

HOUSING AND CARE OF YOUR PET RABBIT

Housing your rabbit

Rabbits can be kept as indoor pets or outdoor pets - or a mixture of the two. The most satisfactory pet rabbit is one obtained young from a responsible breeder or family home where the young rabbit has been reared on the correct diet and been handled regularly from a very young age.

Hutches and runs

A rabbit kept out of doors needs a fox-proof shelter where he or she can be shut at night (a hutch or a shed) and either a large fenced run, or access to a garden. Being let out into a run or garden shouldn't be something for special occasions and good weather, but a daily event for the rabbit.

Your rabbit should always be able to get out of bad weather if he wants to, and never be forced to sit in the sun - they are very susceptible to heat-stroke.

Apart from the sun, rabbits cope well with our climate, and are healthier when allowed out in all weathers that when shut up in a hutch or shed.

House rabbits

Rabbits can be kept indoors, and will learn to use a litter tray - but you do need to have a safe area where you can shut your rabbit when you are out of the house, so that he doesn't chew electric cables, or anything else that could harm him.

Exercise

Whether your rabbit is kept inside or outside, regular exercise is important. A great many pet rabbits are overweight, which may lead to a number of health problems, including weak bones, and digestive disturbances.

Should he have a friend?

Rabbits are social animals - in the wild they live in groups, forming pairs as they reach maturity. Pet rabbits should ideally be kept in pairs or groups, which are easiest to establish when the animals are young. Two males kept together will fight (the only exception is that two brothers, if they are neutered very young, will sometimes live together peacefully).

Two female rabbits kept together will compete to be 'boss rabbit'. The best solution is a male and a female together, with either one or both neutered (see 'neutering'). Try to establish your pair or group while the rabbits are young. Older rabbits find it much harder to accept new members of the family.

Feeding your rabbit

For more detail, see the leaflet on 'feeding'. A rabbit's diet should be high in fibre, and 90% of the diet should be made up of hay and green stuff. A good quality high-fibre mix (not a 'muesli-type' mix) can make up the final 10% of the diet.

Vaccination

Ask your vet about the vaccination regime in your area - it will vary according to local circumstances.

Pet rabbits can be vaccinated against two diseases - Myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease. In many areas myxomatosis continues to be a problem for pet rabbits, and the time of peak disease incidence is in September, October and November. VHD 2 is a new, emergent disease becoming the top killer of wild rabbits, and a vaccine is now available for this also, and highly recommended.

Neutering

Many vets advise that all pet rabbits not required for breeding should be neutered. It makes them better pets (especially for children) as they do not develop the behavioural problems of aggression and territory defence that are part of sexual behaviour.

In females, it also prevents the development of tumours of the uterus, which are very common indeed in un-spayed rabbits.