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# ON THE HOP

The RWAFF guide to rabbit care

3rd edition



- Are rabbits for me?
- Inside or out
- Hay! Feed me properly!
- The importance of neutering
- Two (or more!) is company
- Preventative health care
- Rabbit MOT - keep your buns running smoothly!
- Grooming and coat care
- Aggressive behaviour in rabbits
- How to choose a rabbit-savvy vet
- And much more inside!



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Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund  
A hutch is not enough

# A hutch is not enough

## Contents

### How to keep pet rabbits happy and healthy



|              |                                                      |    |
|--------------|------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Introduction |                                                      | 1  |
| Chapter 1    | <b>ARE RABBITS FOR ME?</b>                           | 4  |
| Chapter 2    | <b>INSIDE OR OUT?</b>                                | 6  |
| Chapter 3    | <b>HAY! FEED ME PROPERLY!</b>                        | 13 |
| Chapter 4    | <b>THE IMPORTANCE OF NEUTERING</b>                   | 20 |
| Chapter 5    | <b>TWO (OR MORE!) IS COMPANY</b>                     | 24 |
| Chapter 6    | <b>PREVENTATIVE HEALTH CARE</b>                      | 28 |
| Chapter 7    | <b>RABBIT MOT - KEEP YOUR BUNS RUNNING SMOOTHLY!</b> | 34 |
| Chapter 8    | <b>GROOMING &amp; COAT CARE</b>                      | 38 |
| Chapter 9    | <b>AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR IN RABBITS</b>               | 40 |
| Chapter 10   | <b>HOW TO CHOOSE A RABBIT-SAVVY VET</b>              | 42 |
| Chapter 11   | <b>HOLIDAY CARE</b>                                  | 45 |
|              | <b>GUINEA PIGS!</b>                                  | 62 |

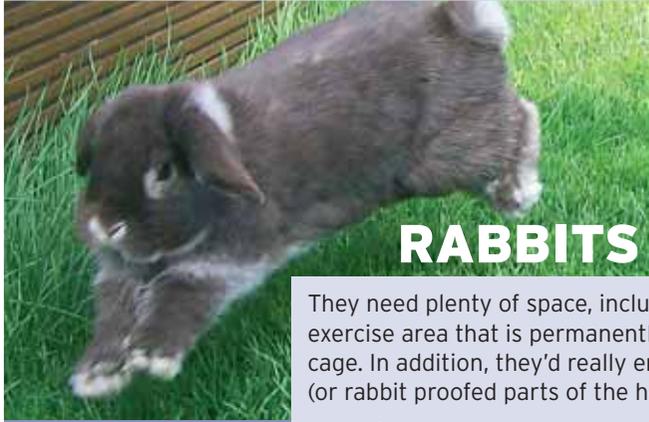
Rabbits can make wonderful pets - so long as you keep them in the right way! Watching rabbits running, jumping, playing, grooming each other and just being all-round joyful creatures is a real delight. But they must be looked after properly: rabbits are hugely misunderstood pets and thousands suffer from neglect through lack of knowledge of their needs as a species.



This booklet is an overall guide to keeping healthy, contented pet rabbits. As well as providing clear, accurate, up-to-date advice, we hope it will help to dispel some of the myths and misconceptions that

have led to so much neglect and suffering in pet rabbits. It is aimed at anyone thinking of acquiring rabbits as pets, as well as existing rabbit owners. This booklet covers the basics in detail, but there's lots more information on our website [www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk](http://www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk)

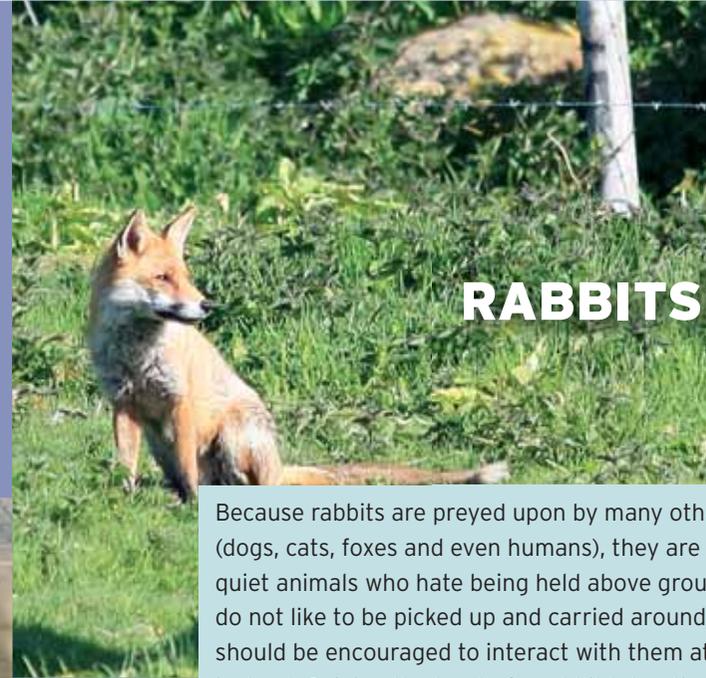
Throughout this booklet we will keep referring to fundamental needs of rabbits as a species - although they are different shapes, sizes and colours, domestic rabbits kept as pets are fundamentally the same as their wild cousins. Their basic nature and needs are the same as those of wild rabbits, who live in large social groups and cover a distance equal to the length of 6 football pitches every day.



## RABBITS ARE ACTIVE!

They need plenty of space, including a spacious and safe exercise area that is permanently attached to their hutch or cage. In addition, they'd really enjoy free run of the garden (or rabbit proofed parts of the house!) when supervised.

Cages/hutches should be regarded as burrows to rest in as part of a larger living area, not prisons!



## RABBITS ARE SOMEONE ELSE'S DINNER!

Because rabbits are preyed upon by many other species (dogs, cats, foxes and even humans), they are naturally shy, quiet animals who hate being held above ground level. They do not like to be picked up and carried around, so children should be encouraged to interact with them at ground level instead. Gaining the trust of a rabbit takes time and effort. If your child is looking for something soft and cuddly to pick up then buy a fluffy toy, a rabbit is not for them!

## RABBITS ARE SOCIABLE!

Wild rabbits live in colonies, never on their own. Rabbits should be kept in neutered pairs or compatible groups. Recent scientific research has confirmed that rabbits suffer from stress and loneliness if kept alone: they value companionship as much as food - and you wouldn't keep them without food, would you?



## RABBITS EAT GRASS (OR HAY)!

Rabbits should be fed in a way that is as close as possible to their natural diet: mostly grass or hay. In fact, rabbits could live on hay and water alone, but we recommend providing some fresh leafy vegetables and a small amount of commercial feed. The long fibre of grass or hay is vital to their digestive, behavioural and dental health.



## RABBITS LIVE ABOUT TEN YEARS

Rabbits are often acquired for children (often following displays of "pester power"! ) but it is essential to remember that the adult is always responsible for any pet... therefore at least one adult in the household must be prepared to commit sufficient time, energy and money to the rabbits for the next decade. Rabbits are not cheap and easy children's pets!

# Chapter One

# ARE RABBITS FOR ME?

So, you think rabbits might be the right pets for you? Thousands of rabbits end up in rescue centres every year (or worse, neglected at the end of the garden) because their new owners just didn't realise what was involved. Taking on the care of rabbits for their lifetime is a big commitment: in fact, it's almost like a marriage. Indeed, well-cared for pet rabbits will live longer than many marriages!

## For better for worse...

Your rabbits will be completely dependent on you. They will need affection and attention every day, and cannot be left for more than 24 (ideally, not more than 12) hours without being checked and fed. They're just as much of a responsibility as a cat... can you take on that kind of commitment for the next decade?

## For richer for poorer...

Pet rabbits are usually inexpensive to buy, but they should not be seen as 'cheap' pets. Building a safe, secure outdoor enclosed complex can cost several hundred pounds. Or, if you decide to keep your rabbits indoors, an indoor cage (remember that our minimum size of accommodation is the same as for outdoor rabbits) and essential equipment will not leave much change out of £300. Your rabbits will need regular supplies of a good quality rabbit food, hay, and bedding. We estimate that a pair of rabbits over their lifetime will cost around £11,000 - can you afford that?

## In sickness and in health...

Your rabbits will all need to be neutered, and to have annual vaccinations against RVHD and myxomatosis. Veterinary fees for a rabbit are very similar to those for a cat, so pet health insurance cover is strongly

recommended in case of serious health problems. However, rabbits often have dental problems, which are rarely covered by insurance. If your rabbits are affected (and they are very likely to be, unless you feed them a grass/hay-based diet!) then the cost of essential regular dental treatment can quickly add up to hundreds of pounds each year.

Your rabbits will all need to be neutered, and to have regular vaccinations against VHD and myxomatosis

## Till death do us part...

The maximum life span of a rabbit is about 12 years, and in general small breeds live longer than giant breeds, but most properly cared-for rabbits live 7-10 years, so you are taking on your pets for around a decade. People often see rabbits as children's pets but don't consider the fact that within a few years, a child may well have lost interest (or even left home!) whilst the rabbits still have several years to live. You will sometimes see the lifespan of pet rabbits quoted as only five years, which is a very sad reflection of how few rabbits are looked after properly. Sadly, kept in the way that pet rabbits have traditionally been kept, many rabbits do die prematurely... there is a good reason why **"a hutch is not enough"**■

## A note about your legal duty:

Since 2006 in the UK, any pet owner has legal responsibilities under the Animal Welfare Act and must provide their pets with.

- A suitable environment (place to live)
- A suitable diet
- The opportunity to exhibit normal behaviour patterns
- Appropriate companionship
- Protection from pain, injury, suffering and disease

Anyone who is cruel to an animal, or does not provide for its welfare needs, may be banned from owning animals, fined up to £20,000 and/or sent to prison.

# Chapter two



## INSIDE OR OUT?

One of the first choices you will need to make is where your rabbits will live. Rabbits can live equally happily outdoors in the garden, or indoors as “houserabbits”, as long as the accommodation allows them to behave naturally. The two options are discussed in the following two sections. Please read both and consider the choice carefully.



### THE GREAT OUTDOORS

**Rabbits are traditionally thought of as being outdoor pets, and are perfectly happy living in the garden , so long as their physical and behavioural requirements are catered for... which means a lot more than just a hutch!**

Rabbits are active animals, and can develop painful skeletal problems if kept permanently caged. Hence, daily exercise outside the hutch is vital. A hutch should only ever be a shelter, never the sole/main accommodation for your rabbits. For this reason we suggest a large hutch or shed with an exercise run permanently attached, so that the rabbits can decide when they want to shelter, and when to play. Rabbits are most active at dawn and dusk - they're “crepuscular” - so lifting them from hutch to run for a few hours in the daytime just doesn't suit their body clocks and instincts. Having the hutch and run permanently attached also means you can have a Sunday morning lie-in without feeling guilty!

If you choose a traditional hutch as a bedroom for your rabbits, it needs to be big enough for a rabbit to take 3 hops and to stretch fully upright. For most breeds this will mean a hutch of 6ft long

#### A Quick tip:

It's so much easier to provide pet rabbits with the necessary exercise if their exercise run is attached to their hutch/cage, so they can come and go as they please. If the run is separate, this makes it much more difficult to provide the necessary exercise. Putting your rabbits in their run for 2 hours actually means that for 22 hours a day they get no exercise at all.



x 2ft tall, so we recommend a hutch no smaller than 6ft x 2ft x2ft, with an attached exercise run of 8ft long, 6ft wide and 2ft tall. This sounds very large but in reality this is only 4 hops on average! In total this will provide an area of 10ft x 6ft x 2 ft high, which should be the minimum for a pair of rabbits - and a single rabbit will need just as much room as this!

Rabbits whose exercise run is on a lawn will enjoy access to grass every day, which is great for their teeth and digestive systems and will keep them busy. But be aware that unless you take appropriate precautions, they are likely to

dig their way out, which could put them at risk from predators. So, if you have your run on grass, either make sure you move it regularly, fit a wire-mesh 'houdini-kit' skirt, or set paving slabs around the perimeter to make it more

The exercise run should enable your rabbits to display all of their key natural behaviours:  
**Running, Digging/Burrowing, Jumping, Hiding, Foraging/Grazing**

difficult for your rabbits to tunnel out! Anti-dig kits are becoming more widely available - they comprise sections of mesh skirting tucked under the perimeter of the enclosure.

## You need to make sure that all parts of your rabbit habitat is secure...

Rabbits with enclosures on concrete, slabs or decking (or in grass runs with a wire mesh skirt around the perimeter) will not be able to dig out, making them more secure. But because digging is a natural behaviour, you will need to provide them with an alternative: a digging pit, which could be a large litter tray or planter filled with earth. This will need to be changed regularly. They will also need a hayrack to give them access to hay that hasn't got wet from the ground - and also to encourage them to stretch up.

## Providing the correct environment can be fun, and doesn't need to take up the whole garden

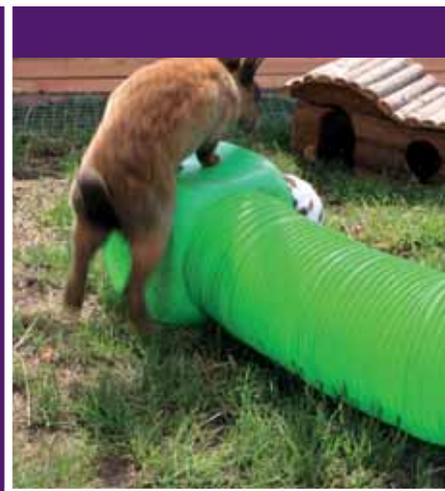
Tunnels are important: they will encourage your rabbits to be much more active, and provide a substitute burrow. These can be bought from pet shops or can be as cheap and easy as a cardboard box with a hole cut at each end. Toys such as willow balls will finish the exercise run off nicely. Don't forget the water bottle, and preferably a water bowl too - rabbits can drink more efficiently from a water bowl than a bottle (many rabbits will choose to use a bowl over a bottle), and it's a good back up in case the bottle spout jams. Finally, don't forget to protect part of the run from extremes of weather with a cover of some sort (it need only be a tarpaulin, not only to protect from rain and snow, but also from hot sun).

You need to make sure that all parts of your rabbit habitat is secure, so choose something with strong wire mesh and bolt-operated locks - don't rely on turn-pin fastenings. Avoid anything that a fox or dog would be able to access.

### Try this at home



*Hanging baskets (the type sold at garden centres) make great hay racks because they are cheap and hold lots more hay than purpose-built rabbit hay racks. A run covered by a tarpaulin and attached to the hutch, means that the rabbits can play whatever the weather.*



*Make sure that there is room for running and jumping! They also need this space to stretch up fully in their exercise run and climb onto their toys.*



*In the garden, they must be supervised in case of predators (including next door's cat!) and the risk of them getting out of the garden and harming themselves.*

*Make sure your exercise run has some cover and is safe with strong mesh and bolts.*



*These rabbits have a hay-rack, toys, water bottle and bowl, and can dig in the earth, but are prevented from escape by the anti-dig kit on the perimeter.*

*The tarpaulin cover can be used to cover all or part of the run depending on the weather.*

*Make sure you have room for toys and a hay-rack*



*Using a large hutch or shed as a base, you can create a fun area for your rabbits to play. Run, rabbit run!*

*Providing the correct environment can be fun, and doesn't need to take up the whole garden. Be inventive!*



*Sheds are lovely spacious homes for rabbits, but they can become very hot inside. Here, one door is open and the rabbits are safely behind a secondary wire screen door which provides extra ventilation.*

*Windows can be covered with curtains to provide some shade, and it's easy to insulate the roof of a garden shed. Try to site your shed or hutch in a shaded area, but if none is available, think about planting rabbit-safe shrubs or climbers to provide shade once they grow.*

## Checklist: Essentials for keeping rabbits OUTDOORS

- Large hutch or shed with exercise run attached - providing sufficient space for them to run, jump and stretch
- Cover or tarpaulin to protect from extremes of weather
- Digging box
- Hay rack
- Tunnels to play in
- Toys
- Water bottle or bowl (or both)
- Litter tray and litter
- Hay



## HOME, SWEET HOME - HOUSERABBITS

**If you decide that you'd like to share your home with your rabbits, you'll be in the happy position of having the most wonderful, amusing, fascinating companions imaginable. You'll also be able to observe their behaviour closely and it should be easy for you to spot if they are off-colour or behaving abnormally, so that you can ensure they get any treatments they should need as soon as possible.**

But, before getting too carried away, remember that you will require some modifications to your home, or your houserabbits will modify it for you! Rabbit-proofing your home is essential and there will be nibbles, spills, possibly an occasional toilet accident and a lot of hair to vacuum up in the moulting season. Don't take on houserabbits unless you can live with the results. Read on to see what's involved and then consider carefully!

As with outdoor rabbits, your houserabbit needs company, and you most likely aren't at home 24/7, so you will need to plan on keeping at least one other rabbit. Companionship is very important to them. They will learn to love you, they may well love their toys... but they also need a companion of their own species to share their home and their lives.

Sharing your home with rabbits needs some preparation. Firstly, where will they live? Remember that houserabbits need at least as much space as we recommend for outdoor rabbits.



## Free range

This is where the rabbits are given the run of most, if not all of, the house. Obviously this is a big commitment and so the points listed below should be considered even more carefully.

If you choose to go down the free range route, we strongly recommend you start with a limited area where they will have their toilet and carry out their litter-training, especially with young rabbits. Make sure they feel secure and comfortable there (and are toilet trained in the smaller area) before opening up other areas of the house. See the 'litter training' advice below.

## A particular room

This tends to be a utility room, kitchen or conservatory, often with solid flooring that is easy to clean, unlike carpet. Note that rabbits often slip on smooth floors, so newspapers, carpet tiles or runners are useful. Be aware that conservatories can get very hot in summer so unless you can manage the temperature adequately, choose another room.

## Part of a room

This is an area in a room given over to the rabbits, utilising a large run or enclosure. It has to be at least as large as the recommended minimum for an outdoor set-up.

Wherever you decide is most suitable for your own and your rabbits' comfort and happiness, there are things you should bear in mind

They need to be safe from other pets, houseplants that may be poisonous, electric wires, being trodden on (this is a real concern!) and 'escaping' into a dangerous outside environment.

Your home needs to be protected from chewing (for the whole of your rabbits' lives) and toileting (until they are neutered and house-trained).

While these preparations take some effort, they are vital. So, let's think about protecting all areas they will access before deciding where in the home they might live. We suggest 10 x 6 as the minimum area for 2 rabbits to have access to at all times, and this would also apply to a single rabbit.



Have a look around your home. How many cables are exposed? **These attract rabbits like magnets!**

## Litter training

Rabbits are generally quite easy to litter train, although occasional accidents may occur. The quickest way to house-train your rabbits is to start off with a litter tray in a smaller area (put some hay in it - rabbits like to poo and chew at the same time!), usually where they have chosen to "go", and gradually increase the area they are allowed to access only once they are reliably using their tray. It is also vital to have your rabbits neutered as soon as they are old enough...male rabbits can spray like tom cats unless they are neutered, and will leave scent-marking poops scattered around too!

## House plants

There are so many different houseplants around that it's impossible to list them all.

A surprising number are poisonous to rabbits and so the only safe thing to do is to assume that they all are. Keep them out of reach and remember that some rabbits like to climb onto furniture, so keep that in mind when reckoning what is actually out of reach!

## Electric wires

Have a look around your home: how many cables are exposed? These attract rabbits like magnets! In the wild, while burrowing, rabbits chew through roots and they will treat wires in the same way. You need to protect those wires and keep them away from rabbits both for your own convenience and for the rabbits' safety.

## Safety

Rabbit proofing includes lifting cables out of reach, plastering into the wall, encasing them in protective trunking from a DIY or aquatic store, or even having electrical sockets raised up the wall and turned upside down so cables project up and not down. Remember, rabbits can get into spaces humans don't think they can reach, so protect every possible space.

If you're ironing, go somewhere your rabbits can't - it's just not worth the risk. To our knowledge nobody has yet worked out how to effectively rabbit-proof a conventional electric iron whilst it is in use!

## Chewing

Wires aren't the only things your rabbits will chew. Furniture, door-frames, carpets, clothes and anything else can be attractive propositions too. Pretty much anything is at risk, especially when your rabbits are young. Make sure you supervise your rabbits at all times whilst they are running free in your house.

Give your rabbits lots of toys and things that you don't mind them getting their teeth into and protect anything you don't want chewed. But please be realistic, they will chew where they shouldn't, so you'll either need to accept this, set up your living arrangements so that your rabbits can't access forbidden items unsupervised (just like most people do with pet dogs) or think again about having houserabbits!

## Rabbits quite literally get under your feet!

Unlike dogs and cats, rabbits will often put themselves exactly where your foot is about to land. You'll have to develop a sixth sense and learn how to tread very carefully. If you have mobility problems, you need to be particularly careful, as it is very easy to trip over a rabbit!

## The great escape

Rabbits can get through surprisingly small gaps and don't forget how high they can jump, so take whatever precautions you need to stop them putting themselves in danger, be that from a kamikaze launch from the back of the sofa or leaping out of an open window from a table! Remember to take care when you open your front door too, in case they make a run for it.

## Even though they're indoors...

Although a few houserabbits live free-range in the house, most are kept to one room, or part of a room, especially when unsupervised.

Remember they still need at least as much space as we recommend for outdoor rabbits, which is a permanent living area of 10ft x 6ft. Some people use puppy crates and/or pens for an indoor enclosure.

Whatever you choose, it is likely that you'll want some areas that are rabbit free. Baby and dog gates are handy but again, rabbits can squeeze through surprisingly narrow gaps and can jump very high - so take care!

Just as for outdoor rabbits, houserabbits will need places to hide out so they feel safe and secure, particularly if startled. Cardboard boxes are great for this, with a hole cut at each end.

Again, just like outdoor rabbits, they need to display their natural behaviours: digging, running, hiding and jumping. Fill boxes or tubs with shredded paper and hay to allow digging and provide tunnels that they can run through. A large cardboard or plastic tunnel (sewage piping!) behind the sofa works particularly well as sofas against walls are very difficult to rabbit-proof otherwise!

## Home alone

Ensure that wherever your rabbits live, they are safe when you go out. Close any doors you need to, put ironing boards away, make sure they can't set off the burglar alarm - generally think about any harm that could come to them and remedy it before leaving ■



# Chapter three

# HAY! FEED ME PROPERLY!

Rabbits evolved to eat grass, and grass, and more grass. In fact, they are designed to eat grass for hours every day supplemented with a wide variety of wild plants and vegetables, including the odd windfall apple and bark stripped from trees.

Pretty much anything is at risk, especially when your rabbits are young.

## FEED ME PROPERLY!

Domestic rabbits are fundamentally the same as their wild cousins, so just as their accommodation should allow them to display their natural behaviours, their diet should mimic that of wild rabbits as closely as possible. This has become known as The Natural Diet... and if fed with a larger proportion of greens & vegetables, the Hay & Veggies diet.

### THE NATURAL DIET CONSISTS OF:

- Unlimited grass or hay (long fibre) - 80%
- wide variety of leafy greens and vegetables - 15%
- Approximately 1 egg-cup of pelleted feed per rabbit - 5% (partly as a useful check to ensure your rabbits are eating normally!)



Burgess Excell  
Timothy hay with  
Dandelion & Marigold  
Herbage

Hay provides lots of long-strand fibre which maintains healthy gut movement

### WARNING

Never change your rabbits' mix or pellets suddenly. Abrupt changes can trigger fatal digestive upsets: rabbits use bacteria in their gut to help digest food and sudden dietary changes can disrupt the population of these "friendly" bacteria. Baby rabbits and those changing home or prone to other stresses are particularly vulnerable: take at least 1-2 weeks to change over to a new food and maintain unlimited hay at all times.

### So what's so good about hay?

Unlimited, good quality hay is the foundation of a healthy diet for pet rabbits. As well as meeting their basic nutritional requirements it has many other benefits, including keeping their teeth in order.

Hay provides lots of long-strand fibre which maintains healthy gut movement. It's the closest thing to a natural diet. Rabbits would naturally graze upon it all day, so ensure they have an unlimited supply.

Unlike humans, rabbits' teeth grow continuously. The specific chewing action (plus the abrasive action of silica in the grass leaf) of eating grass and hay keeps the teeth worn naturally. This is vitally important: rabbits that don't eat enough hay will develop painful 'spurs' on their teeth where the teeth have not worn

down properly. These cut into the gums and tongue and restrict their ability to eat. Many pet rabbits die of starvation when this condition is left untreated. Because of the need for this specific chewing action, the so-called 'Complete' rabbit foods that are commercially available are not a replacement for hay... they provide the correct nutrients, but they don't provide the correct dental exercise.

### What should I look for when buying hay?

Good quality hay should be dry, sweet smelling and free of grit, dust and mould. There is a wide variety available from retailers both on the high street and online. Buying in bulk is a good idea; try your local farm or riding stables for your basic supply to fill the enclosure, but you should add in speciality feeding hay (obtainable from pet shops and mail order outlets) for a variety of flavours and nutrients. Alfalfa hay is so rich it should only be fed as a treat. Kiln dried grass products can be used alongside hay and will provide different trace elements, which can be beneficial. So remember that you can't give your rabbits too much hay! They will nest in it, play in it and nibble on it constantly.

### Commercial food

In the past, commercial foods were the basis of domestic rabbits' diets. We have moved on since then, but there can still be a place for small quantities of good quality pellets/extrusions in your rabbits' diet. Aim for a high fibre content and opt for an extruded pellet rather than a mix/muesli style food. A medium-sized rabbit should be fed no more than one egg-cup of commercial food per day. And of course it should be as well as - never instead of - unlimited hay and some greens and vegetables.

### Greens and veggies

A multitude of plants are safe for rabbits to eat, it's up to you whether you get them from the hedgerow or the supermarket. Broccoli, spring greens and parsley are as tasty to a rabbit as dandelions from the garden. Either way, aim to vary what you give them, and keep to small portions of any one plant.

Fruits are counted as treats as they are generally high in sugars. Your rabbits may well enjoy a grape or a slice of apple, but they should not eat fruit every day.

Many UK rabbit owners prefer to feed their rabbits a grass/hay-based diet with regular but fairly small quantities of greens & veggies. The "Hay & Veggie" diet is another alternative,

particular popular in the USA, where chopped greens and vegetables are fed (alongside unlimited hay) up to a dessert-bowl full per 3kg of rabbit! Some rabbits suit one feeding strategy better than the other... The best way to work out what your rabbit likes best is to look at his droppings, because...

### A healthy bun has a healthy bum!

The best way to see if you've got your rabbits' diets right is to check their droppings. How do your rabbits' compare to the healthy poos in the picture? They should be large and look like compressed hay. This is what you would see around a wild rabbit warren and this is what you should aim for. Small, dry, dark droppings (not to be confused with caecotrophs - see later) are your rabbits' way of telling you that they're not getting what they need. Try different types of hay and slowly reduce the commercial pellets whilst varying or reducing the greens and vegetables - and keep an eye on what comes out of the other end.



### Safety First

If you're feeding wild plants make sure you can reliably identify them - you don't want to poison your rabbits. See our Foraging For Rabbits book for great advice.

Wash all greens thoroughly, and anything you've picked fresh. Keep your rabbits' RVHD and myxomatosis vaccinations up to date in case of transmission of disease from infected wild rabbits. If collecting wild plants, avoid areas frequented by dogs, at the side of roads or sprayed with pesticides.

Never feed lawn clippings to rabbits - they ferment very quickly and can be extremely harmful.

You might need to try both increasing and decreasing the greens and veggies - and eliminating certain foods at times. Ask a rabbit-savvy vet for help if needed.



### Let's get down to grass roots...

We'll come to the veg and the pellets in a moment, but first let's focus on the most important part of the diet: grass. Fresh grass is preferable, but hay is a very good substitute and more likely to be fed by owners. You can also buy kiln-dried grass. For simplicity, we will use the term hay throughout this section to mean fresh grass, kiln-dried grass, or hay.

### Grass and hay has:

- High fibre - at least 20%
- Moderate protein - 12 to 15%
- Trace minerals
- Low fat, starch and sugar
- Your rabbits' diet should be as close to this as possible!

### Rabbit Myths

Only cartoon rabbits live on carrots! In fact, whilst most rabbits do enjoy eating carrots, they should be given in limited quantities as they are high in sugar.

### Rabbits are natural recyclers

As part of their normal diet, rabbits eat a particular kind of their own droppings – it's the rabbit equivalent of "chewing the cud". Unlike the normal dry faecal droppings, which should look like compacted hay, they also produce shiny, smelly 'night' droppings called caecotrophs (pictured here).

These are normally eaten directly from the anus, so you won't (or shouldn't) see them very often. If you do frequently see caecotrophs, then you need to find the reason and take action – your rabbits may be having problems reaching their bottom to ingest the caecotrophs. Possible causes include obesity, large dewlaps, reduced flexibility (due to conditions such as spinal arthritis) and dental problems, but an unsuitable diet is by far the most common. If your rabbits are affected then increase their hay, reduce the amount of commercial pellets, vary/reduce their vegetables (or start to gradually introduce leafy vegetables if you aren't feeding any), and have them checked by a rabbit-savvy vet.

### Does my bun look big in this?

Obesity is a huge problem in pet rabbits. This can be a result of too little exercise (so their accommodation needs to be large enough and entertaining enough to encourage physical activity) but the major cause is an unsuitable diet. Remember that however much hay you give your rabbits, if you're giving them too much commercial food and treats then, just like humans, they'll often go for the unhealthy option at the expense of the good stuff. Fat rabbits suffer from a number of serious health risks, including not being able to clean themselves or reach their bottom to eat their caecotrophs – which puts them at greater risk of skin infections and flystrike.

### Selective feeding

The primary reason we don't recommend muesli-type "rabbit mix", is because of the risk of selective feeding. If given a large portion of muesli type food, rabbits can select the bits they like the most and

leave the rest – much like a child eating too many sweets and not wanting his dinner. This means they won't be getting all the nutrition they need. And if you keep two rabbits, it's impossible to be sure they are not each eating different preferred components.

To discourage selective feeding, the RWAf recommends a good quality extruded feed rather than a muesli-type mix.

### Treats

If we over-indulge ourselves on treats such as crisps or cakes then we're likely to suffer from heart problems, obesity and tooth decay. The same goes for rabbits – but our rabbits can also develop more immediate serious problems. Excess sugars and starchy treats can wreak havoc with the sensitive population of bacteria in the gut, leading to fatal digestive upsets. Stick to healthy treats, and keep them varied. For example, fresh coriander, a chunk of broccoli or a piece of mange tout will be greatly enjoyed by your rabbits.

Many of the treats that are marketed for rabbits (e.g. milk-based yoghurt drops; sticks of sweetened cereals) should be avoided.

### Don't forget the water!

Rabbits must have access to fresh water at all times. Rabbits eating lots of fresh grass and greens will drink less, whilst those eating mostly hay will drink a greater amount. Bowls are preferable to bottles as they are easier to drink from (particularly in hot weather) and they will not get blocked, but they may get spilled or knocked over so it's a good idea to provide a bowl and a bottle if you can. Change your rabbits' water daily, and clean bowls and bottles regularly.

### Rabbits, calcium and vitamin D

Like all mammals, rabbits obtain calcium from their diet. Rabbits absorb calcium in proportion to what is present in their food and excrete any excess calcium via the kidneys, which is why rabbit urine can often be chalky. Too much or too little calcium can cause problems. Calcium deficiency is linked with dental disease, whilst excess calcium causes urinary stones and bladder problems. The level of calcium will vary depending on your rabbits' overall diets – ask your rabbit-savvy vet for advice if you are concerned about too much or too little calcium.

Rabbits also need vitamin D to enable dietary calcium to be absorbed from the gut. Outdoor rabbits with an attached run will be able to synthesise vitamin D from sunlight, but rabbits living indoors will become deficient unless they have enough vitamin D in their diet or spend time sunbathing outdoors. Vitamin D is present in hay and is added to commercial rabbit foods.

A normal healthy rabbit eating plenty of hay and limited quantities of a good quality commercial rabbit food does not need a vitamin or mineral supplement. Rabbits with existing dental disease or those that are very fussy eaters (although you shouldn't allow your rabbits to be fussy eaters, see Selective Feeding) may benefit from receiving one. Ask your rabbit savvy vet for advice.

### Commercial foods - mix, pellets or extruded?

Rabbit mixes look like muesli and are popular with owners because they look more 'interesting' as they are brightly coloured. However, they can encourage selective feeding, particularly if given in large quantities, and are not recommended.

Pellets are bite-sized nuggets, with each mouthful having the same composition, which helps ensure rabbits eat a balanced diet. Despite them not being as pleasing to the eye as the muesli mix, they are much better for your rabbits.

In extruded foods, the ingredients are mixed, cooked and 'extruded' (squeezed or forced out). They have all the important advantages of pellets but are much more palatable, and the more advanced brands contain some long-strand fibre similar to hay.

### What about complete foods?

So-called complete foods are designed to contain all the nutrients that rabbits require (check the label and look for fibre of around 20% or higher and less than 15% protein) but they won't provide enough of the necessary long fibre for dietary and digestive health. It's absolutely vital that your rabbits have constant access to hay! ■



muesli mix



pellets



extruded

Try this at home!  
Cut a few small slices of apple and hide them in your rabbits' hay. They'll love sniffing them out and digging them up!





# galens garden

## Safe wild plants

Wild rabbits eat a variety of grasses and wild plants. They learn from their mothers which foods are good to eat, initially from the scent in her droppings and the plants she uses in making the nest and then later by observing and copying her eating patterns.

It is natural for rabbits to be cautious about new foods for two reasons; they cannot vomit (a means other animals can use to eject poisonous substances that they've ingested) and there are a number of poisonous plants which they need to avoid.

There are plenty of good, and safe, wild plants that your rabbit will enjoy as part of a varied diet if you stick to the three Golden Rules.

1. Pick only in safe areas free from chemical or animal pollution.
2. Feed only those plants which you can positively identify as safe.
3. Feed small amounts of a range of plants rather than a pile of a single one.

Many wild plants have medicinal properties which dictate their suitability. Rabbits love dandelions but too many will make a rabbit wee and poop too much and can lead to a smelly, sticky bottom. Fortunately most wild plants that are safe to feed are 'astringent' or drying, so when fed alongside a few dandelion leaves help balance things out.

In fields, gardens and allotments across the UK you should be able to find at least a few from this safe list: Agrimony, Avens, Burdock, Chickweed, Cleavers, Clovers, Dandelion, Goat's Rue, Golden Rod, Heather, Mallow, Melilot, Plantain, Rosebay Willow Herb, Sanfoin, Shepherd's Purse, Vetch and Yarrow. Why not look on line at [shop.rabbitwelfare.co.uk](http://shop.rabbitwelfare.co.uk) for a copy of our 'Foraging for rabbits' book if you are interested in doing this for your rabbits.

Rabbits can also be fed the leaves of apple, blackberry, currants, hazel, mulberry, pear, raspberry, rose, strawberry; culinary herbs and a range of garden flowers including calendula marigold, chamomile, echinacea, Jerusalem artichoke (sunchoke), lady's mantle, nasturtium, roses, sunflowers.

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[www.galensgarden.co.uk](http://www.galensgarden.co.uk)



Agrimony



Bramble



Avens

Broad Leaf Plantain



Burdock



Calendula



Cleavers



Cornflower



Dandelion



Dry herbs



Melilot



Nasturtium



Mulberry



Golden Rod



Mint



Raspberry



Ribwort Plantain



Goats Rue



Wild Strawberry



Lemon Balm



Yarrow

## Chapter four

# THE IMPORTANCE OF NEUTERING

Neutering (castration of males and spaying of females) is vital to helping your rabbits live a long and healthy life.

Neutering allows rabbits to be kept in the pairs or groups that are so vital to their welfare; prevents life-threatening health problems (especially in female rabbits) and, of course, prevents unwanted pregnancies: there are thousands of unwanted rabbits in rescue centres already, please don't add to this by breeding from your pets.

## Neutering is vital to helping your rabbits live a long and healthy life.

If you have a mixed-sex pair of rabbits, they both need to be neutered in order to live together harmoniously: even if your female rabbit is spayed, an un-castrated male will still try to mount her, which can trigger fighting and cause stress to both rabbits. And if you neuter your male rabbit leaving your female rabbit un-spayed, she will have repeated false pregnancies, is likely to become aggressive, and will be at risk of premature death from uterine cancer. While mounting may still take place between neutered pairs, it'll be due to dominance behaviour rather than reproduction, and this is a wholly natural behaviour... you will sometimes find female rabbits mounting their male companions for this reason.

Male rabbits can be castrated at any age, but if you have bought young rabbits, it's best to have them castrated as soon as their testicles descend (10-12 weeks) although take advice from your own vet - some may prefer you to wait a little longer. The operation is fairly straightforward and recovery time is quite quick, provided there are no complications. Some vets perform rabbit castrations via the scrotum and some via the abdomen.

If you have a young male rabbit castrated within a few days of his testicles descending into the scrotum, he won't have the chance to become fertile and he can remain with a female litter-mate or companion. If he was any older when he was castrated, be careful: male rabbits aren't sterile immediately after castration (mature sperm may have already left the testicles, and can live a surprisingly long time!), so keep him away from unspayed adult females for between four and eight weeks after his operation.

For females, the spaying operation is a bigger undertaking, as her uterus and ovaries have to be removed via an incision in the abdomen. Females are sterile as soon as they have been spayed, but if they have a male companion, you need to check he is gentle with her until the healing process is well underway: if you suspect he might mount your female rabbit, keep them apart for a few days, where they can see and smell each other through wire mesh.



### Advantages to having male rabbits castrated

- Un-castrated males can breed. Neutering/castration prevents this.
- Un-castrated male rabbits often spray urine like tom cats... over their territory, their possessions (include their rabbit companions) and very often over you, too.
- Un-neutered males occasionally develop cancer in their testes and prostate gland. Although the risk is small, castration eliminates it.
- Neutering usually make litter training much easier.
- Some un-neutered males are aggressive. After castration, testosterone levels will fall dramatically which should reduce or eradicate aggression.
- In general, neutered males are much happier and more relaxed pets.
- Un-castrated male rabbits can't realistically live with any other rabbit.

### Advantages of having female rabbits spayed

- Unspayed females are at very high risk of two potentially fatal conditions: uterine cancer and pyometra (infection of the uterus/womb). These can both be fatal.
- Some unspayed females are aggressive and territorial. Many have repeated phantom pregnancies and may growl, lunge at, scratch or bite their owners or other rabbits, particularly in spring and summer.
- Keeping two un-spayed females together, even if they are sisters, can make aggression issues worse.
- Female rabbits are able to reproduce from about 4-6 months of age. Rabbit pregnancies are short - around 31 days - and there are several kits to each litter. Females are able to mate again immediately after they have given birth, so if the dad is still around the potential for a population explosion is obvious.



### Is it safe?

Even a decade ago, rabbit surgery was regarded as high risk and many vets were very reluctant to perform elective (planned) surgery on rabbits. Today, things are very different: advances in anaesthetic techniques and veterinary training have resulted in rabbit neutering operations becoming much safer. However, low-risk surgery doesn't mean no-risk surgery. Surgery on any animal can have unexpected complications, including a small risk of death, but for most rabbits the benefits of neutering far outweigh the very small risk.

Today things are very different...

Older rabbits and those in poor health are more difficult to neuter safely. If your pet rabbit is older than three or four years old, or has medical problems (such as obesity, dental disease or 'snuffles' and related disorders) you must discuss the risks and benefits with your vet in order to choose the best option for your pet.

### Choosing the right vet to neuter your rabbits

It's important to choose a suitable veterinary practice to neuter your rabbits. Like any other specialist field, vets vary in their interests and expertise in rabbit medicine.

There is a full guide on how to choose a vet for this most important of procedures elsewhere in this booklet.

If you already use a veterinary practice, ask whether they neuter rabbits. Most small animal vets are happy to neuter both male and female rabbits these days, but some practices do still refer rabbit surgery - especially spays, or higher-risk rabbits - to specialist exotics practices.

The cost of having rabbits neutered varies from one veterinary practice to another. Spaying a female is always more expensive than neutering a male because it is takes longer and is a more complex operation. Ask vets for quotes, but if you can afford to do so, choose your vet based on their rabbit expertise and track record in rabbit anaesthesia and surgery, not on their price-list. And don't forget, that expertise may not be at the most expensive veterinary clinic!



Prior oxygen administration can make an anaesthetic safer



### Pre-operative care

Take your rabbit to the vet well before the operation date for a health check and to discuss the procedure. Ask whether any pre-operative blood tests are advised. Don't change the diet in the week or so before surgery. Rabbits cannot vomit, so they don't need to be fasted before surgery. They should be offered food and water right up to the time of surgery and as soon as they wake up.

### Post-operative care

Your rabbit should be awake, alert and preferably eating when you collect him after surgery. Remember to check:

- Has the rabbit been given pain-relieving drugs? If not, request some - you are unlikely to find any rabbit-savvy vet these days who doesn't routinely pay great attention to pain relief after rabbit surgery, but always check.
- Who should be contacted if there are any problems?
- Do you need to book an appointment for a check-up, or for stitches to be removed?
- How long should the rabbit be on cage rest? (Usually 2 days for males, 5 or 6 for females)
- Ask your vet about syringe feeding if your rabbit doesn't begin to eat for itself. The gut needs to be kept moving and syringing will help with that and with general recovery.

When you get your rabbit home, put him in a disinfected cage indoors with comfortable bedding (e.g. clean towels or Vetbed) and a clean litter tray or newspapers. Most vets use special suture techniques to prevent rabbits chewing at stitches, but you should still check the operation site for any discharge or swelling.

Males usually bounce back from their operation, but females may be quiet for a day or so. The most important thing is to get your rabbit eating, or the digestive system may grind to a halt. Vets try very hard to avoid this complication, using drugs to relieve pain and stimulate the gut, but you should be prepared to tempt the rabbit with nibbles of favourite food. Freshly picked grass or herbs often work. If your rabbit isn't eating by next morning, call the vet for advice. You should also monitor the rabbit's droppings for a few days and contact the vet if few or none are produced within a few hours after coming home. ■

The most important thing is to get your rabbit eating



## Chapter five

# TWO (OR MORE!) IS COMPANY

Rabbits evolved to live in groups. Bonding your rabbit with a partner will greatly increase its quality of life, but there are benefits for the owner too: once you have witnessed your bonded pair or group grooming each other, eating and lying down together, it's unlikely you would ever want to return to keeping a solitary rabbit. This section explains the importance of companionship and how you can successfully pair up your rabbit and make everyone's lives better.

For simplicity, we will refer to pairs throughout this section, but groups are also suited to rabbits' natural behaviours.



Rabbits may be sociable, but they're also territorial.

### Why domestic rabbits need a friend

- Warmth:** In the winter they share body warmth to keep out the cold.
- Company:** Rabbits are hard-wired to be sociable, and when kept in pairs will spend most of their time together. Studies have shown that they will seek company even above food.
- Grooming:** Mutual grooming is a joy to watch, and it's a vital natural behaviour for rabbits.
- Health:** Rabbits kept in pairs are healthier than those kept alone. Rabbits do a great job of cleaning themselves but a partner will be able to get to the parts they cannot reach themselves, the eyes for example. Many owners have reported that when one rabbit has died, the remaining rabbit starts to suffer from eye infections because his partner is no longer keeping his eyes clean. This shows the importance of mutual grooming.
- Emotional health:** Particularly in times of stress, they rely on each other and they should not be deprived of a companion to turn to and to share their lives with. Depression-type behaviour has been observed in widowed rabbits, that then improves when the survivor finds a new companion. In the wild, rabbits naturally rely on each other for "safety in numbers" and that instinct is still present in domestic rabbits - they'll feel more confident if they are living with other rabbits.

### The basics of bonding

Introductions have to be conducted carefully. Rabbits may be sociable, but they're also territorial. Your resident rabbit will be naturally wary of a stranger being brought into its home. Both rabbits must be neutered if they are old enough. If you already have a rabbit, arrange for him/her to be neutered and wait a few weeks before adopting the second rabbit. It's never too late to get a friend for your existing rabbit - there are many cases where older rabbits have spent their twilight years happily with a new companion.

### Think about it...

Single rabbits often put their head down in front of their owner in the hope of a head-rub. This is the equivalent of being socially groomed by another rabbit - one of its natural behaviours. Owners can only do this for short periods whereas a bonded companion rabbit will always be on hand.

## What combination?

The easiest pairing is castrated male/spayed female. So if you already have one rabbit, choose a companion of the opposite sex.

Same-sex pairs can be tricky, but it is possible to keep two males or two females if they have grown up together. You'll need to find either a pair of siblings, or two rabbits from different litters both between 8 and 10 weeks of age. It's vital that both rabbits are neutered as soon as possible, before any fighting has occurred. Same-sex pairs must never be separated, even for short periods of time. Even then, many will have occasional squabbles. Any visiting rabbits may upset the balance and trigger fighting.

With same-sex introductions, if one or both of the rabbits is already adult, introductions should only be undertaken with great caution and expert advice. Such introductions are possible, but success is not guaranteed.

There is a lot more potential for serious fighting than when introducing opposite-sex pairs.

## Where do I get my second rabbit?

The best place to go to is a rescue shelter; you'll be giving a home to a rabbit in need, and a rescue rabbit is likely to be already neutered, vaccinated and health checked.

Many rescue centres have some expertise in pairing up rabbits, and will often allow you to bring your own rabbit along to the centre to meet potential partners on neutral territory. Some rescues have facilities to board rabbits and will supervise the introduction process for you. With a bit of luck, you'll find a "love at first sight" match for your rabbit, but you can't count on this. If you are about to obtain your first rabbit, please consider adopting a bonded pair from a rescue centre, because then the hard work has been done.

## Love at first sight

Some rabbits will establish an instant bond. You can recognise this by an initial lack of interest when first introduced followed by individual grooming. This will soon progress to mutual grooming and the rabbits sitting together. Do keep a careful eye on a "love at first sight" couple for any possible aggression, but if all goes well, don't separate them.

## We do not recommend keeping rabbits and guinea pigs together

### What if this method doesn't work?

There are a number of different ways to bond your rabbits. If the method described doesn't do the trick then talk to your local rescue shelter for advice or look on the RWF website.

### What about a guinea pig?

We do not recommend keeping rabbits and guinea pigs together: a guinea pig should not be seen as a cheaper, easier friend for your rabbit than another rabbit. Although some rabbit/guinea pig pairs get on well, many more end in disaster, often with injuries to one or both animals.



Guinea pigs and rabbits have different diets - for example guinea pigs need daily vitamin C, whereas rabbits don't. A rabbit is likely to 'bully' the guinea pig and take its food. The guinea pig may spend most of its life hiding from its larger, more powerful housemate.

A guinea pig cannot perform the natural sociable function of another rabbit. It will not groom the rabbit, for example, and will not provide the same level of warmth because of the difference in size.

As discussed elsewhere in this booklet, rabbit-keeping is all about allowing them to behave as they would in their natural environment as much as possible. Rabbits do not live with guinea pigs in the wild, and guinea-pigs don't behave like rabbits either.

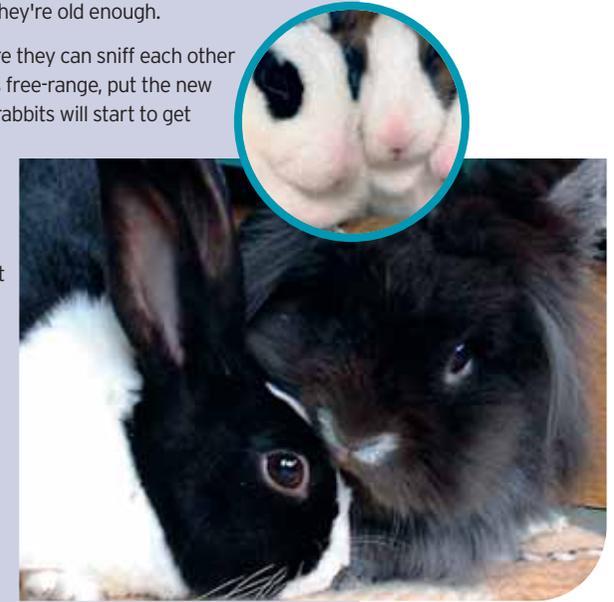
If you already have a rabbit and guinea pig living together happily, let them stay together but make sure the rabbit is neutered, or the guinea pig is likely to be sexually harassed. Male guinea pigs may also need to be castrated. You must always provide a hidey-hole where the guinea pig can escape from the rabbit. Please do not start out with this combination. A rabbit needs the company of its own species.

## How do I introduce two rabbits?

**Two baby rabbits (under 10-12 weeks of age); or a "love at first sight" couple, can live with each other immediately. All other combinations will need to be carefully and gradually introduced.**

**There are many different ways to introduce two rabbits, all of which have their devotees. The scheme outlined below isn't the quickest, but it is easy to follow and it nearly always works.**

- 1 Both rabbits need to be neutered, if they're old enough.
- 2 Put the rabbits in nearby cages, where they can sniff each other through wire. If your existing rabbit is free-range, put the new rabbit in a cage inside this area. The rabbits will start to get used to each others' scent. To help this you can also swap their litter trays over, or rub a cloth over one rabbit and then the other.
- 3 Once the rabbits are used to the sight and smell of each other, start putting them together for very short periods of time in strictly neutral territory (where neither has been before - try the bathroom!). Alternatively, you may have taken your existing rabbit(s) with you to the rescue centre to choose a new friend, in which case, bring them home together in the same carry case. Because this is a stressful situation, the rabbits are likely to stick together for comfort and security rather than trying to squabble. You can go straight to putting them on neutral territory if this is the case. If there is a sign of tension, separate the rabbits. Try again next day, gradually increasing the time the rabbits spend together. A little bit of chasing and nipping is normal, but it's better to separate the rabbits at this point than risk an all-out fight.
- 4 Repeat this until the rabbits are relaxed together. You can assist this process by feeding the rabbits together, and providing lots of cardboard boxes and hidey holes so that they don't have to stare at each other.
- 5 When the rabbits are happy to groom each other and lie together, they can be left together unsupervised.



If there is a sign of tension, separate the rabbits

The whole process can take anything from a couple of hours to a couple of months. The better the rabbits get on at their first meeting, the quicker they will bond. And if you are able to put the rabbits together for very brief periods, many times a day, they'll get used to each other far more quickly than if you can only do so once per day. ■

# Chapter six

## PREVENTATIVE HEALTH CARE

Like every responsible pet owner, you want your rabbits to live a happy, healthy life - so you must have them vaccinated against Myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (RVHD).

This chapter also includes information on preventing two other dangerous conditions, "Flystrike" (which is not an infectious disease so it cannot be immunised against) and the brain and kidney parasite *Encephalitozoon cuniculi*.

### Myxomatosis

Often referred to as "myxi" or "myxo", myxomatosis decimated the wild rabbit population when it arrived in Britain in the 1950s and 60s. It is still deadly today. Myxomatosis starts with severe conjunctivitis. Next, affected rabbits develop swellings around the head and genital regions, become increasingly weak, go blind, and eventually die.

If an unvaccinated pet rabbit catches myxomatosis, it is probably doomed. Most vets advise euthanasia as soon as the diagnosis is made because the outlook is so bleak, even with intensive treatment.

### How can pets catch myxomatosis?

The main route of infection is via insect "vectors" (e.g. fleas and mosquitoes) that have previously bitten an infected rabbit. Midges and mites have also been suspected of passing on the disease. Direct contact with infected rabbits can also spread the disease, particularly respiratory secretions and direct mucosal contact.

All pet rabbits - indoors or outdoors - are at risk. Rabbits living outside (especially if wild rabbits enter the garden) are at especially high risk.

### How can I protect my rabbits from myxomatosis?

Vaccination is the keystone of a package of measures you should take to protect your rabbit. Rabbits can be vaccinated from 5 weeks of age. Since 2012 there has been a combined vaccination that covers both Myxomatosis and Rabbit Viral Haemorrhagic Disease. It needs to be repeated every year.

Vaccination cannot guarantee absolute protection: vaccinated rabbits do occasionally catch myxomatosis. However, in vaccinated rabbits, the disease is usually milder, sometimes just a single skin lesion, or a transient illness. Vaccinated rabbits with myxi usually survive with proper care, whereas unvaccinated rabbits nearly always die. RVHD-2 is a mutated strain of the original virus that recently entered the UK. The RWAf has obtained permission to import a European vaccine to protect against it.

Vaccination  
can protect pet  
rabbits from  
two killer  
diseases.  
Crossing your  
fingers won't.



### As well as regular vaccination:

- If you buy your hay and straw direct from the producer, try to use farms where the farmer hasn't seen any rabbit with myxomatosis on the land.
- Feed dust-extracted hay or kiln-dried grass.
- Fit insect screens to outdoor enclosures.
- Eliminate standing water (where mosquitoes might breed) from your garden. If you have a garden pond, put a small amount of cooking oil into the water. This will form a film over the surface that won't kill fish or frogs, but will suffocate mosquito larvae.
- Treat your cats and dogs for fleas, otherwise they may bring rabbit fleas home. Talk to your vet about flea control: some products are toxic to rabbits.
- Try to stop wild rabbits from getting into your garden. If this isn't feasible, make it impossible for wild visitors to have nose-to-nose contact with your pets.
- Make sure there's nothing to attract vermin and wild birds to hutches/runs; use small-hole mesh on hutches/runs to keep unwelcome creatures out!

## Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (RVHD)

### What it does

RVHD arrived in Britain in 1992. It is a swift and efficient killer - almost all unvaccinated rabbits who catch RVHD die within a day or two. The virus causes massive internal bleeding. Some rabbits bleed from the nose and back passage before death, others die so quickly there may be no outward sign of disease at all. Owners often think their rabbit has died of "fright", a "heart attack" or (in summer) "heatstroke". Most cases are never diagnosed: RVHD is often only suspected when several rabbits die in quick succession.

...some rabbits are quiet for a day or two after vaccination



### How can pet rabbits catch RVHD?

RVHD is spread by direct contact with infected rabbits, or indirectly via their urine/faeces. The virus can survive for months in the environment, and is terrifyingly easy to bring home to your pets.

#### For example:

- Hay may have been in contact with infected wild rabbits as grass growing in the field.
- Birds or insects may transport the virus on their feet (or in their droppings) to your rabbit grazing on the lawn.
- The virus may be blown on the wind.
- You might bring the virus home on your feet, or your pets' feet (or car wheels) from infected wild rabbit droppings.
- You could bring the virus home on your hands or clothes.

RVHD has been recorded all over the UK: all pet rabbits should be vaccinated. There is no way of predicting where the next outbreak will strike, and no practical way of shielding your pet rabbit from all the possible sources of infection.

### How can I protect my rabbit from RVHD?

Your rabbit can be protected by the same vaccine used to protect against Myxomatosis. This can be given from 5 weeks of age and needs to be repeated every year.

#### If you are about to obtain a young rabbit that hasn't yet been vaccinated:

- Follow the advice given above, in the Myxomatosis section.
- Don't use second-hand hutches or equipment without finding out what the previous occupant died from.

#### Vaccination FAQs

I'm thinking of having my rabbit vaccinated, but there's no RVHD or Myxomatosis in the area. Is vaccination really necessary?

We would still recommend vaccination:

It's impossible to predict when and where diseases will strike. If you wait for a local outbreak of RVHD or myxomatosis:

- Your rabbit might be the first to die.
- Many boarding establishments and insurance policies require rabbits to have up-to-date vaccinations.

### My rabbit has chronic health problems.

#### Can he still be vaccinated?

You need to discuss this with your vet. In general, vaccines should only be given to healthy animals, whose immune system can mount a proper response to the vaccine. However, if your rabbit's condition is stable, it may be possible to vaccinate him.

#### Do RVHD and Myxomatosis vaccinations have side effects?

Like all drugs, vaccines can have side effects, although problems in rabbits are very unusual. Skin reactions are sometimes reported at the site of injection (this was more of a problem with some of the older RVHD vaccines), and some rabbits are quiet for a day or two after vaccination. Although this is not desirable, it's a whole lot better than death from a preventable disease.



## Flystrike

### What is "Flystrike"?

Rabbits are said to have "flystrike" (myiasis) when flies lay eggs upon them and the eggs then hatch into maggots. Some species of fly (e.g. blue bottles and green bottles) produce maggots that can very rapidly mature and eat into the living flesh within 24 hours. This is often rapidly fatal for the rabbit.

#### Are my rabbits at risk?

All rabbits are at risk from flystrike so you should never be complacent, but certain factors increase the risk:

- Time of year - flystrike is especially common during the summer, but can occur at any time of the year.
- Rabbits with open wounds
- Rabbits with a dirty bottom, most likely because of poor diet, or who have wounds or wet fur, are at very high risk of flystrike.

#### What to do if you find your rabbit has maggots

Firstly, keep calm, but telephone your veterinary practice immediately. Flystrike is a true emergency - day or night - and treatment cannot wait.

So long as it does not delay your trip to the vet, pick off any visible maggots with tweezers. Do not dunk the rabbit in water: fur in the affected area may need to be shaved and wet fur clogs the clippers.

Flystrike is a very serious condition and is, sadly, often fatal. However, rabbits can make a full recovery if the condition is found and treated quickly. Flyblown rabbits are usually in pain and severe shock, and need skilled veterinary and nursing care.

#### How is flystrike treated?

The vet will usually sedate or anaesthetize the rabbit to perform a very thorough examination. After clipping away the fur, the vet can find and remove all external maggots. This usually requires sedation or general anaesthesia, which carries a much higher risk than normal because flyblown rabbits may be in shock. If the vet finds that maggots have already eaten into the rabbit's body, euthanasia may well be recommended.



### FLY KILLERS & NATURAL REPELLENTS

As well as the steps listed above, you can also try to reduce the number of flies coming near your rabbit.

Old-fashioned sticky papers may be used in the home or shed.

A number of plants are said to repel insects and flies. Some may be dried and hung in the home, or the rabbit shed; others may be planted in pots to sit on top of outdoor hutches, or planted in half baskets and hung on the sides of the run. Just make sure they are well out of reach of your rabbits.

#### Supportive care

Affected rabbits usually need intravenous or subcutaneous fluids, antibiotics to try to prevent infection, and plenty of pain relief. Some vets also use anti-parasitic drugs in the hope that it will penetrate the tissues and kill any remaining concealed maggots.

#### How to prevent flystrike from happening again

Once a rabbit has been lucky enough to recover from flystrike, it's important to prevent the same thing happening again. The vet will need to find and treat any underlying health problems, and the owner must take every possible step to protect their rabbits from flies.

- Check that your rabbit is eating a healthy diet (See the feeding section).
- Remove soiled bedding every day and disinfect hutches weekly.
- Check your rabbit at least once a day: "high-risk rabbits" need twice-daily bottom checks especially in warm weather.
- Don't forget that houserabbits can also be at risk!
- Physical barriers such as adding fly screens or mosquito nets to hutches and runs.
- Speak to your vet about specific preventative measures: "Rearguard" is a liquid that is applied by sponge to the rabbit and helps prevent flystrike for up to 10 weeks. It stops maggots maturing to a stage where they become dangerous.



### Encephalatozoon cuniculi

#### What is "E cuniculi"?

*E cuniculi* is a microscopic brain and kidney parasite of rabbits (less commonly, some other species are also affected such as Arctic foxes and some small primates).

#### Are my rabbits at risk?

It's believed that the time around weaning is the most common time for infection and it comes from the rabbits' mothers. However, rabbits can certainly catch the disease later in life, typically after being introduced to an infected newcomer, or sharing pasture with one. Your newly acquired rabbit may already be infected, or may have met the infection and its immune system may have overcome it.

#### How do I know if my rabbits have been infected with *E cuniculi*?

There are some typical but not guaranteed signs of infection. Your rabbit may develop a head tilt to one side. His eyes may track from side to side or up and down. He may shuffle or develop weakness on one or both back legs, or even become paralysed. He may spin or roll without being able to control it. He may develop seizures, deafness, cataract or unexplained behavioural changes. He may start to drink and urinate more than usual.

Testing for this disease is complicated. There are blood tests which can reveal antibodies to the disease, but many rabbits have antibodies and it does not necessarily indicate current infection. High levels, or "titres", are more useful in pointing to current disease. The spores of the organism may be found in the urine, using microscopic tests or DNA fingerprinting, but they are only found intermittently, and false negative results may lead to a false sense of security. Biopsy of affected tissues is possible, but this is potentially invasive.

#### How is *E cuniculi* treated?

##### Routine prevention

There are several components to preventing *Ec* infection. The first is preventing exposure to the disease in the first place, by testing all of your rabbits, and testing any new arrivals before mixing them. This may be prohibitively expensive, however, and blood tests may not reveal rabbits recently exposed to infection. Some vets advocate treating all new arrivals, and this helps to reduce the spread of infection between individuals, as well as aiming to prevent them developing the disease. Fenbendazole is a drug commonly used for worming cats and dogs and is also available for use with rabbits. Give it to all contact animals continuously for 28 days. *E cuniculi* may be harboured in the environment, so you need to thoroughly clean cages, surfaces and all equipment, especially litter trays. The RWAf does not advocate the regular use of worming products for rabbits, i.e. every quarter, as is recommended for cats and dogs. However, there are times when the use of 9 day courses might be helpful. Please see our website for more details.

The role of wild rabbits is not fully understood, but testing of wild rabbits has shown only low levels of infection in the UK, and so it does not seem a very significant route of infection, although more work is needed.

##### Treating suspected or confirmed *Ec* problems

If you suspect *Ec*, you should speak to your vet about a specific treatment course, as many other problems (including ear infections and spinal damage) may mimic *Ec* infection. Treatment is likely to be as above, but may also involve other drug treatments to support your rabbit, reduce inflammation, or help with the disorientation that affected rabbits may have.

##### Is *E cuniculi* infectious to me or my other animals?

*Ec* is potentially zoonotic, ie it can be transmitted to humans. However, only humans with severe immune compromise (typically those with HIV/AIDS, or on chemotherapy), are vulnerable. If you are concerned about the risk of infection, you should speak to your doctor. Other species are not believed to be generally susceptible to the rabbit strain of *Ec*, although if they are immune suppressed, this is equally possible. ■

He may develop seizures, deafness, cataract or unexplained behavioural changes.

# Chapter seven

## RABBIT MOT- KEEP YOUR BUNS RUNNING SMOOTHLY!



Keeping your rabbits running smoothly isn't difficult, but it's important to recognise problems early. If you check your rabbits carefully you will soon become familiar with their eating habits, behaviour, and general body condition.



### Emissions

Rabbit urine can be colourful! Anything from white to yellow or even red is normal, particularly if the rabbits have been eating foods such as beetroot! Signs of trouble include the rabbit straining to pass urine, or blood in the urine (a red patch or flecks in a lighter coloured pool of urine).

Rabbit droppings should be fairly large, but may be dark if they have a lot of rich grass in their diet. If they are dark and small then you need to take action. You may also notice "caecotrophs" occasionally - soft, dark shiny droppings usually eaten directly from the anus. If you see caecotrophs often, then the first thing to do is to make sure the diet is correct: see the feeding section in this booklet for more information. If the over-production of caecotrophs continues after you have optimised your rabbits' diet, then seek veterinary advice.

Never change your rabbit's diet suddenly - switch foods over a period of at least 1-2 weeks.

### Tyres

Well, legs and feet really. Toenails need to be kept in trim. If they overgrow, then the angle of your rabbits' feet on the ground may be altered, which can sometimes lead to sore hocks and strain on joints and overlong claws can catch in things and break, leading to bleeding and possible infection.

### Servicing

Your rabbits must be vaccinated against two killer diseases: myxomatosis and RVHD (every year). When you go to the vet for the vaccinations your vet should check them thoroughly (including their teeth and weight) and it's a great opportunity to ask questions about their general health and care. Rabbit medicine is quite specialised and although vets have become much more rabbit-savvy in recent years, you should check carefully before choosing one. See 'choosing a vet' elsewhere in this booklet.

If you see caecotrophs often, then the first thing to do is to make sure the diet is correct

### Performance

Rabbits are prey animals who conceal signs of illness. This means that when they do finally show the signs, then they're in a very bad way. If a rabbit is quieter than normal; sitting in a crouched position, hopping with difficulty or grinding his teeth, then he may be ill or in pain. He needs to be checked over by a vet immediately.

### Fuel

Rabbits will only stay healthy if they have the correct diet. Follow the guidelines in the feeding section of this booklet and don't let your rabbits get fat. Overweight rabbits can develop all sorts of problems including flystrike.

## THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR:

### Nose - Clean and dry

Rabbits don't get colds, so if yours sneezes frequently, or has a runny nose, take him to a vet.

### Eyes - Clean and bright

Runny eyes are commonly due to a scratch or dust, but may be something more serious and must be seen by a vet. Bathing the eye may help temporarily, but probably won't cure the problem.

### Ears - Clean and dry

Rabbits have big ears, but they're usually trouble-free. See the vet if your rabbit is shaking his head frequently, scratching his ears, or has lots of ear wax.

### Skin and fur - Clean, even and shiny

Rabbits moult several times a year - don't panic if fur starts dropping out in handfuls! It's important to brush moulting rabbits every day. And it's worth knowing that rabbit skin, which is usually a very pale colour, often looks coloured underneath moulting fur.

Long-haired rabbits need regular grooming throughout their lives: see next section for detailed advice on caring for long-haired rabbits.

"Dandruff" is usually caused by mites. Treatment usually involves a series of injections. Don't use flea sprays without asking the vet - some products are dangerous to rabbits. Areas of bare, red or sore skin should be seen by the vet.

### Tail and bottom - Clean and dry

Check your rabbit's bottom daily and keep it clean. Flies can lay eggs on soiled fur and hatch into maggots which eat into the flesh. This is "flystrike". If you find fly eggs or maggots on your rabbit, call the vet immediately.

Rabbits have scent glands - clefts at either side of the genital region. If they fill with smelly wax you can clean them gently with a damp cotton bud.

### Feet

Nails need to be trimmed every few months. You can do this at home, but ask the vet to teach you. Rabbits use their front paws as a handkerchief so look out for wet, matted fur - your rabbit may have a running nose or eye. ■



### Hocks

A small bare pink patch, beneath a flap of folded-over fur, is normal, especially in large rabbits. Sore hocks (red, broken or infected skin) must be treated by a vet.

### Teeth

Rabbits can suffer from dental problems, often due to a lack of hay in their diet.

Rabbit teeth never stop growing and if the top and bottom teeth don't line up correctly, they'll grow too long and the rabbit won't be able to eat properly.

Front teeth are easy to see - just fold back the top lip. You can't check the back teeth at home, but if they are causing problems your rabbit might dribble; lose weight; change his favourite foods; or stop eating altogether.

Rabbits with dental problems may not like having their heads touched, and sometimes have bumps along the lower jaw, runny eye(s), or a nasal discharge.

If you think your rabbit has a tooth problem, take him to the vet. He'll probably need to be sedated or anaesthetised for a careful examination. Clipping teeth at home is not advised - it is thought to be painful and carries a risk of shattering the tooth root, which can lead on to serious problems.

### Neutering

We strongly recommend that all male pet rabbits are castrated and females spayed - this is vital for their physical and behavioural well-being in captivity. There's much more information in the section on Neutering elsewhere in this booklet.

### EMERGENCIES: WHEN A VET IS NEEDED IMMEDIATELY!

Rabbits have evolved not to show obvious signs of weakness or illness, because in the wild it would make them a target for predators. So if your rabbit is showing signs then you must assume there is a serious problem. Watch out for:

- Difficulty breathing; or blueish lips and tongue
- Limp, floppy, cold, or hasn't eaten for 12 hours
- Uncontrollable bleeding
- Flystrike
- Showing signs of pain - panting for breath or unable to eat
- Severe diarrhoea
- Not moving around properly/lameness/paralysis



## How to handle your rabbit

From time to time it is necessary to handle our rabbits. We need to be able to examine them and perform tasks such as claw clipping and checking for fly strike.

Most rabbits do not like being handled. If they are not handled correctly, they can cause nasty injuries to the handler. They may lash out with their hind legs and that can result in a fractured spine or hind leg. Therefore it's important to do it properly.

### Method:

- Approach the rabbit quietly and slowly. Rabbits do not like being grabbed from above and have a blind spot in front of their nose, so it is best to approach them from the side
- Allow the rabbit to sniff at your hand and talk quietly to him
- Stroke the rabbit in a confident manner
- Gently hold and steady the rabbit behind the head by putting a hand across the shoulders and slipping it from there under the chest. If you are right handed use your right hand, your left hand if you are left handed.
- Scoop up the rabbit's bottom with your other hand and tuck his head into the crook of your elbow/arm. This way the rabbit is held securely.
- Never allow your rabbit to hang by the scruff of the neck. Always support the back end and NEVER pick up a rabbit by its ears.



Always ensure the rabbit is fully supported regardless of his size

Always ensure that your rabbit's bottom is supported and handle him for the minimum amount of time possible. If you are examining the rabbit's back end, then his bottom should be resting on a table to free up one of your hands. If the rabbit struggles at any point then it may be best to stop and attempt to handle him at another time.

**Note - Never tip your rabbit on his back - this is known as 'trancing' and invokes a fear response - we don't want to scare our rabbits**



Gently hold the rabbit with your left hand



Ensure the rabbits bottom is supported

## GROOMING & COAT CARE

Long-haired rabbits have been prized for hundreds of years. But few people appreciate the effort that will be required to maintain this special type of coat. Rescue centres are taking in increasing numbers of long-haired rabbits in a terrible state because of neglected coats.

### Why grooming is so important

- To remove loose hair and matts.
- To allow close examination of the whole rabbit - even short haired rabbits can get matted underneath.
- To help you health check and bond with your rabbit.

### Short (normal) coat care

- Use a soft-bristled brush for day to day care. A weekly groom is usually enough, except when moulting.
- Slicker brushes and cat moulting combs are useful for thick or moulting coats.

### Long Coat Care

The entire coat (including armpits, groin, tummy and feet) must be combed or clipped. The fur on the hind feet is thicker and there for protection so unless it is matted, leave it alone. Grooming takes 20 to 40 minutes a day whereas clipping is a lot of work every 4-6 weeks with less work in between. Here's how:

### Grooming

- Start with a wide-toothed comb. When you've done the whole rabbit, repeat with a fine toothed comb. Finish with a flea comb between the ears, round the vent, under the chin, and in the armpits.
- Soft brushes are hopeless on long-haired rabbits - the top may look lovely, but there may be a matted mess underneath.
- Matts should be teased out with fingers or carefully cut off - be careful, as it's easy to cut the skin.
- Even if you're keeping the coat long, consider a "sanitary clip" around the vent area.
- Metal-toothed slicker brushes are effective, but can scratch the skin - take care!
- Cat moulting combs are great at removing dead undercoat.

### Clipping

- Get someone to teach you how to do it safely!
- Use scissors 2 inches long from pivot to tip. Round ended scissors are safer, but won't penetrate mats as well as scissors with sharp ends. Rest a comb against the skin as protection whilst you are scissoring. Don't "tent" the skin.
- Normal dog clippers clog with rabbit fur. Adapted blades are available, but costly.
- If your rabbit is clipped in cold weather, bring him indoors or provide a rabbit-proofed heat lamp or heated mat.

### Tricky bits

- Step up the grooming when your rabbit starts to moult. If droppings become small, seek veterinary help.
- Young long haired rabbits can be impossible to keep tangle free. Clip off the baby coat and keep the coarser adult coat groomed as it appears.
- Neutered rabbits are happier, healthier pets, but neutering may make the coat more woolly and difficult to care for.
- Don't keep long haired rabbits on woodshavings: use a thick layer of hay or straw instead.
- Don't allow long-haired rabbits outside in wet weather.
- Unhandled rabbits may find the whole process so distressing they have to be de-matted under sedation or general anaesthetic. If you don't know how to train an animal using modern behavioural techniques such as clicker training, seek help from a behaviourist who can advise you on how to train your rabbits to accept routine grooming.
- Introduce grooming into your rabbit's routine as soon as possible - short sessions at first!
- Get help if you are struggling to cope with your rabbit's coat. Rabbit rescue centres and breeders of long haired rabbits will probably be able to help. Some accept rabbits for clipping for a small fee.

### The ethical conundrum of long-haired rabbits

However much we may admire magnificent long-haired rabbits, we must ask ourselves whether it is right to create animals with fundamental welfare problems. Even properly groomed long coated rabbits are at increased risk of serious health problems such as fur balls and flystrike. They are also uncomfortable in hot weather.

"We have seen many horrific sights. Rabbits with huge matted balls of fur under the chin which have prevented them from lowering their heads to eat; coats that have become so tangled that the matted fur has pulled the legs together and the animal has barely been able to move. Underneath the matts lies bleeding raw skin..."



Matted fur being removed from a neglected Cashmere Lop

# Chapter nine

## AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR IN RABBITS

It's a sad fact that many rabbits are rehomed for aggressive behaviour because many of their owners feel that there is nothing they can do. This section explains how aggressive behaviour can be prevented, and what to do if your rabbit is trying to bite you.

### When aggression is normal

- Rabbits in the wild are prey animals. If they feel under threat from a predator they have three options - to freeze, to run away or to fight. Having eyes on the side of the head for all round vision and large ears for picking up the slightest sound helps the rabbit to spot a predator and get away as quickly as possible. If caught, the rabbit will use its teeth, long claws and powerful back legs to fight for its survival.
- Wild rabbits also use aggression to defend territories against rival groups of rabbits. Female rabbits will sometimes fight to the death for nest sites and can be very aggressive in the later stages of pregnancy or when they have young in the nest.

### Aggression in pet rabbits: why does it happen?

- If a rabbit has not been accustomed to handling when it was young, it can view its owners as a threat when they try to pick it up or stroke it. In these situations, rabbits will use similar behaviours to those shown in the presence of a predator. They will either freeze, try to run away or show aggression. When there is nowhere for them to run, they cannot avoid contact altogether so they are left with aggression as their last line of defence.
- Some rabbits can show aggression towards their owners when a hand is placed into their enclosure to fill their food bowl or to remove dirty bedding. To the rabbit this is seen as an invasion of their territory so they treat the owner's hand as a threat and display territorial aggression.
- Un-spayed female rabbits can display aggressive behaviour towards their owners or perhaps companions during the spring - rabbits' natural breeding season. This aggression is hormonal and indicates a normal desire to defend her territory and ward off any rivals. This behaviour can often disappear by the end of the summer and may not reappear until the following spring.
- Rabbits can often be aggressive when they are in pain. Regular check-ups with your veterinary surgeon can ensure that your rabbits are not unwell or suffering from any condition that may make handling uncomfortable.
- Pain when handling: incorrect housing can cause spinal deformities leading to pain when being confined to a hutch.

Rabbits can often be aggressive when they are in pain

### How to prevent/reduce aggressive behaviour in pet rabbits

- Provide rabbits with sufficient space to enable them to exercise regularly, with areas to explore and hide in, to keep them stimulated.
- A rabbit that is used to being around people and handled regularly from a young age is less likely to become aggressive towards its owners.
- Train your rabbit to like being with you! Clicker training may work very well - talk to an animal behaviourist if you need advice.
- Learning to pick up a rabbit correctly can prevent the rabbit feeling afraid of you, and trying to avoid contact at other times. There are many right and wrong ways to pick up a rabbit but as a general rule one hand under the front legs supporting the chest, while the other is under the rabbit's bottom, taking the bulk of the weight. **Never scruff a rabbit (holding by loose skin on the back of the neck)** or forget to put a hand under its bottom - if a rabbit feels unsafe it will struggle and if dropped, may suffer severe injuries.
- Neutering a rabbit when it is young can prevent the development of certain types of aggression. This can be discussed with your veterinary surgeon. Refer to the Neutering section of this booklet. ■

### Think about it...

Rabbits are prey animals. The only time a wild rabbit leaves the ground is when it is about to be eaten! So, although you can and should train your pet rabbits to tolerate routine handling, they may never enjoy being picked up and cuddled.

## HOW TO CHOOSE A RABBIT SAVVY VET

It's essential that you find and register with a rabbit savvy vet even if you have no immediate need for one: you can never predict when an emergency will arise.

Vets in training tend to spend less time learning about rabbits than they do cats or dogs. Rabbit medicine is often taught alongside "exotic species", as they are also very different from cats and dogs physiologically, behaviourally and anatomically. So, it is important to choose a vet who has a specific knowledge of rabbits. Vets who have qualified in recent years from Bristol or Edinburgh vet schools should have an excellent grounding in rabbits thanks to the RWF Veterinary Resident schemes.

### So how do I find a rabbit savvy vet?

- Start with people you know who have companion rabbits. If they are on the ball then they should have a rabbit savvy vet.
- The RWF holds a list of rabbit friendly vets. To be included in the list vets must give satisfactory responses to a questionnaire. At present we aren't able to inspect but that is set to change soon. All practices must re-apply annually.
- You can email or call our Helpline for a list of vets in your area. Or if you are a member of a good online rabbit forum you could ask for recommendations.
- Otherwise, it's a case of going through the yellow pages or the RCVS Find A Vet website <http://findavet.rcvs.org.uk/home/> and finding all vets local to you.
- Whichever way you have come across a vet to consider, you should always ring them yourself and ask some questions to satisfy yourself that they'll be able to care for your rabbits.

### The questions you need to ask

- Do you have a separate kennelling area for rabbits?

Rabbits are prey animals and will find the experience of being hospitalised very stressful. The sound of dogs barking and cats yowling near them will be even more stressful and may hinder recovery from any treatment. If vets cannot offer a separate room, some have small animal days where dogs are not admitted for operations.

Vets should also be aware of the importance of hospitalising bonded pairs together if at all possible.

- Do you routinely spay and castrate rabbits? You need to be sure that they have good experience of routinely undertaking these procedures and that they have a good track record. Don't be scared to ask about how safe it is (there is always a risk even with a very competent vet) and when they last lost a rabbit under anaesthetic.
- What is your anaesthetic protocol? The best protocol is one that the vet is most comfortable and experienced using, but some anaesthetic combinations are regarded as safer than others. Injectable anaesthetics are currently in vogue, but some rabbit-expert vets are happy using inhalational (gas) anaesthetics. Vet practices that seem nervous about anaesthetising rabbits should be avoided because they may not have updated their anaesthetic protocol and peri-operative management in the light of recent findings, and this may ring an alarm bell.  
You need to be happy that your chosen vet will:
  - Consider pre-medication if appropriate.
  - Take steps to keep rabbits warm during and after surgery.
  - Intubate the rabbit if required (this may not be possible during some procedures such as dentals, but is recommended as standard practice).
  - Monitor your rabbits carefully during surgery, using modern equipment such as a pulse oximeter.

### Strength in numbers

If only one of your rabbits needs to visit the vet, you should still take them both (or all if you have a group). This prevents problems with reintroducing back at home (a rabbit returning from the vet will smell different from other rabbits). It also benefits the poorly rabbit, his mate will aid his recovery. The exception to this is something contagious like myxi, or if you need to keep an eye on diet or monitor their poops.



● **Do any of the vets at this practice particularly like seeing rabbits?**

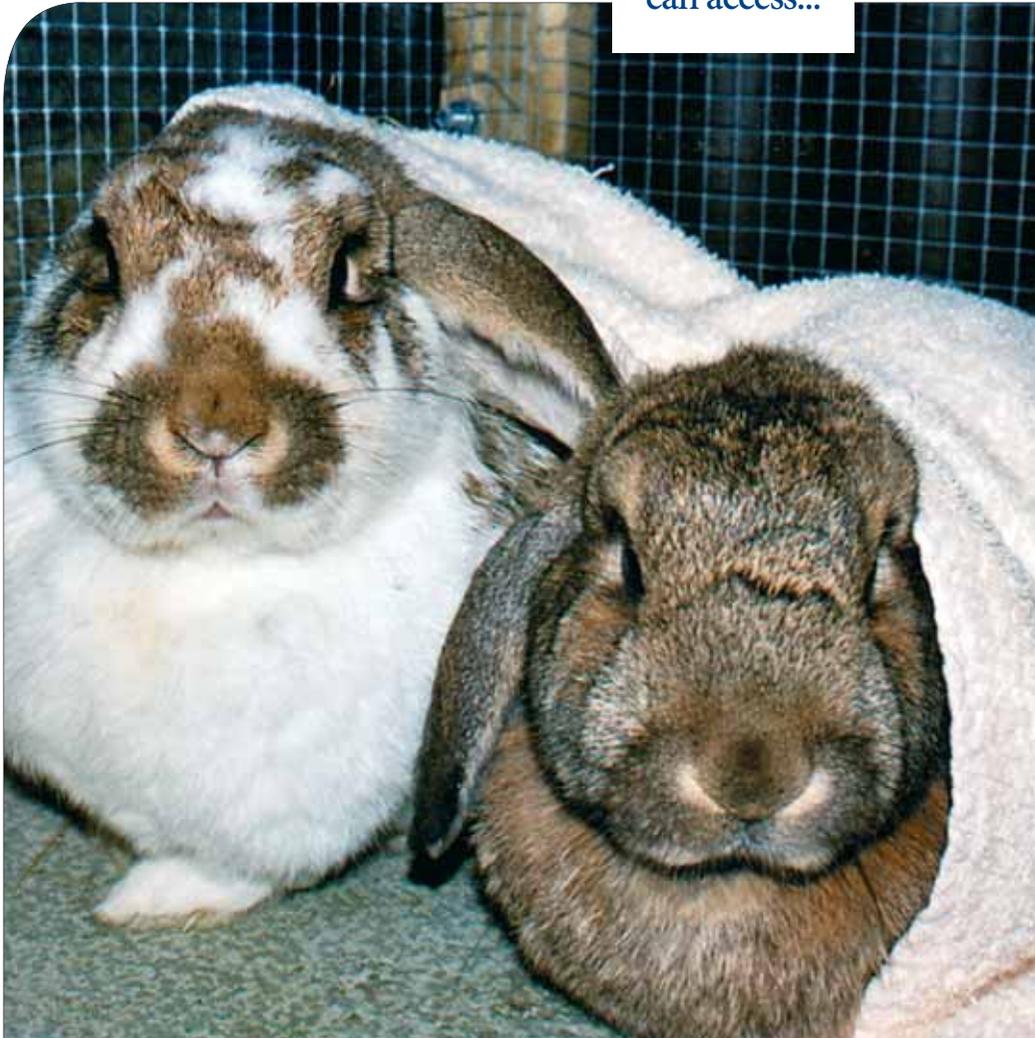
If the receptionist says 'all of them' this is likely to mean that no vet takes a special interest in rabbits and so this may not be a good sign. Often, there is one vet who is very keen on rabbits and this benefits the practice because they can all learn from him/her. Make sure you get a named vet, and see that vet whenever possible.

Very often the vets will be pleased to speak to new or potential clients and this is a good sign, ask them if they have completed any rabbit CPD (Continuing Professional Development - extra studying!) recently. The RWAf holds an annual vet conference, and there are other CPD events such as BSAVA and London Vet Show that do rabbit lectures and workshops. Many practices also have rabbit-mad vet nurses, which is particularly good - it is often the nurses that intubate the rabbits, and see to their after-care.

● **Do you recommend vaccinations?**

The answer should be yes, a single annual vaccine protects against both Myxomatosis and RVHD with a further new vaccine against RVHD2. Be wary of any advice against vaccinating as 'not necessary' because they are not aware of myxi or RVHD in the area (both can strike at any time) or if rabbits are house rabbits (because they can still catch both). ■

**The RWAf holds a 'vet list' that anybody can access...**



# Chapter eleven

## HOLIDAY CARE

In all the excitement of going on holiday it can be easy to forget about arranging holiday care for the rabbits. You may find yourself going on a last minute or surprise break so, very much like finding a good vet, make sure you have holiday cover sorted well in advance. You have 2 main options: home care, or rabbit boarding.



## Home care

Although leaving the rabbits in their own environment is less stressful for them, especially if they have a good set-up as discussed elsewhere in this booklet, it is important that you make sure that the sitter (be it a neighbour, friend or professional pet-sitter) is rabbit-savvy. Rabbits are prey species and hide illnesses well, so your sitter must have the knowledge and inclination to visit and check thoroughly at least twice a day. That is a minimum: if they can come more frequently then all the better.

**Here's a checklist for you and for your sitter. You can print a version from our website.**

### Check List for you before you go:

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| Make sure vaccinations are up to date                                                                                                                                                                               |  |
| Stock up on hay                                                                                                                                                                                                     |  |
| Stock up on bedding                                                                                                                                                                                                 |  |
| Stock up on pellets                                                                                                                                                                                                 |  |
| Stock up on greens                                                                                                                                                                                                  |  |
| Stock up on litter (and rubbish bags!)                                                                                                                                                                              |  |
| Leave instructions for the rabbit sitter                                                                                                                                                                            |  |
| Leave vet's name and number for the sitter                                                                                                                                                                          |  |
| Tell your vet you will be away and leave details of the sitter, along with your permission for any essential treatments in case they need to be carried out. Some vets may require you to leave a deposit for this. |  |
| Clean out the evening before or the morning that you go                                                                                                                                                             |  |
| Check over for clean bottoms                                                                                                                                                                                        |  |
| Get a spare water bottle in case one fails, and check spouts work on any water bottles you have.                                                                                                                    |  |
| Carry out an MOT as discussed elsewhere in this booklet                                                                                                                                                             |  |
| <b>It's a good idea to leave a copy of this booklet with the sitter as well!</b>                                                                                                                                    |  |

### Check List for sitter:

|                                                                                                                         |  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| Owner's contact details in case there is a situation on which you have to make some decision                            |  |
| The name and number of the vet we use are:                                                                              |  |
| Vet name _____                                                                                                          |  |
| Vet number _____                                                                                                        |  |
| Contact details of a trusted friend who can make decisions if contact cannot be made with the owner                     |  |
| <b>You should check the rabbits at least twice every day, morning and evening. If in doubt please take to the vets.</b> |  |
| <b>Morning:</b>                                                                                                         |  |
| Change water - if using a bottle check spout is working                                                                 |  |
| Top up hay                                                                                                              |  |
| Clean out litter tray                                                                                                   |  |
| Feed                                                                                                                    |  |
| Check bottoms are clean and free of flystrike                                                                           |  |
| Make sure everything is safe, ie no holes that could lead to an escape                                                  |  |
| Other:                                                                                                                  |  |
| Other:                                                                                                                  |  |
| <b>Evening:</b>                                                                                                         |  |
| Top up hay                                                                                                              |  |
| Change water                                                                                                            |  |
| Feed                                                                                                                    |  |
| Check bottoms are clean                                                                                                 |  |
| Make sure everything is safe                                                                                            |  |
| Other:                                                                                                                  |  |
| Other:                                                                                                                  |  |

## Rabbit boarding

The other option is to board your rabbits. There are many professional establishments and the best are booked up early, so where possible plan ahead. Often, rescue centres will board to help with their expenses, and then you have the satisfaction of knowing you are helping a good cause too. Your local vet may be aware of a good rabbit boarder in your area, and the RWAf holds a rabbit boarding list for members. Make sure that your rabbits' vaccinations are up to date before you go, and check whether they want you to take your own food with you, or if it is included.

Do pay an inspection visit well beforehand (several weeks, preferably, in case you don't like what you see and need to book somewhere different) to check that you are happy with the accommodation that your rabbits will have, and how often they will be checked (this should be a minimum of twice per day).

Housing should be cleaned using a modern disinfectant product (e.g. Virkon) between residents to ensure they are not going to catch anything from the previous occupant (the brain/kidney parasite *E. cuniculi* can live for some time on surfaces), and although it is nice for the rabbits to have runs on grass, there is the risk of spreading disease, so concrete runs hosed off and cleaned are safer. Many places offer houserabbit accommodation too, so make sure that litter trays are properly cleaned in between, and vet bedding is washed. Avoid carpets as these have a risk of spreading disease as they cannot be scrubbed clean.

### House sitters

Probably the best solution of all is to ask someone to move into your home whilst you are away. If you have friends or family willing to do so, this may cost you nothing. A responsible student may be willing to house and rabbit-sit for a sensible fee, or at the other end of the scale there are agencies providing professional, CRB-checked home sitters who are usually very animal-friendly, although they may not have specific rabbit expertise.

If you have several animals - or a garden - that you have to pay other people to look after when you are away, then a resident house-sitter may be a sensible option. If however you only need care for two rabbits, you might find the cost prohibitive! And finally.... if you love rabbits, please support the RWA by joining us today! ■



## And finally... If you love rabbits, you will love the Rabbit Welfare Association... Britain's only national club for rabbit lovers.

Members receive our wonderful colour magazine "Rabbiting On" four times a year, which is packed with advice, information, features, and photos. Membership of RWA also pays to run the help-line which is a valuable resource for many rabbit lovers and we help thousands of owners every year.

### Membership of the RWA includes:

- Membership of the largest rabbit club in the UK
- A copy of our fantastic Rabbiting On Magazine every quarter
- A free member's handbook
- Discount at the annual RWAf conference
- Access to the vet list and rabbit boarding list
- The knowledge that you are supporting the work we do to improve the fate of thousands of rabbits in the UK
- Free 'A Hutch Is Not Enough' car sticker and a 'home alone' card

**"Woe betide anyone who disturbs me whilst I am reading it"...**

**Toyah Wilcox**





Rabbit Welfare  
Association & Fund  
A hutch is not enough

### What is the Rabbit Welfare Fund?

The Rabbit Welfare Association and the Rabbit Welfare Fund run hand in hand: the RWA is the “supporters club” for the RWF, which is the only charity in the UK dedicated to improving the lives of pet rabbits.

The RWF’s current lead campaign is based around “**A Hutch Is Not Enough**”: Far too many rabbits live alone and confined in hutches, and we want to educate rabbit owners that this is just not the right way to look after their rabbits: in fact, there’s good evidence it is actually cruel to keep a solitary rabbit in cramped conditions. We have been successful in persuading many retailers to stop stocking smaller sized rabbit hutches, but there is still a long way to go.

The RWF holds annual veterinary and owner conferences to keep vets (and owners!) up to date with advances in rabbit medicine and care; we run a help line; we produce and distribute around 50,000 booklets and leaflets every year and have a fantastic website which is accurate and up to date, providing the best rabbit information available.

We are generally known as The RWF, and have been around now for over 20 years - we are the leading authority on rabbit care and information.

So if you love rabbits, and you want to see things improve for them instead of being confined to a hutch and lonely, then please join the RWA, or donate to the RWF - because together we can make a difference.

We are always very grateful for donations and you can do this via PayPal to:

bunnybazaar@rabbitwelfare.co.uk or via our shop  
<http://www.rwaf.org.uk/shopdonate> or here at My Donate <http://www.rwaf.org.uk/mydonate>



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# Join The Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund...



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### Members also receive

- Four issues of Rabbiting On, our fantastic full-colour magazine
- The RWA Members Handbook.
- ON THE HOP, our comprehensive rabbit care guide.
- Stickers for your car and pet carrier.
- The satisfaction of helping us to help rabbits and campaign for better welfare standards.

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We have a wealth of goodies on sale for your bunnies and small furrries. But not to be missed are our latest publications: **ON THE HOP** and **Foraging for Rabbits**. Both essential guides for a happy, healthy life for your rabbits.

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## Join the Rabbit Welfare Association

If you have enjoyed reading 'ON THE HOP' and are not already a member of the Rabbit Welfare Association, why not join to be sure of receiving the next issue of Rabbiting On magazine, packed full of interesting and informative features.

Cut out or photocopy the form below and send it to:

RWAF, Enigma House, Culmhead Business Park, Taunton, Somerset TA3 7DY  
or for instant membership simply phone the RWA Helpline: **0844 324 6090**.

As a member of the RWA you will receive four issues of Rabbiting On, our fantastic full-colour magazine, The RWA Members Handbook. On the hop, our comprehensive rabbit care guide, stickers for your car and pet carrier, a Home Alone card and the satisfaction of helping us to help rabbits and campaign for better welfare standards. and loads of other benefits.

Surname: .....

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I would like to apply for membership of the Rabbit Welfare Association and agree to be bound by the Rules and Conditions of the association. I understand that my membership details will be held on computer.

Signed: ..... Date: .....

Annual subscription: (please tick one): Individual £20.00  Family £24.00

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I would like to make a donation to the Rabbit Welfare Fund charity (Please tick one box)

£3  £5  £8  £10  Other sum £ ..... (Please indicate amount)

I would like to make a donation to become an official 'A Hutch Is Not Enough' supporter.

Please indicate amount .....

I enclose a cheque made payable to the Rabbit Welfare Association (or fill in your credit/debit card details below:)

Please charge my: **Mastercard**  **Visa**  **Delta**  **Switch**  **Solo**  **JCB**

Card No: ..... Issue no: (Switch): .....

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# 15 Emergency Reasons

why  
you  
need  
to see  
a  
rabbit  
savvy  
vet  
NOW

Not moving around.  
Sitting hunched up

1

Change of food  
preference or loss of  
appetite

2

Smaller, fewer or  
no poos

3

Broken bones / legs

4

Collapse

5

Mouth breathing

6

Runny eyes/nose/  
coughing/sneezing/  
wheezing

7



15

Significant wounds

8

Flystrike

9

Blood in urine

10

Dribbling / wet fur  
around mouth

11

Haemorrhage

12

Fitting

13

Screaming

14

Diarrhoea



Rabbit Welfare  
Association & Fund  
A hutch is not enough

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Rescue rabbits are already health checked,  
neutered and vaccinated.

**Adopt don't shop**

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If so, please consider Petplan. If you quote our **reference 1300027785** they will make a small donation to us for every new or renewed policy - at no extra cost to you! It does not have to be a rabbit policy, we will get a donation for any policy that quotes our reference, so if you have a dog, cat or horse insured you can help us too!

[www.petplan.co.uk](http://www.petplan.co.uk)

Every pet deserves



There are Runaround Connection Kits with doors for GIANT rabbits now!

Link your hutch to your run and let your rabbits choose where they would like to be with Runaround connection kits, mesh tunnels and runs.

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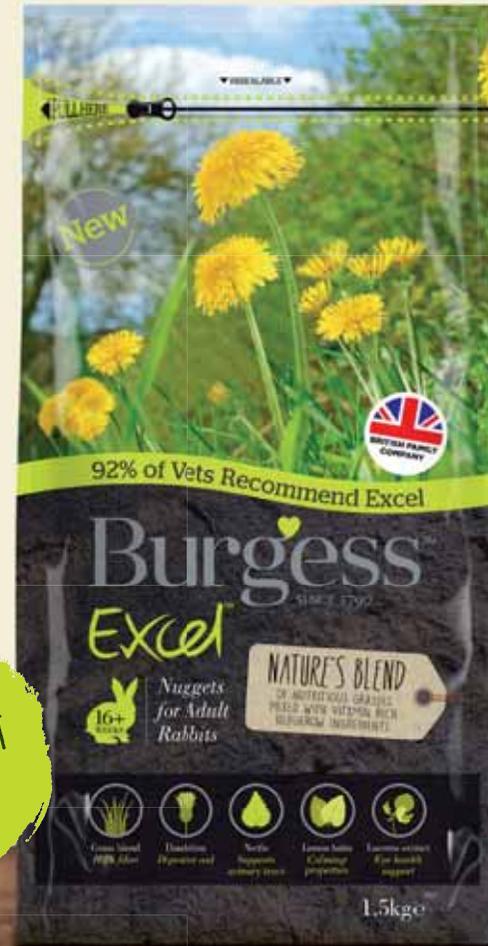
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## INSPIRED BY THE GREAT BRITISH HEDGEROW

\*Data held on file

# FORAGING FOR RABBITS



## Our very own, fantastic new book, written for us by Dr Twigs Way

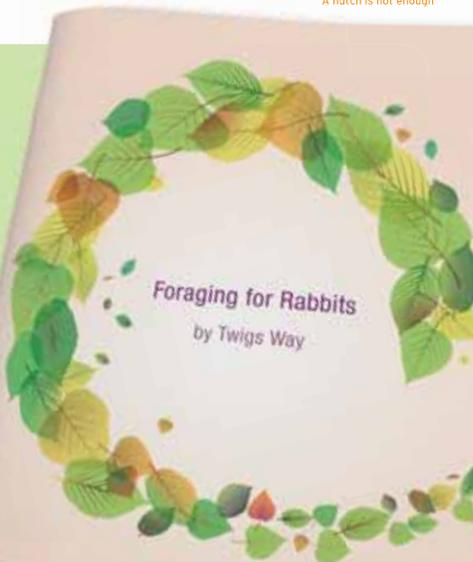
We all know how important it is for rabbits to have a good diet, as close as possible to what they'd eat in the wild. Many of us go out foraging, but what should you gather for them? What should you not? How do you stand regarding the law? Where is it best to get foraged plants from? How can you have a year-round supply of wild forage?

All these and many other questions answered in this great little book, that you can fit into your pocket and take with you on foraging expeditions. It's fully illustrated to help with plant identification, contains common and botanical names of plants so you can look them up for even more information and it even has nominess ratings for each plant!

No self respecting forager can afford to be without it.

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Foraging for Rabbits  
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# Bonding Rabbits

By Fiona Campbell

**Anybody who is embarking on bonding rabbits, or has hit a brick wall in the process needs a copy of this book.**

This book gives super advice on getting through that often tricky and stressful process of bonding rabbits.

Being highly social animals they need the company of their own species but there can be problems in the process of bonding and Fiona tackles these in a structured way, giving suggestions for setting up bonding areas, strategies, what to look out for, when to intervene and so much more.

**36 pages - colour throughout.**

Bonding Rabbits  
**£5.50**  
Plus P&P



## SPECIAL LIMITED OFFER

Buy both books by Fiona Campbell  
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[shop.rabbitwelfare.co.uk](http://shop.rabbitwelfare.co.uk)

All profits support our 'A Hutch is Not Enough' campaign

# Say NO to Flystrike

## PREVENT IT BY:

- Checking your rabbit's bottom at least once daily, preferably twice, especially in warmer weather
- Optimising your rabbit's diet to prevent loose stools - ask your vet
- Cleaning cages regularly
- Fitting flyscreens to hutches and runs
- Asking your vet about preventative treatments

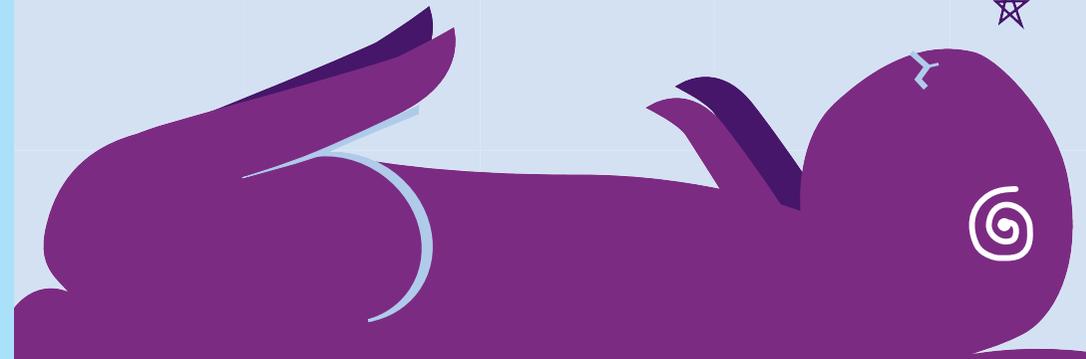
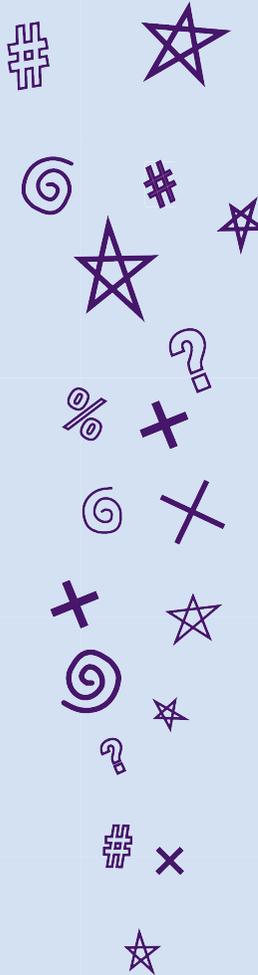


Ask your vet for The RWF 'On The Hop' guide book, or download a pdf from our website [www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk](http://www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk)

The Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund, Enigma House, Culmhead Business Park, Taunton, Somerset TA3 7DX



**Tonic Immobility**, often referred to as **“Trancing”** or **“Hypnotising”**, is a technique for handling rabbits that has been around for many years. It takes advantage of the rabbit's tendency, as a prey species, to **“play dead”** and stay immobile when placed in a vulnerable position, on its back. In studies, behavioural observation (facial expression, ear position etc) and physiological monitoring (heart rate and stress hormone levels) suggest that the rabbits are both well aware of their surroundings, and are exhibiting a **fear response** rather than being calmed by the position. It is also very important to note that, even if they do not react, they are still perfectly capable of **feeling pain**. Although the resulting immobility makes procedures easier for the owner, and repeated use appears to make it easier to perform in the rabbit, it is not good welfare practice to use this technique in prey species. There are some circumstances (for example, non painful procedures such as radiography in sick rabbits with possible gastrointestinal obstruction), where it can allow diagnostic xrays to be taken, and it can then literally be a lifesaver to have the option. However, this should be as a **last resort**, and not as part of a routine groom or check up by pet owners, and should only be undertaken by **veterinary professionals** in a safe and controlled environment. For these reasons, we do not recommend its use for **grooming purposes**.



# GUINEA PIGS!

Many of our readers may have guinea pigs at home; this short section will give you a small insight into their care and the common problems they face.



Guinea pigs can live for 8 years and are very social talkative animals; they love nothing more than grazing on fresh safe forage and the sound of the fridge door opening or a rustling bag!

### **Wheek wheek who will be my friend?**

Guinea pigs depend on the companionship of their own kind to remain happy and feel safe. They communicate through a huge variety of squeaks and noises, a single piggy will live a life of many unanswered squeaks and questions.

The most suited mixes are:

2 or more females

2 males (of similar age, three often fight)

1 castrated male to 1 or more females

Unlike rabbits neutering does not play a role in behaviour change, therefore we wouldn't recommend it as a solution for guinea pigs that fight. If you find yourself with a pair of piggies who are fighting, contact your local guinea pig rescue as soon as possible for support.

As with rabbits, rescue centres find themselves inundated with guinea pigs. Many guinea pig rescues like Wood Green the Animals Charity offer dating services for your lone piggies and

always have lots of pairs and groups looking for new homes.

As with rabbits, when bonding you will need a neutral space/outdoor run to set them up in. Piggy mixes are often very clear on a success or fail early on. Happy mixes consist of lots of happy squeaks, chirruping and mutual eating. Mixes likely to fail or result in injury consist of lots of teeth chattering from both pigs, face to face with heads raised baring teeth and injuries which can become easily infected if not seen by a piggy friendly vet.

We would never recommend for rabbits and guinea pigs to live together.

### **Home sweet home**

Guinea pigs may be small but they still need lots of space, fighting and health conditions are often linked to unsuitable accommodation. Guinea pigs should be housed in a hutch or indoor set up with a minimum of 4ft by 2ft per pair of piggies. They will also need permanent access to a secure run with a lid measuring around 6ft by 4ft. Guinea pigs love living indoors, it is certainly a great way to socialise with them and monitor for any health issues. If your guinea pigs are outside, their hutch must be kept in a shed to keep them warm and safe from predators. In the winter Snugglesafes are perfect for keeping the chill off.





### Food glorious food!

Guinea pigs love to eat! Although they do enjoy exploring they are not as keen to play as rabbits and their main motivation is food and what their companions are up to.

Good quality green hay is the most important part of their diet, it should make up around 85% of their daily diet and bedding.

All of the safe plants mentioned in the rabbit section are also safe for your guinea pigs to enjoy; ideally they should be given a mix of five different plants/vegetables in a large handful a day, this will also help to naturally meet their vitamin C requirements without the aid of supplements.

Good weather permitting, piggies will also enjoy 4-6 hours a day out in their run grazing on grass. If they are indoor piggies only, grass trays can be grown.

### Guinea pig health care

One of the biggest problems guinea pigs face is skin issues.

This can be in the form of fur mites, running lice, burrowing mite, fungal and ringworm.

Despite traditional beliefs and being a common offering, wood shavings / sawdust and even straw bedding can all harbour and transmit mites and cause skin conditions. This is often due to storage around rodents and damp conditions. Old/ poor quality/brown dusty hay can in some cases be a transmitter for these also so make sure your hay is 1st cut or heat dried, it should be soft and green and smells sweet, Burgess forage hay is ideal! Whatever bedding you chose make sure you keep your guinea pigs clean and dry.

The safest bedding for your guinea pigs is a thick layer of newspaper completely covered with a thick layer of good quality green hay. You can also opt for fleece bedding if they live indoors or on a shed floor.

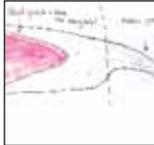
### Signs to look out for include:

Fur loss, red or flaky/dandruff skin, itching or suddenly biting the owner, unexplained open wounds, unable to gain weight, scab patches around face and ears, V like shape of chewed fur down back, dull dry looking coat.

Ideally your guinea pigs should be health checked weekly, bedded correctly and bathed in piggy safe products to protect them from skin issues twice a year. Visit [www.gorgeousguineas.com](http://www.gorgeousguineas.com) for further advice, skin care piggy safe products and a whole page dedicated to identifying your guinea pigs skin problems.

### Scary nails!?

Owners are always terrified of cutting guinea pigs nails, guinea pigs won't need their nails clipping in most cases till they are around 1 year as this is when they really start to grow. From then on they will need doing every 4-6 weeks using a small pair of pet nail clippers and a person to hold the guinea pig whilst you clip. The diagram shows where to cut without having to worry about the blood vessel, take a small amount off the tip of the nail every 3 weeks will also reduce the risk of overgrown, scary nails!



### Boys bits!

Sadly most male piggy owners do not realise that they can need a little extra care and observation. Males over a year old will need to have their penis extruded by gently pushing down above the skin that is exposed and cleaned every few months similar to a horse. This area is prone to a build-up of cheesy like discharge which can eventually prevent your guinea pig from passing urine normally. Both males and females are prone to cystitis and stones, keep an eye out for your guinea pig regularly being wet and smelly around the back end, small amounts of blood in urine or a single painful squeak when toileting. A piggy friendly vet or rescue will happily give you advice and support with both issues.

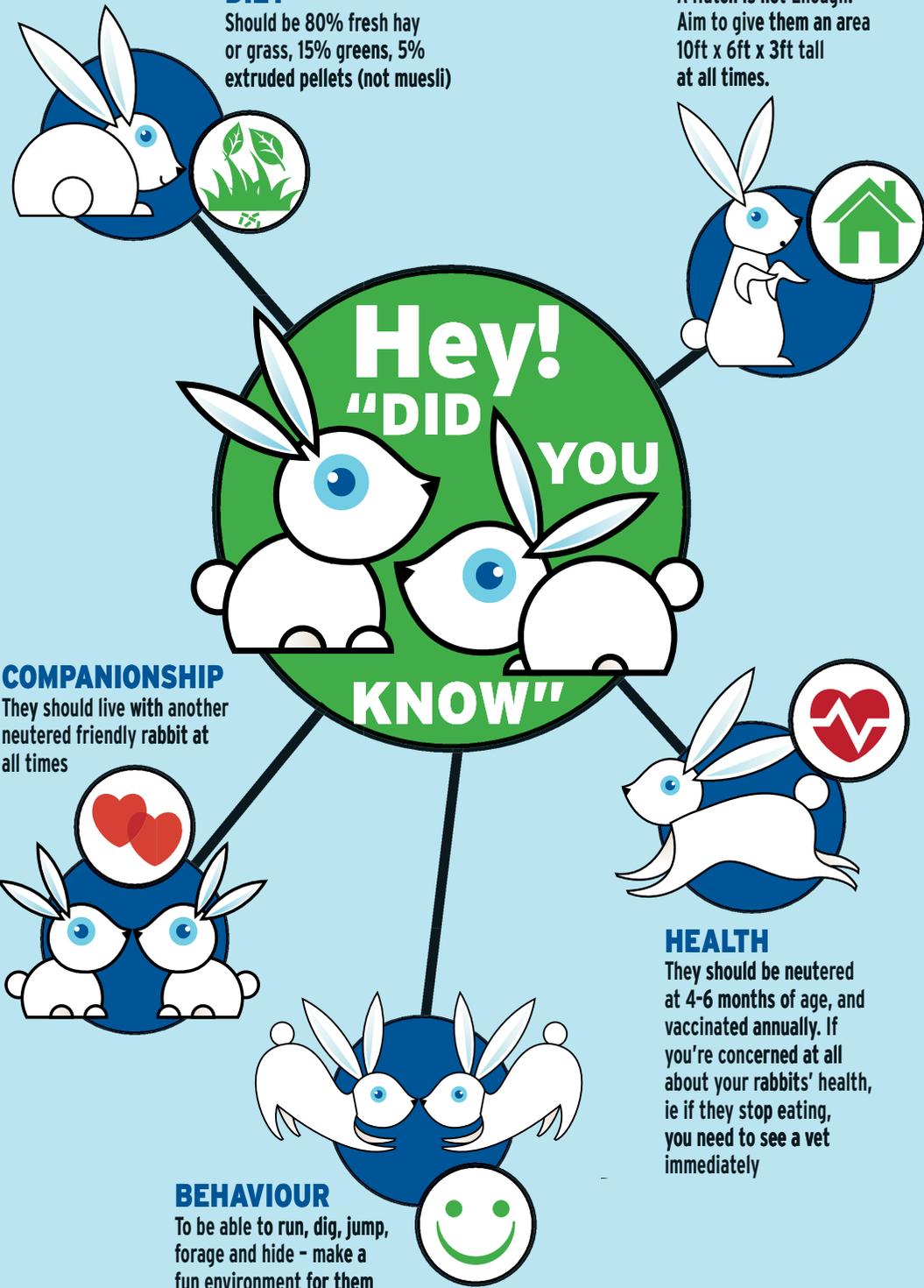
Large dominant males can also be prone to impaction when they are around 3-4 years, this is rather a smelly situation but can be fatal if not spotted and managed correctly. Impaction will cause the anus to bulge and a large ball of faeces will appear to be blocking him despite the evidence of a few normal faeces in the cage. Speak to your guinea pig friendly vet for advice on how to empty this and improve muscle tone in this area.



Wood Green the Animals Charity rescues hundreds of guinea pigs every year, for further advice, support or to adopt some rescue piggies please contact us at:



[www.woodgreen.org.uk](http://www.woodgreen.org.uk)  
or find us on facebook.



### DIET

Should be 80% fresh hay or grass, 15% greens, 5% extruded pellets (not muesli)

### HOUSING

A Hutch is not Enough!  
Aim to give them an area 10ft x 6ft x 3ft tall at all times.

### COMPANIONSHIP

They should live with another neutered friendly rabbit at all times

### HEALTH

They should be neutered at 4-6 months of age, and vaccinated annually. If you're concerned at all about your rabbits' health, ie if they stop eating, you need to see a vet immediately

### BEHAVIOUR

To be able to run, dig, jump, forage and hide - make a fun environment for them