available that vary greatly in size and temperament.

Dwarf lop eared rabbits are very popular due to their appealing looks, attractive colours and docile nature. Although a dwarf lop is smaller than English or French lops, they can still be quite large when fully grown and can weigh more than 2kg.

Longhaired rabbits are less suitable as pets because they usually need daily grooming, which is time consuming and must not be neglected.

Whatever variety is chosen, rabbits should be at least 8 weeks old. When you buy a new baby rabbit, it should be fed only hay and water for the first day and allowed time to adapt to its new home. You should continue to feed whatever the rabbit is used to for at least the first few weeks. Any change of diet should be made slowly over a period of 7 to 30 days.

## Housing

Rabbits should be provided with as large cage as possible in which they can comfortably stand on their hind legs. A hutch for outdoors should be sturdy and water proof. It should be raised off the floor by about 25cm and placed in a sheltered position or inside a shed. Rabbits must be protected from inclement weathers as well as strong sunlight. (a hutch cover, blanket or piece of old carpet will often offer added protection on cold nights) House rabbits are often kept in cages similar to those used for hamsters, only much larger. These should be placed in a cool room and out of direct sunlight and drafts.

All rabbits benefit from access to a pen or run in the garden. Avoid using pesticides nearby and ensure that the enclosure is secure enough to keep the rabbit in as well as other animals out.

## Bedding and hutch maintenance

A hutch or cage should have a layer of shavings on the floor with plenty of hay or straw provided for nesting. Any shavings or bedding that become wet should be removed daily along with any uneaten fresh foods.

Hygiene is extremely important, particularly in summer. If not kept clean the hutch will attract flies and other undesirable pests. As a general rule, cages should be cleaned thoroughly at least once a week. A good quality, pet friendly disinfectant should be used and all the bedding and shavings replaced with a fresh supply.

Rabbits often use the same area for their toilet every day. This allows them to be trained to use a litter tray which can be easily cleaned out daily.

Outdoor runs should be moved regularly.

## Feeding and water

The most important part of a rabbit's diet is good quality hay or freeze dried grass. This should be fed liberally and be available at all times.

Rabbits need to nibble all day so hay gives them something to do. Most importantly, it provides the fibre needed for a healthy gut and helps to prevent dental problems.

A wide range of prepared foods is available and many are now formulated for rabbits of different ages or sizes. Be very careful not to overfeed as this can lead to obesity.

Fresh foods are always enjoyed but should be given in moderation. Baby rabbits in particular should only get very small amounts and contrary to popular belief, lettuce should be avoided. Suitable fresh foods include kale, spring greens, broccoli and carrot as well as fruit like apple. Fresh foods should be washed thoroughly before feeding and should not be allowed to become frosted or frozen. Anything that is not eaten should be removed regularly.

Fresh clean water must be available at all times and is best provided by a gravity-fed bottle.

## General care

Adopting a good routine and feeding plenty of hay will help keep your rabbit healthy. Pet rabbits should be allocated some of their owner's time everyday and usually enjoy attention. Grooming them with a soft brush can be one means of interaction.

Rabbits can become stressed very easily and are prone to digestive disorders. Any signs of ill health should be referred to a vet without delay.

Vaccinations against myxomatosis and another serious disease known as VHD are available and recommended. It is also prudent to have rabbits neutered as this helps prevent some behavioral and health issues. Pet rabbits should be registered with your vet and insurance against unexpected veterinary costs should be considered.

Fly strike: It is recommended to check your rabbit underneath regularly, especially during the summer to ensure they are clean. Flies are attracted to soiled areas around the rabbits tail and can lay their eggs there, which will then develop into maggots.

## Shopping List - all available from Pets Pad

|                               |                             |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Outdoor hutch/indoor cage     | Run or pen for the garden   |
| Rabbit food                   | Ceramic food dish           |
| Water bottle and bottle brush | Hay or freeze dried grass   |
| Hay or straw for bedding      | Shavings                    |
| Treats                        | Toys                        |
| Gnaw block                    | Mineral block/vitamin drops |
| Pet safe disinfectant         | Fly repellent               |
| Rabbit care book              |                             |

