

Care Guide



VET SERVICES
HAWKE'S BAY

TAKING CARE OF YOUR RABBIT

Rabbits can bring enormous joy into our lives. If you have recently acquired a rabbit, this guide will help answer some common questions about settling your new rabbit into your home and ongoing care.



SETTLING IN

Rabbits can live happily either indoors or outdoors.

If your rabbit lives outside

Your rabbit will need a roomy hutch and an exercise run that will allow them to stand up fully on their hind legs, plus allow plenty of room to hop around. “The minimal guidelines (RWAf, 2012. Meredith & Lord, 2014) suggest 2.4m x 1.2m as a minimum floor area for a run attached to a living area for a rabbit.

d.) These are minimum standards and are based on the fact that free range rabbit will utilise 2185m² (entire male) and 1580m² (entire females), similar or wild rabbits (Meredith & Lord, 2014). This confirms that rabbits are very active animals and must be allowed to display their normal behaviour” This could be converted to more pet owner friendly language : they must be able to do minimum 3-5 hops across their run without bumping nose onto fence or wall, otherwise it is too small.

- Place the hutch facing the morning sun. Make sure the rabbit has access to shade during the summer and is protected from the rain and wind during the winter.

Hutch requirements

- The sleeping area should be slightly raised off the ground and must be weatherproof and draught-proof.
- Strong mesh sides will allow air and light to enter.
- Your hutch must be predator proof, as dogs and cats can kill your rabbit.
- There should be areas to hide and play.
- There should be raised areas for your rabbit to sit on, sunbathe and look out.
- Digging is a normal rabbit behaviour.
- Rabbits are actually very clean pets and like to toilet in the same spot. A cat litter tray filled with hay or straws on the offer can help maintaining the hutch clean.

If your rabbit lives inside

They will need:

- A safe place for sleep and play, with a water bowl, bedding, food dish, litter trays and toys.
Ideally a smaller to medium size indoor plastic hutch where they can be put safely for night time.
- Supervision when loose in the house.
- Tape electrical and phone cords where they cannot be chewed (even if your rabbit is on its hind legs) Consider getting cord protectors and covers for electrical outlets
- Move potted plants where they cannot be eaten, as they are likely to be poisonous
- Remove children's toys, clothing, etc. that you don't want chewed
- Offer a cat litter tray filled with hay or straws for toileting, they are toilet trainable just like cats. Plus they like to eat while going number poos 😊

BEDDING

- Straw, hay or shredded paper atop a layer of newspaper is best.
- Do not use treated timber and wood shavings as bedding. They can be fatal.

EXERCISE

Provide supervised exercise time in the backyard where they are free to hop around as often as you can (this area needs to be secure and rabbit-proof) or use a large exercise pen.

MENTAL STIMULATION

Rabbits also need mental stimulation. Add ramps, tunnels, boxes, climbable objects and plenty of toys to your rabbit's home.

SAFE SPACES

Rabbits in the wild use high points to check for danger. Provide objects to jump up on and sunbathe or sleep so that your rabbit can exhibit this natural behaviour.

Rabbits naturally live underground so provide protected areas and hidey holes where they feel safe and secure:

- Cardboard boxes of different sizes
- Wicker baskets (untreated ones) filled with hay
- Tunnels



HANDLING

Rabbits are naturally sociable animals and enjoy lots of attention and company. But it might take your new rabbit a little while to get used to you and their new home. Remember, too, that in the wild rabbits can be attacked by predators, so they are naturally fearful of a sudden approach, especially from above.

- Never sneak up on your rabbit.
- Let your rabbit come and sniff you on their own terms. Then offer a treat and a gentle stroke.
- Give your rabbit a few gentle strokes before picking up.
- Do not rush contact or force your rabbit to be held. Use firm but gentle handling.
- Spend some time on the floor hanging out with your rabbit so they get used to your presence.
- The more you handle your rabbit the quieter and friendlier they will be.

HOW TO PICK UP YOUR RABBIT

- Place one hand under the chest.
- One hand supporting back legs.
- Hold gently but securely against your chest.
- Rabbits' spines are fragile and can fracture easily. The hind legs need to be secure so they cannot kick out and damage their spine.
- Supervise and train children to hold rabbits properly.

FEEDING

Hay and grass should form the basis (80%) of your rabbit's diet. The remainder of your rabbit's diet should be fresh vegetables (15%) and a small amount of pellets (around 5%).

Hay

- Hay is a vital part of a rabbit's diet (do not confuse with straw which is for bedding only).
- Provide a good-sized handful of fresh hay every day.
- Hay provides fibre and helps wear down a rabbit's teeth.
- Purchase fresh hay from feed stores or some pet shops.
- Make sure it is not damp, dusty or mouldy as this could cause respiratory illness.
- Rabbits love grass, dandelion leaves, thistle/puha, plantain leaves and dock leaves.
- Ensure the leaves haven't been sprayed with poison or repellents and **don't use grass clippings from lawn mower.**
- Rabbits love fresh herbs which provide health benefits. A herb garden can lead to a happy, healthy bunny.
- Fresh vegetables. Feeding a variety of fresh vegetables provides essential nutrients.
- Introduce vegetables slowly, one at a time. If they cause diarrhoea, stop feeding them immediately.



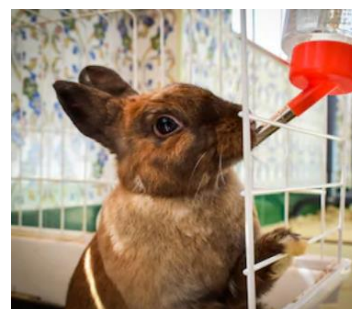
Rabbits under 12 weeks have sensitive stomachs so introduce all new foods very gradually from 12 weeks. This prevents diarrhoea which can be fatal at a young age.

Pellets

- Avoid pellets with dried fruits, nuts, grains and coloured pieces which are high in fat, sugar and salt.
- Choose pellets with high fibre content (>15%) and less protein than fibre.
- Your vet can recommend a good pellet food.
- Refer to feeding instructions on the bag.
- Overfeeding of pellets is a common cause of obesity and **teeth damage** in older rabbits.

Treats and fruit

- Fruit and special rabbit treats are high in sugar and/or salt, so give only occasionally.
- While most fresh vegetables, herbs and fruit are suitable for your rabbit, there are some foods to avoid altogether:
- Use kale, spinach and silver beet sparingly.
- Some fruit tree branches and leaves are suitable to eat, but not all, so always do your research first.
- Give carrots only as treats as they are high in starch and sugar.
- Celery must be cut into 1 cm pieces as it can get caught in their intestines.
- Never feed your rabbit processed human foods such as: chocolate, cookies, crackers, cereal, yoghurt, milk, pasta or bread.



WATER AND BOWLS

- Fresh water must always be available and replaced daily.
- Use heavy containers for food and water to avoid spillage, or use a pet sipper bottle or container that clips to the cage.

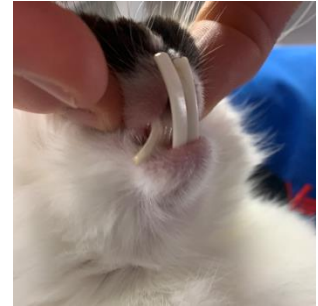
HEALTH

If your rabbit has a healthy diet, lots of exercise and gets a lot of attention it should live a happy and healthy life. However, things can go wrong and if you are ever in doubt you should talk to your vet.

Rabbits are good at hiding their symptoms as a sick rabbit in the wild is easy prey. Pay close attention to your rabbit's appearance and behaviour – sometimes a rabbit that just looks a bit down is actually a sick rabbit. Handle and check your rabbit daily.

You should check:

- **Weight.** A healthy rabbit should be slim and sleek. You should be able to feel (but not see) their ribs just under the skin without a thick layer of fat. Any sudden decrease in weight is likely to be health-related and you should take your rabbit to the vet. An overweight rabbit is likely to suffer from ongoing health issues so it is important not to overfeed your rabbit.
- **Eyes, ears and nose.** These should be clear, clean and bright looking with no discharge. If your rabbit is shaking their head a lot and scratching around the ears, this could be a sign of ear mites and they will need to see a vet.
- **Coat.** The coat should be shiny, flat and smooth. Dandruff may mean your rabbit has mites, which will require vet treatment. Rabbits can also get fleas – your vet can advise a safe flea treatment for rabbits. Brush your rabbit with a soft brush to keep the coat looking nice and healthy. Angora and cashmere rabbits need a **daily grooming, their fine silky fur matts very easily**. Your rabbit will moult a few times a year and will require brushing – they may look quite scruffy at this time.
- **Ensure the fur around the bum is kept clean and check daily in summer to avoid fly strike.**
- **Eating and dropping. Any change in eating habits or reduction in size, shape or numbers of droppings can mean that your rabbit is sick.**



DROPPINGS

Rabbits have two sorts of droppings – hard fibrous pellets and soft green caecotropes. Rabbits will reingest their caecotropes but usually do this at night in private. This is a normal and important part of a rabbit's digestion and does not indicate ill health.

TEETH

Rabbits' teeth grow throughout their lives and dental problems are common. Make sure you provide your rabbits with **good fresh hay every day** and adequate chewing material. Branches from trees such as willow, apple, pear, poplar and citrus, or other untreated wood treats, will keep their teeth worn down. Avoid trees which have been chemically treated or are close to sources of pollution. Any reluctance to eat or drooling may indicate a dental problem that should be checked out by a vet.

VACCINATIONS

Calici Virus is present in New Zealand and is fatal. Most rabbits don't show a lot of symptoms and can die within a few hours. A vaccine is available and we recommend to have your rabbit vaccinated as soon as you get it. We recommend keeping your pet rabbit in doors until it has had its vaccinations.

CLAWS

Rabbits' nails need clipping regularly if they don't wear them down in their environment (about once every six to eight weeks). Ask your vet to show you how, as you can easily cut through the blood vessel. A paving stone or a flat river stone placed in an area your rabbit regularly travels over may help reduce the need to trim nails as often.

EXERCISE AND ENRICHMENT

Rabbits need lots of play and enrichment to stave off boredom and for physical and mental health. Use your imagination when enriching your rabbit's environment. Just ensure everything is safe, non-toxic and unable to cause injury.

TRAINING

Many people have great success in training their rabbit to do all types of tricks – fetch, sit, roll over, or even jump through hoops. You can also buy a rabbit harness and lead and train your rabbit to use this, which can be useful in keeping your rabbit safe when in unsecured outdoor areas.

TOYS

Toys are a fantastic way for you to interact with your rabbit. Toss a ball and get them to toss it back before feeding. They will also appreciate having toys to play with purely by themselves. Rabbits love to investigate, push, pull and play with toys. Alternate toys regularly to keep them interested.

Here are some toy ideas:

- Fill toilet paper rolls with hay and treats.
- Hide a slice of fruit or vegetables in a treat ball.
- Hard plastic baby toys make great enrichment items for rabbits to throw around.
- Untreated wicker baskets, wooden 'fiddlesticks', cartons and untreated fruit tree limbs make great shredding fun and are also important for wearing down teeth.
- Telephone books, boxes, cat tunnels and blocks of untreated wood are excellent for stretching, climbing or sitting
- Remember to let them destroy these toys if they want to – that is part of the fun!



OUTSIDE ENRICHMENT

- Rabbits are naturally outdoor animals and they will love the chance to kick up their heels in their own exercise area.
- Invest in an exercise pen or buy several and link them together to make a mega outdoor play area.
- Add a variety of toys to the pen.
- Ensure they have access to fresh water and a place to eat fresh grass.
- Sandpits filled with soil or sand make for a very spoiled rabbit. Pushing sand and digging encourages natural behaviour.

Caution

- Ensure you are monitoring playtime to protect your pet from attacks from other animals, such as cats or dogs.
- Escaping – rabbits may dig and they can dig fast.
- Exposure – add some shelter, such as a tarpaulin or kennel and ensure they are not left in direct sun without shade or in wet, cold weather.

BUNNY BONDING

Rabbits are very sociable and often crave the companionship of their own kind. Having a bonded pair is often a recipe for happiness, especially if you cannot spend much time with your rabbit.

- Rabbits form powerful bonds.
- The loss of a companion can cause depression and illness.
- Bonding may take patience, time and commitment from you.
- You will need separate housing for each animal until successfully bonded.
- Both rabbits must be desexed to avoid breeding or fighting.
- The best match is a neutered male and spayed female.



If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rabbit, please call one of our clinics today.

