

Care guide: Rabbits





Whether you have already welcomed your new rabbit into your home or are about to adopt a rabbit, we wanted to share some top tips for offering the best care. Providing for your rabbit's needs is the best way of ensuring their physical and mental wellbeing, so here are our team's recommendations:



PROVIDE A SUITABLE LIVING ENVIRONMENT

- Rabbits can live inside or outdoors as long as their welfare needs are met. We advise against moving them between the two though as a change in extreme temperature can cause stress and illness.
- Rabbits need a large space to call home – the bigger, the better! For a pair of rabbits, we recommend as a minimum, you provide at least the following:
- A run area that is at least **3 metres long, 2 metres wide, 1 metre high. Within this area or attached to it, a hutch that is at least 1.8 metres long, 0.6 metres wide, 0.6 metres high.**
- It's important to establish that the hutch should never be the sole or main accommodation for rabbits and be mindful that you don't lock them in their sleeping area at night as they need permanent access to the whole enclosure to allow them to run, jump and binky whenever they desire.
- The rabbit enclosure must be secure, sturdy and predator proof to keep your rabbit safe in its new home.
- We recommend having the following items in the rabbit's enclosure:

■ Unlimited hay

■ Chew toys

■ Litter tray

■ Hiding places with entrance and exit

■ Water bowl and bottle

■ Other forms of enrichment





- It's important to regularly check the enclosure for signs of damage such as chewed wood, gaps in the mesh or staples sticking out. Otherwise, this may lead to injury or allowing your rabbits to escape.
- Whilst checking for any sign of damage, it is also important to spot clean your rabbit's enclosure daily to prevent health issues and to reduce odours.
- If you plan to house your rabbits outside, ensure the enclosure has areas that are protected from the elements, including from cold, wet, windy, hot or sunny weather. In cold weather, we recommend providing heat pads to keep your rabbits warm and comfortable.
- Make sure your rabbits feel safe and comfortable in their sleeping area by checking it is warm, dry and free for draughts. Remember as rabbits are prey animals, they will need multiple places to hide in order to feel safe.
- We advise using the following as bedding in your rabbit's enclosure: hay, carpet or blankets, dust-extracted straw, shredded cardboard, paper-based bedding or kiln-dried, dust-extracted wood chip.
- Rabbits are naturally very clean animals and can often be easily trained to use a litter tray. In fact, rabbits like to eat while they do their business so we recommend hanging a hay rack above a litter tray as this is the easiest way to coax them into using it.
- If you are housing rabbits indoors, make sure any rooms that are used are rabbit-proofed. This involves removing or covering up any wires and moving any objects that could cause injury to the rabbits.
- Firework season can be very stressful for your rabbit so provide spaces in your home that feel safe for your rabbit with all their essentials. We also advise providing extra bedding and places to hide, covering their hutch with a thick blanket (but ensure there is a gap to make sure their enclosure still has enough ventilation), or temporarily move your rabbit hutch to a quieter space further away or temporarily indoors as this will reduce the loud noises and lights from nearby fireworks.

LOOK AFTER THEIR PHYSICAL HEALTH

- Make sure to register your rabbits with a vet and take them for annual health checks.
- It is important to be mindful that rabbits are prey animals and as a result, are extremely good at hiding any signs of pain and illness. Watch out for any indications of pain or illness every day and seek veterinary advice if you notice something out of the ordinary.
- Remember to make sure your rabbit is kept up-to-date with vaccinations to protect against serious, potentially fatal diseases.
- Keep up-to-date with flea, worm and tick treatment.
- We strongly advise you to maintain pet insurance as rabbit veterinary care can be expensive.
- Whether in the home and the garden, be aware of potential hazards like toxic plants, human foods or cleaning products that are unsafe for rabbits. If possible, remove them or make sure they are kept out of reach.
- Regularly check your rabbit's coat and skin for signs of mites, bald patches, sores or lumps. Depending on the rabbit's coat length, they may require daily or frequent brushing to prevent matting and to ensure their coat stays healthy.
- Every rabbit is different. They require different amounts of exercise, depending on health, age and breed, however all rabbits will benefit from getting exercise from playing or exploring – encourage this regularly to keep them a healthy weight.
- Check teeth and nails are not becoming overgrown. Feeding the right food and providing digging opportunities can help keep their teeth and nails the right length.
- Monitor their toilet habits and check they have a clean bottom. If you notice anything unusual, get in touch



with your vet as soon as you can.

- Some rabbit breeds are more prone to certain conditions and illnesses than others. Before adoption, research your rabbit breed so you can be prepared and spot signs of these conditions.
- Whilst we hope your rabbit doesn't experience emergencies, it is important to be prepared if they do. Make sure to seek immediate veterinary attention if there is an emergency. Here are some symptoms to watch out for:

- If your rabbit's toilet habits have changed, and they have reduced, stopped or are straining while peeing or pooping, or if they have excessive diarrhoea. Healthy rabbits should produce more than 100 faecal pellets every day.
- If your rabbit is eating less, not at all or has shown a change in thirst levels. Rabbits generally shouldn't ever go more than a few hours without eating.
- If your rabbit has eaten something they shouldn't have. Certain objects such as toys, strings and any foreign object can become stuck in the intestinal tract and cause serious problems.
- If they have eaten anything poisonous. Here are a few poisonous items for cats to look out for: chocolate, caffeine, rat poison, slug pellets, lilies, antifreeze, human medication, hydrangea, onions, poppies, rhododendron, iris, daffodil, hyacinth, buttercup, avocados, potatoes, ivy, rhubarb, foxgloves and herbicides.
- If your rabbit has collapsed or has a seizure.
- If your rabbit has any breathing concerns and is showing an increased effort in breathing or is breathing rapidly.
- If your rabbit has experienced trauma and/or is bleeding excessively.
- If your rabbit is showing signs of pain and is not moving, hunched up, or hiding away.
- If your rabbit is showing signs of heatstroke, such as slow or uncoordinated movement, trembling or heavy breathing.
- If your rabbit's tummy appears bloated and they seem in pain or are lethargic.
- If your rabbit has discharge from the eyes or saliva around the mouth or chin.





PROMOTE NATURAL BEHAVIOURS

- Rabbits are very social animals and should never live alone. They should live in pairs or groups with other rabbits, but it's important to make sure to follow instructions on how to safely bond rabbits and ensure all rabbits are healthy, neutered and fully vaccinated before you introduce them.
- Although they are social animals, rabbits should never be kept with other animals such as guinea pigs due to the risk of injuries and having different welfare needs.
- Rabbits love to forage and graze for their food. Scatter their food or use toilet roll tubes stuffed with hay, treat balls, or interactive feeders to make food-time more interesting.
- We recommend that you provide your rabbit access to appropriate and safe things to chew to prevent them from chewing their enclosure or if they are housed indoors, chewing on furniture or walls. To prevent this, you should provide lots of hay and safe twigs such as willow, hazel or apple for your rabbit to chew on.
- Rabbits are natural diggers – in the wild they live underground in burrows. We recommend providing your rabbit an appropriate space to dig, such as a large litter tray filled with soil or bedding.
- Rabbits need to get lots of exercise so make sure you give them a large enough space to run, jump and play. We recommend making this space interesting with tunnels and hideouts.
- Due to being prey animals, rabbits don't like loud noises or sudden movements, and generally prefer to not be picked up or carried around. It's important to give your rabbits lots of spaces to hide in their home and spend time with them by sitting on the ground calmly and quietly. You should always let them come to you and if they approach you to be petted, be very gentle. This way, you are much more likely to build a good bond with your rabbits.
- If you do need to handle your rabbits, only pick them up when it is necessary to do so - for example when examining their backend, cutting their nails, or giving them medication.

If you do need to pick them up:

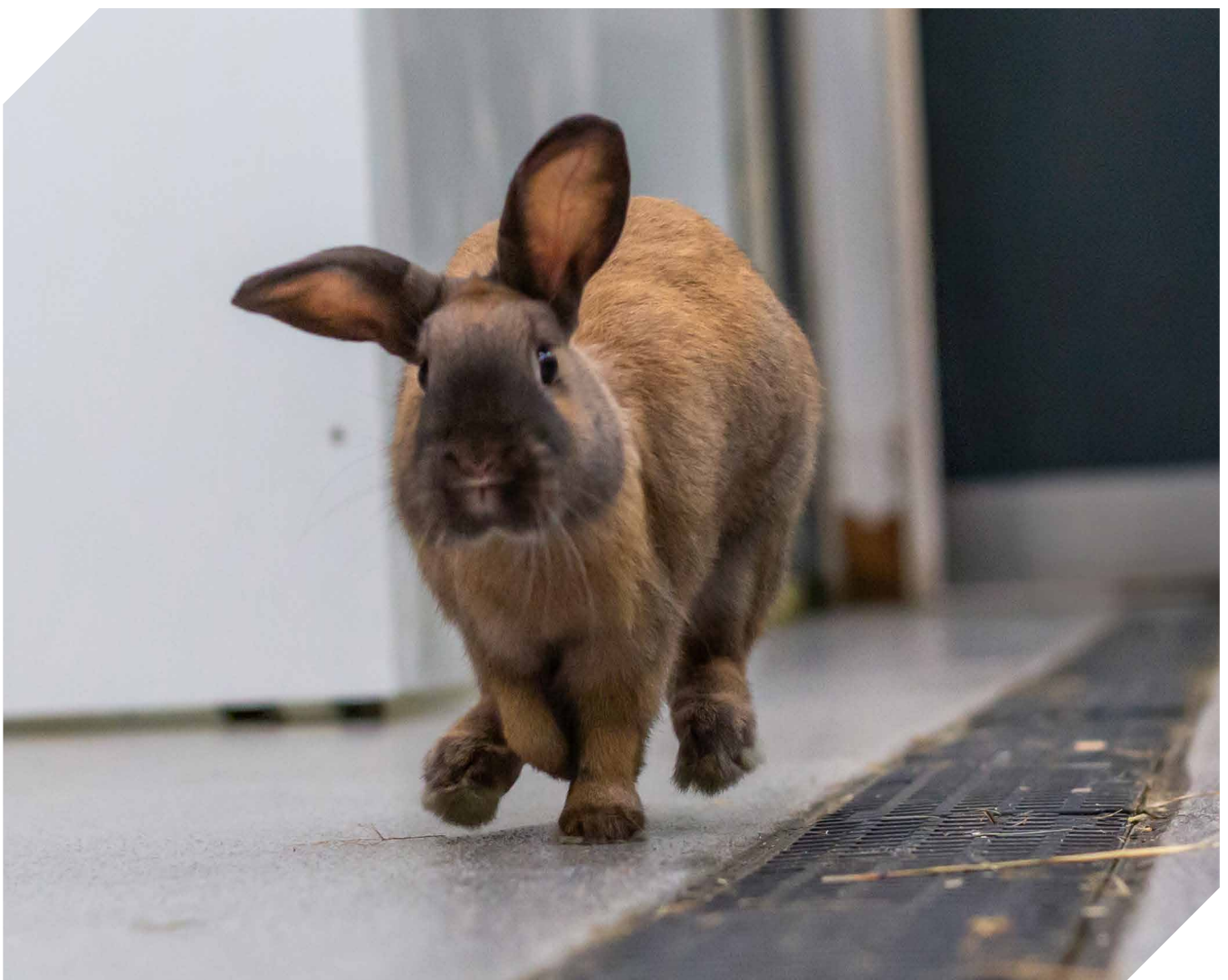
- Place a hand on their shoulders to steady them. Never scruff a rabbit or pick them up by their ears.
- Put one hand under their chest with a couple of fingers between their front legs.
- With your other hand, scoop up their bottom and it's important to make sure you always support their backend.
- Once you have a hold of the rabbit, move them close to your body and maintain a firm grip, but make sure not to squeeze them too tight.
- When putting the rabbit back down, be careful not to allow them to leap out of your arms. Keep them close to your body and crouch down to the ground, gently place the rabbit on the floor and avoid letting them jump from a height.
- Patience is key! Give your rabbits space and allow them time alone to sleep, rest and to build their confidence.
- Children may get very excited when saying hello to your rabbit, so it is important to always supervise children around your rabbits to ensure they are being careful.
- If you already have rabbits, our team will provide guidance with how to safely introduce them to avoid conflict. If you have other types of animals, such as cats or dogs, you must make sure to keep them separate from your rabbits as they could cause serious or fatal injuries.





STAY IN TUNE WITH THEIR MENTAL STATE

- Rabbits are sentient beings and are capable of feeling a huge range of emotions.
- Learn to read your rabbit's body language as it is key in telling you if they are happy or not. Sometimes signs can be subtle so make sure to look for how they're behaving and changes in their body language, including their eyes, ears, tails, mouth and body.
- If you need behavioural support and want to understand your rabbit more, we recommend looking at the Animal Behaviour and Training Council Practitioner register to find someone who can support you. This is covered by most pet insurance, so make sure to check before you take out your policy.



For further advice on how best to take care of your rabbit, please visit our website:

www.scottishspca.org/advice/rabbits/