



Beaconsfield Veterinary Centre

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RABBIT CARE

Rabbits can make ideal pets. They are relatively low maintenance and bond happily with people to become part of the family. They are a good children's pet, however, they are not recommended for very young children as they require good handling techniques and can occasionally nip. Correct feeding, housing, vaccinations, desexing and handling are all important to ensure the ongoing health of your pet rabbit.

Choosing a rabbit

Baby rabbits can be brought home from 6 weeks of age onwards. Make sure that your new rabbit has been well handled and is used to human contact. It can be difficult to tell the sex of a baby rabbit, so it is a good idea to come in to see the vet for a check if your new rabbit is very young. Rabbits are social animals, and the best combination is often a desexed male and female pair. Undesexed males kept together can become territorial.

Housing

Rabbits can be indoor or outdoor pets. Indoor rabbits are easily toilet trained and need a safe indoor enclosure when unsupervised. If they are housed outside, the hutch should be warm and sheltered, waterproof, well ventilated and away from potential predators. Ideally the hutch should be made of an easy to clean material, and should be chew-proof. For these reasons timber is not ideal. The hutch needs to be tall enough that the rabbit can stand completely upright on the hind legs, and four hops wide. The flooring of the hutch is very important, as inappropriate flooring can damage their paws. Wire meshing on the floor is not good for rabbits. A solid base covered with absorbent material such as thick straw or regularly changed towels or newspaper is best. Bedding should be changed regularly so that it stays dry and clean.

Exercise

Your rabbit should not spend all of its life inside the hutch. Rabbits need daily physical and mental stimulation through exercise. It is fine to bring the rabbit indoors to play, but if unsupervised they can chew on electric wires (and be electrocuted), eat poisonous household plants, or damage furniture and carpets.

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Another option is to create a safe, predator-proof outdoor run area that is fully enclosed so that the rabbit cannot escape. Be careful to ensure they cannot dig out of their playpen! It should contain places for the rabbit to hide e.g. pipes, upturned boxes. It is also good for rabbits to receive a little sunlight daily.

Toilet Training

Rabbits will naturally use one area for urination and defecation, so it is very easy to toilet train them. Indoor rabbits will happily use a cat litter tray that is filled with organic litter material such as straw or shredded paper. Un-desexed rabbits, particularly males can be more difficult to train, as they use urine and faeces as a way of marking their territory. Toileting material should be changed regularly, as the ammonia from stale urine can cause health problems, skin conditions, and also attracts insects. Rabbits do eat their own faeces, so do not be alarmed! This is normal bunny behaviour and necessary for the rabbit to gain maximum nutrition.

Feeding

One of the major causes of health problems in pet rabbits is an inappropriate diet. Rabbits need a large amount of fibre to keep their digestive system working properly, and in the wild their staple diet is grass. The majority of your pet rabbit's diet (80-90%) should be fresh grass, or grass hay (not lucerne hay). Fresh clean hay should be available at all times. Most commercial foods are high in starch and low in fibre, and bunnies tend to pick out their favourite ingredients which are often the sugary ones. Plus, how often do you see wild rabbits in paddocks munching on whole grains? Commercial mixes are not recommended, and the only pellets we recommend are the Oxbow brand, which is high in fibre and low in sugars and starch. Healthy rabbits can be fed a diet of hay and veggies alone.

Your rabbit should be fed 2 packed cups per kilogram of bodyweight per day of green leafy vegetables. Three different types should be provided per day. For example broccoli, cabbages, celery, carrot tops, spinach leaves, silverbeet, asian greens, carrot tops and dark leafed lettuce. Herbs such as parsley, dandelion, coriander, basil, dill and mint can also be included in the daily greens. Healthy treat foods include most fruits, root vegetables (carrot, sweet potato) and capsicum, and rabbits can have a tablespoon of these per day. Commercial rabbit treats tend to be loaded with sugar and are not recommended. By following this diet you can be sure that all of your rabbit's nutritional needs are met. Foods that are not good for rabbits include cereals, grains, nuts, seeds, corn, beans, peas, breads, biscuits, sweets and sugar.

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Sudden changes in diet can cause diarrhoea, so introduce new foods gradually. Mineral blocks and salt licks are not necessary if fed an appropriate diet.

Water is best supplied in a drinking bottle that attaches to the cage. Bowls are not as good because the water is easily spilt or dirtied.

Common Health Problems

- **Heat stress:** Rabbits are particularly vulnerable to heat stress as they cannot sweat or pant to cool themselves down. Therefore on any day that is over 25 degrees, you should ensure that your rabbit is in a cool, shady place, and keep an eye on it for any signs of discomfort.
- **Dental problems:** As rabbits teeth grow fast and continuously throughout their life it is important to make sure that the front incisor teeth do not grown too long. Most rabbits wear them down gradually, but some rabbits have slight skull abnormalities that prevent this from happening. Overgrown teeth result in problems eating, and eventually starvation. Teeth can be easily trimmed at the vet clinic.
- **Myxomatosis:** This is a fatal disease that is common in the wild rabbit population. It is spread by insects – particularly mosquitos. Unfortunately no vaccine is available in Australia, so the best way to protect your rabbit from this virus is to cover their cage with mosquito-proof netting, and make sure they are in their cages especially at dawn and dusk when mozzies are out
- **Calici Virus:** This is another quite common and untreatable disease. Fortunately it is possible to protect your rabbit from calici virus by vaccination. Baby rabbits under 12 weeks of age will need an initial course of 2 injections. Adult rabbits need an annual booster.

Handling

It is VERY important that anyone coming into contact with the rabbit knows how to pick it up appropriately. This is because rabbits have very powerful hind limbs and the force of kicking out can lead to a spinal fracture and paralysis. So always pick rabbits up gently and carefully, making sure that the hind legs are well supported. NEVER pick them up by the ears.

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Desexing

We recommend desexings for all pet rabbits. Although in the past this may not have been encouraged due to potential problems with anaesthetics, modern drugs have now become available that make the procedure much safer.

Benefits of desexing:

- Prevents unwanted pregnancies when male and female rabbits are housed together.
- Less aggression between rabbits, and therefore enhances social interaction.
- Less territorial behaviour e.g. marking with urine and faeces.
- Less aggressive toward humans.
- Less risk of cancer in females later in life – studies show 80% of undesexed female rabbits over 3 years of age have some degree of uterine cancer

We recommend desexing at 4 to 6 months of age as this age is the best age for the anaesthetic. However, rabbits can start to become sexually mature from 3 months of age, so males and females should be separated from this time as a precaution.

Biological Data

Life Expectancy – 6 to 14 years

Breeding – 4 to 10 months old

Litter Size – 4 to 10 (average of 6)

Body Weight – 1 to 10kg (depends on breed)

Gestation – 31 days

Weaning – 4 to 6 weeks



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