

Rabbit Care Sheet

Everything we would tell you across the counter, written down so you can take it home.

Living With Rabbits | The Enclosure | Diet | Health | Call Your Vet

At A Glance

LIFESPAN
8 to 12 years

COMPANY
Keep in bonded pairs

MOST ACTIVE
Dusk and dawn

DIET
80 to 90% grass hay

ENCLOSURE
2m minimum per rabbit

VACCINE
Annual, against RHD

Living With Rabbits

- Rabbits are **social animals** and should be kept in pairs. They do not always get along, and altercations cause real stress and often severe wounds, so put the work into proper **bonding**. Spaying or neutering before you attempt it makes a great deal of difference.
- They are crepuscular, so they are at their liveliest at dusk and dawn.
- Rabbits are **not heat tolerant**. Free-roaming bunnies need cool, shaded areas at all times.
- Do not wash your rabbit. Spot-clean the areas that need it, usually a dirty bum or feet.
- They are curious and they chew. **Safeguard electric cords** from free-roaming animals, and be **cautious of toxic plants** in the garden (Cotyledon pig's ears succulent, hydrangea, arum lily) and indoors (Dieffenbachia, oleander).
- Support the rear end when you lift a rabbit, and the whole body once you are carrying it. A bunny that is not held securely can kick out and fracture its spine, or injure itself jumping from a height.
- It is widely believed that rabbits and guinea pigs should not be housed together because of *Bordetella bronchiseptica*. That claim was never proven and was removed from the later edition of the textbook it first appeared in.[1]
- Rabbits eat some of their own faeces. These caecotrophs help build healthy gut flora, so it is normal and useful.

The Enclosure

- **The bigger the better.** Rabbits need room to stay fit, stay healthy and avoid behavioural problems. The minimum is 2 metres long per bunny and tall enough for it to stand fully on its hindlegs. Treat that as a floor, not a target, and give indoor rabbits a much larger pen to roam.
- Outdoor bunnies need a spacious, easy-to-clean hutch. Make the run escape-proof and dig-proof, pregnant does especially will tunnel, and protect it from predators such as cats and raptors.
- Hiding spaces reduce stress. Boxes, tented areas or an Oxbow Timothy Bungalow all work.
- The floor must be **solid, never mesh**, covered in soft clean substrate such as straw, hay or blankets.
- Regular access to unfiltered sunlight supports vitamin D production, which prevents skeletal and dental disease. Always provide shade when they are outside.
- Rabbits often defecate while they eat. You can use that to potty train: fill a large tray with hay and set a hay rack above it so they can nibble while they go.

Diet

- **80 to 90% fresh grass hay** (oat, teff, timothy, meadow), offered in unlimited quantities. Only use lucerne (alfalfa) hay for growing and pregnant bunnies.
- **5 to 10% fresh green food**, meaning veggies and herbs.
- **5% pellets.** One to two tablespoons per bunny per day is usually enough for an adult, which is often less than the packaging recommends. The bowl should be empty once the pellets are eaten, so buy quality pellets that are packed with nutrients (Oxbow, Burgess). **Do not use seed or muesli mixes**, they encourage selective feeding and cause health problems.
- **Treats**, one tablespoon per 2kg of rabbit. Safe fruit and veg, or high-quality treats such as Oxbow, Jacobiez and Burgess. Stay away from anything containing sugar.
- **Water** should always be available and changed daily. Do not put medications or vitamins in it. If the taste or colour changes, your bunny may simply stop drinking.

Hay should be available at all times. It is the single biggest thing preventing diarrhoea, bumblefoot, over-grooming and obesity, and rabbits need it for their teeth and for healthy gut flora. **Never feed straw**, it leads to serious nutritional deficiencies. Straw is bedding.

Enrichment keeps a rabbit exercised and mentally stimulated. Toys made of natural, non-toxic, safe materials work well (Oxbow), as do willow wreaths and balls stuffed with hay and treats, or an empty toilet roll filled with treats. Hide hay toppers and treats inside fresh grass hay to get them foraging.

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Health

- **Teeth grow continuously** throughout life. Rabbits need plenty of fibre, meaning hay, to wear them down to a healthy length.
- **Diarrhoea** is usually caused by inadequate diet or an underlying health problem. Soiled fur sticks and attracts flies, which lay eggs under the skin and in body openings (**fly strike**). Tell your vet if the faeces are harder and smaller than usual as well.
- **Discharge** from the nose or mouth can indicate an infection.
- **Obesity** is usually the unintended result of too many pellets and treats. Identify it early, adjust feeding and exercise, and do regular weigh-ins with your exotic vet. It leads on to other problems such as bumblefoot.
- **Head tilt** needs a veterinary examination to determine the cause.
- An **annual vaccine** against Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease is recommended, even for rabbits with no contact with other bunnies.
- **Spaying and neutering** prevents unwanted offspring, reduces territorial behaviour and lowers the risk of certain tumours. These procedures are best performed by a rabbit-savvy vet.

Call Your Vet Straight Away

- **Gut stasis.** Any decrease or stop in appetite and in droppings. A rabbit should never stop eating. This is an emergency and can turn life-threatening quickly, so see a vet as soon as you can. It is worth keeping food at home that can be syringe-fed to buy time on the way, such as Oxbow Critical Care.
- Diarrhoea, or droppings that are suddenly harder and smaller.
- Discharge from the nose or mouth.
- A head tilt that was not there yesterday.

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

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.