



# The Veterinary Centre



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## Rabbit Advice Guide

### Diet

A Rabbit's diet is fundamental to maintaining its health, particularly the dental and gastrointestinal system. The first thing to remember is that any new diet should be gradually introduced over a period of 5-7 days. The natural diet of rabbits is very high in fibre and grasses and plants are the only source of this essential nutrient. Being allowed to graze for several hours per day is ideal but not always practical, so meadow/timothy hay is a great substitute along with freeze dried grass. This should be available at all times and must be the main ingredient in your rabbits diet. Green food is also important and a variety of broccoli, cabbage, chicory, watercress, celery leaves, dock, beet tops and carrot tops should be given daily. All grass must be washed before feeding. Lettuce should be avoided. To help with tooth wear and provide mental stimulation, branches from apple, pear and plum trees can be given - provided they have not been chemically treated. To compliment the above diet, a pellet mix in small amounts should be given. The colourful coarse mixes should be avoided as they promote selective feeding. Burgess Excel or Science Selective are ideal complimentary feeds. Take care not to overfeed dry rabbit mix as it is high in fat and protein which will soon result in an obese pet; Treats such as apple, carrot, bread, biscuits, nuts and seeds must be fed in moderation as they too can lead to obesity and stomach upsets. Always avoid frosted or mouldy foods and lawnmower clippings as these can lead to digestive disturbances. Vitamin and mineral supplements are not necessary if you are feeding the correct diet.

Rabbits will also eat the first set of faeces that they produce. These are called caecotrophs and are soft faeces, which are eaten directly from the anus by the rabbit. These contain essential nutrients, which are not absorbed the first time the food was eaten. Obese rabbits will not be able to reach round to eat these faeces thus resulting in malnutrition.

Unlimited fresh water, preferably from a gravity bottle must be available at all times. Any further nutrition questions can be answered from Burgess free phone customer care: 0800 410 969

### Vaccinations

All rabbits should be vaccinated against myxomatosis and viral haemorrhagic disease (VHD). These killer diseases can affect every pet as they do not need rabbit to rabbit contact to be passed along. Myxomatosis is carried by fleas and mosquitoes and VHD can be carried on hay, by wild birds or you can even carry the virus home on your shoes. The only method of protecting your rabbit is by vaccination. Each injection must be given 10 days apart with annual boosters given every year.

### Insurance

We strongly recommend that all rabbits be insured from a minimum of 8 weeks of age with Pet Plan Insurance. Although a rabbit can only cost about £10 to purchase, the cost of veterinary treatment can soon build up with referral treatment being very expensive. Rabbit medicine is quite specialised and you may be referred to another vets if your bunny required surgery or specialised treatment.

**If You Have Any Questions Or Need Further Advice Please Phone:  
02476 503000**

## **Microchip**

This involves a small chip being placed under the rabbits skin with an injection. It can be done any time from 8 weeks of age.

## **Teeth**

Rabbit's teeth grow continuously throughout their life and they need an abrasive diet to prevent the teeth from becoming overgrown. If the teeth are misaligned (as in so many domesticated rabbits) they become overgrown and prevent your bunny from eating properly and can also cause immense pain if they grow sharply into the cheeks of their tongue. If your rabbit stops eating, even for just 24 hours or begins to dribble, please make an immediate appointment to see the veterinary surgeon. Some rabbits will require a general anaesthetic, sometimes as often as every 4-6 weeks to have their teeth filed down and this will most likely continue for their entire lives.

## **Neutering**

Female rabbits (does) can be spayed and male rabbits (bucks) can be castrated from 5 months of age. We strongly recommend that it is done as soon as possible to prevent unwanted litters and to help reduce associated medical problems in older age. Entire female rabbit possess a large fold of skin under their chin known as the dewlap, from which they will pluck hair to line a nest. This is quite normal but do not mistake this for a rabbit pulling its hair out from stress or boredom. Neutering can also help prevent certain types of defensive aggression against yourself and other rabbits.

## **Fly Strike**

This is when flies lay eggs on your rabbit, which then hatch into maggots. The maggots mature very quickly and eat into the flesh of your beloved bunny. All this can happen within 24 hours and is often fatal to the rabbit. Every rabbit is at risk but certain factors can greatly increase the chances of fly strike. Dirty coats, diarrhoea, overweight or old rabbits, dental problems, open wounds and unsanitary hutches can all be summer months. This involves you having to physically pick your rabbit up and turning him over to examine its perineal (bottom) area. If your rabbit does have a dirty bottom clean him immediately. If your rabbit has or you suspect that he has fly eggs or maggots, bring him immediately to the surgeon for emergency treatment. To prevent fly strike, keep your rabbit and his environment clean and tidy and use preventative treatments such as Rearguard or Xenex.

## **Flea Control**

Although flea control in rabbits is not regularly carried out, it must be considered to help with the prevention of myxomatosis. Advantage is licensed for the use in rabbits so please ask for more information.

## **Worming**

The presence of worms in rabbits does not seem to be such a big issue as in cats and dogs. Although you may never see any worms, eggs or larvae present it certainly would do your rabbit no harm to have regular worming course at least once a year. This may help in the prevention of the increasingly common 'head tilt'. Please ask for more information from our trained staff.

## Homecare

It is very important that your rabbit is used to being handled. Their hind legs are extremely powerful and one kick from a rabbit that is not used to being picked up can result in fractures of the rabbit's spine, not to mention injuries to the handler. If your rabbit is longhaired you will have to spend time every day grooming your pet, paying particular attention to the back end, which can become quickly matted and dirty. Examine eyes/ears/feet/skin regularly. Familiarise yourself with what is normal so that you will be aware when something is abnormal. Handling your rabbit daily is essential. Always hold it close to your body for support and NEVER pick up a rabbit by its ears.

## Behaviour

Rabbits are prey animals that will conceal signs of illness. If your pet is quieter than usual, especially if he is not eating as well as usual, they may be ill/or in pain. Please telephone to make an appointment for your rabbit the same day.

## Socialising

Rabbits are very sociable animals and in the wild would live in a group of 2-14 individuals. They require contact on a daily basis, even from you, the owner. Keeping same sex rabbits together can be difficult or impossible unless they have grown up together. The best combination is a castrated male and a spayed female. Introducing a new rabbit to the household must be done under supervision and in a neutral area i.e. not in the rabbit hutch. At the slightest sign of tension separate the rabbits to prevent fighting. Introduction can take anything between a few hours to a few months and occasionally may never be successful. Be careful when housing rabbits and guinea pigs together. Although they may appear good friends a rabbit will usually bully and sexually harass (if not neutered) the guinea pig, which will usually result in stress, illness and injuries. They also require different dietary needs.

## Housing

Although there are no set rules to follow, the most important thing to consider is space. A hutch must allow a rabbit to fully stand on its hind legs and take at least 3-4 hops in every direction. They must also be given either free run of either a large outdoor run or your home on a daily basis. Being left to sit in a small wooden box 5-8 years is totally unacceptable. Both hutch and run should be placed in a location where a rabbit would not feel threatened i.e. next to the noisy dog kennels is not suitable, but where it is also protected from direct sunlight, wet weather and frost. Ideally a hutch should be raised several feet off the ground to help protect against other wild animals and predators.

If you have a house rabbit please ensure that it is bunny proof (move electric cables, plants, books etc out of reach) before you let your rabbit run loose. Allow the rabbit its own space with an indoor cage and litter trays your pet to make life easier for yourself. Never leave other pets and your rabbit together unattended.

## Footnote

Although rabbits are very cute and friendly looking, they do require plenty of time and a lot of attention. Many people believe that they are ideal children's pets but this is not always the case. Adult responsibility and intervention is continually required. Young children quickly become bored with rabbits once the novelty of a new pet has worn off and they discover a lot of time and work is needed, so please think very carefully before you go pet shopping. If you are going to purchase a lone rabbit and keep him isolated in a hutch at the bottom of the garden then this is not the pet for you.

For everyone who does decide that a rabbit it is suitable for them, the first step should be to join the Rabbit Welfare Association, who will provide you with lots of useful information and help you to decide which breed is best for you.

## Happy Rabbiting