



Rabbit Care Sheet

Basic facts:

Rabbits are **social animals** and should be kept in pairs. However, rabbits do not always get along! Altercations can cause undue stress and often severe wounds. It is very important to put emphasis on proper **bonding** when introducing bunnies to each other. It is a very good idea to have the bunnies spayed/neutered prior to attempting bonding.

The life-span is between 8-12 years.

Rabbits are crepuscular which means they are at their highest activity levels at dusk and dawn.

Bunnies are not heat tolerant. Always **provide cool, shaded areas** for free-roaming bunnies.

Do not wash your bunny as a whole, rather just spot-clean areas of concern (dirty bum or feet).

Rabbits are very curious and enjoy chewing on objects. Be aware to **safe-guard electric cords** from free-roaming animals. Also be **cautious of toxic plants** in the garden (e.g. Cotyledon pigs ears succulent, hydrangea, arum lilly) as well as in the house (e.g. Dieffenbachia, oleander).

Always take care when picking up your rabbit! It is a good idea to support the rearend when lifting them up and to provide support to the entire body while carrying. If not held securely a bunny can kick out and in the process fracture their spine or be injured by jumping out of your arms from a height.

It is a popular belief that rabbits and guinea pigs should not be housed together due to the assumed risk of *Bordetella bronchiseptica* transmission. Interestingly this statement was never proven to be true and was consequently removed from the later edition of the textbook it was originally printed in ¹.

Rabbits eat their own faeces at times. These caecotrophes assist in building a healthy gut flora.

Enclosure:

The bigger the better! Rabbits need space to allow them to stay fit, keep them healthy and to prevent behavioural issues. The minimum length of the enclosure per bunny should be 2 meters long and tall enough for your bunny to freely stand on its hindlegs. However, these dimensions are not sufficient for daily life so it is advisable to create a much larger pen for indoor bunnies to roam around in. Outdoor bunnies should be provided with a spacious and easy to clean hutch. Be aware that bunnies may try to dig tunnels outdoors (especially pregnant does). The outdoor area should also be made escape-proof and measures should be taken to prevent predators from threatening your bunnies (e.g. cats, raptors).

Hiding spaces (e.g. boxes, tented areas, Oxbow Timothy Bungalow) are necessary to reduce stress.



The floor of an enclosure should be solid (no mesh!) and covered in soft, clean substrate (such as straw or hay) or blankets.

Regular access to unfiltered sunlight (outdoor-time) assists with vitamin D production which prevents skeletal and dental disease! Do remember to always provide a shaded area for bunnies when they are outside.

Rabbits will often defecate while eating. Hence if you want to potty train them it is a good idea to fill a large tray with hay and provide a hay feeding rack over the tray so that the rabbit can nibble during elimination.

Diet:

A normal rabbit's diet should comprise of:

- **80-90% fresh grass HAY** (oat, teff, timothy, meadow). Hay can be offered in unlimited quantities. Only use lucern (=alfalfa) hay in growing and pregnant bunnies!
- 5-10% fresh green foods (veggies and herbs)
- 5% Pellets: You can usually feed less than recommended on the packaging: 1-2 tablespoons per bunny per day are sufficient for an adult. It is fine for the bowl to be empty after the pellets have been consumed! This is why it is crucial to buy only high quality pellets that are packed with nutrients (e.g. Oxbow, Burgess). **Do not use seed/muesli mixes** as these promote selective feeding and can cause health issues.
- Treats (1 Tablespoon per 2kg rabbit) – safe fruits and other veggies or high-quality treats (e.g. Oxbow, Jacobiez and Burgess) are acceptable. Stay away from any treats containing sugar.
- Water - Water should always be available and changed daily. Do not use medications or vitamins in the water as your bunny may not drink the water if the taste or colour is altered.

Hay should be provided at all times in your pet's cage. It is key to preventing many diseases in pet rabbits like diarrhoea, bumblefoot, excessive grooming and obesity. Rabbits also need hay to help care for their teeth and for good, healthy gut flora.

Do not feed straw as it can lead to serious nutritional deficiencies. Straw can be used as bedding.

Enrichment/entertainment items are a great way to stimulate exercise and to keep your bunny mentally stimulated. You can buy toys made of natural, non-toxic, safe materials (e.g. Oxbow); willow wreaths and balls that can be stuffed with hay and treats; or even just fill an empty toilet paper roll with treats. Also promote foraging by hiding hay toppers and treats in amongst some fresh grass hay.



Health:

The **teeth** of rabbits **grow continuously** throughout life. They need lots of fibre in their diet (hay!) to wear the teeth down to a healthy length.

Gut stasis is any decrease or cessation of appetite and defecation. Rabbits should never stop eating. If these symptoms occur it is considered an **emergency** and a veterinarian should be consulted as soon as possible. This can quickly turn into a life-threatening condition. It is advisable to have foods at home that can be syringe-fed in case of gut stasis to buy time until the vet visit (e.g. Oxbow Critical Care).

Diarrhea is a symptom of concern as it is usually caused by inadequate diet or health problems. The diarrhea can in turn also stick to the fur. The soiled fur can be a catalyst for flies to lay their eggs underneath the skin and in body openings (**fly strike**). Also make your vet aware if the faeces is harder and smaller than usual.

Discharge from the nose and mouth can be an indication of an infection.

Obesity is often the unintended consequence of too many pellets and treats. It is crucial to identify when your bunny is overweight and implement a healthy feeding and exercise regime. Ask your exotic vet to give you advice and do regular weigh-ins. This can help prevent further health issues (e.g. bumblefoot).

Head tilts: a veterinarian will need to perform an examination to determine the cause.

An **annual vaccine** against Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease is recommended, even for those rabbits that have no contact with other bunnies.

Spaying and neutering your bunnies prevents unwanted offspring, reduces territorial behaviour and has health benefits such as reducing the risk of certain tumors. Surgical procedures are best performed by a rabbit-savvy vet.

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Information on this care sheet is the opinion of the creator. This care sheet will be adapted if updated information becomes available.

To order food and enrichment items you can contact Exotic Pets Overberg via whatsapp (071-142-2953) or email admin@exoticpetsoverberg.co.za. Or visit our online shop at www.exoticpetsoverberg.co.za

References:

1. Donnelly, T.M., Vella, D. (2021) Basic Anatomy, Physiology, and Husbandry of Rabbits. In: Quesenberry, K.E., Orcutt, C.J., Mans, C., Carpenter, J.W., eds. *Ferrets, Rabbits, and Rodents: Clinical Medicine and Surgery* (4th ed., p.145). Elsevier.