

## RABBIT CARE

Rabbits are a very popular pet and are easy to look after. There are many different breeds of rabbits available. Small breeds such as the Dwarf or Dutch may look the right size for your children to handle but are often rather feisty. Larger breeds including the New Zealand White and Flemish are naturally more docile; however, all can be tamed with regular *gentle* handling.

### HOUSING

- Rabbits can be housed in cages but should not be kept confined 24 hours a day. Many hutches sold for rabbits are too small; they should be at least 1.5 – 2 meters in length and high enough to allow the rabbit to stand up on their back legs. The hutch should have a shaded area at one end because rabbits are very susceptible to heat stress. Rabbits cannot tolerate temperatures above 28°C as they cannot sweat or pant effectively. It is advisable to cover the hutch in mosquito netting to minimize the chance of catching myxomatosis virus, which is spread by mosquitoes.
- Many rabbits are kept together with guinea pigs. This is not recommended as rabbits are capable of spreading a bacteria called *Bordetella bronchiseptica* to guinea pigs. This organism usually has no effect on rabbits but causes severe disease and death in affected guinea pigs.
- Cage floors should be either slatted wood or solid. Many of the cages sold have wire floors. This can cause injuries to rabbit feet which have no protective pads. If wire is the only flooring available then a non-slip resting board or rug should be provided to prevent foot problems. The floor can also be covered in a deep layer of straw which should be changed every 1 - 3 days.
- Daily excursions into the backyard should be supervised to prevent problems with predators such as dogs and cats. You will also need to be careful that burrowing behavior does not make your pet inaccessible!
- Rabbits are also very easy to litter train so another alternative to a hutch is to keep them inside! You will need to rabbit-proof the house though because they will chew on anything! Bored rabbits may become destructive and will target sofas, carpets, electrical cords and many other items. Keeping a selection of boxes, baskets, toys and sticks (from fruit trees that have not been sprayed with insecticides) will help entertain your pet and prevent unwanted chewing. It should also be noted that excessive indoor heating can distress rabbits so it is important to give them access to a cooler section of the house if required.

## **LITTER TRAINING**

- Rabbits can be litter trained at any age. It is often easier to train a desexed rabbit because the hormones responsible for territorial marking are absent. Most Rabbits will choose to eliminate in several areas (usually corners) so having a tray in the hutch as well as several spots around the house is advised.
- The key to litter training your rabbit is to observe it closely and correct any unwanted behavior immediately. If the rabbit goes to the toilet anywhere else in its cage except in the litter box then the litter must be moved to that spot. If the Rabbit eliminates in other spots in its surrounds apart from the litter trays provided then the rabbit should be reprimanded by saying “No.” and gently herding it to the appropriate area. Similar to other animals, rabbits will respond to food rewards for correct behavior.
- A normal litter trained rabbit will drop small amounts of fecal pellets around their cage as a marking – this is not a failure of litter training.
- In other instances, a previously litter trained rabbit may urinate in the wrong area due to health problems such as urinary tract infections or stress. It may be necessary to see a vet if this is suspected.
- An important point to consider when choosing the litter for your rabbit is that rabbits will nibble at their litter. Hay is suitable material for a litter tray. Newspaper or recycled paper products can have poor odor control and may cause constipation. Wood shavings and sawdust are not suitable as many can cause liver problems if consumed. Clumping litters will also clump in the rabbit’s intestine causing problems.

## **INSURANCE**

We highly recommend that you take out a pet insurance policy. For a monthly fee your pet can receive the best treatment at an affordable cost. There is normally an excess to pay for each condition then after that costs are covered up to a set limit. Once you have the policy, please provide us with a copy of your insurance details. There are a lot of different companies and policies available and we suggest you contact a number of them for information- we have a leaflet advising what to look out for. Our advice is to choose a policy which provides cover for chronic illness for the life of your pet. If this policy is too much for you then the best cover you can afford will provide piece of mind in an accident or emergency.

## **FEEDING RABBITS**

### **RABBITS EAT GRASS!**

And have been designed to do so over many centuries!

In the wild they graze from a large variety of different grasses, weeds and bushes and during the winter they eat dried grass that they have stored in their burrows for this purpose.

Despite this fact, people mistakenly feed large quantities of dry foods and fail to give them access to essential grass, hay or greens.

Commercial dry foods such as muesli mixes and pelleted feeds were originally designed for rapid growth in rabbits that were destined for the laboratory, meat or fur trade; that is: *not long lived rabbits*. In the last few years pet stores and rabbit owners have been feeding more and more of these foods and correspondingly we are seeing an increase in the health problems directly linked to such diets including dental disease, abscesses, diarrhoea and subsequent fly strike, obesity and gut stasis.

### **So, how should you feed your rabbit?**

- **Good-quality hay or grass** should make up the majority (75-80%) of the diet. In reality, this means free access to grass or offering at least a rabbit-sized amount of hay to your rabbit daily to allow them to eat as much as they want. Lawnmower clippings should never be used as they ferment rapidly and may have petrol residues on them
- Commercial foods can be offered in small quantities. Muesli mixes allow rabbits to eat the bits which they like best and have been directly linked to dental disease. Therefore complete pellet diets are preferred. The ideal amount of pellets will depend on your individual rabbit and their weight, activity levels and growth but we usually start with 1 table spoon per day
- **Greens, weeds and herbs** should make up the remainder of the diet (see recommended list below) and 1 handful may be fed twice daily
- Fruits should only be fed as an occasional treat due to their high sugar content

Any changes to your rabbits diet should happen slowly over the course of a few weeks – rapid changes can lead to lack of acceptance, diarrhoea, gut stasis or weight loss. Some rabbits may develop diarrhoea when greens are initially offered. You can help by only introducing one new vegetable or fruit at a time and feeding it for several days. In most cases the diarrhoea will stop after a few days without intervention, if it doesn't then stop feeding that item and increase hay feeding for a few days or ring your vet. The key to avoiding upset tummies is to feed greens every day to allow their digestive system to acclimatize to it.

### **The following are a list of plants safe for your rabbit to eat:**

- Artichoke leaves
- Asparagus
- Beetroot (care with leafy tops as high levels of oxalic acid)
- Broccoli (and its leaves, including purple sprouting varieties)
- Cabbage (can sometimes cause digestive upsets)
- Carrots (and carrot tops) – should be limited as they are high in sugars
- Cauliflower (and the leaves)
- Celeriac

- Celery (and its leaves)
- Chicory
- Courgette (and flowers)
- Cucumber
- Curly Kale
- Fennel
- Green beans
- Kohl rabi
- Parsnip
- Peas (including the leaves and pods)
- Radish Tops
- Rocket
- Romaine lettuce (not Iceberg or light coloured leaf)
- Spinach (only occasional)
- Spring Greens
- Turnip (only occasional)
- Watercress

**Herbs (often powerful tastes so may take some getting used to):**

- Basil
- Coriander
- Dill
- Mint (peppermint)
- Parsley
- Oregano
- Rosemary
- Sage
- Thyme

**Wild Garden Herbs/Weeds/Flowers:**

- Calendula
- Camomile
- Chickweed
- Clover (leaves and flowers)
- Comfrey
- Dandelion
- Goosegrass (cleavers) but may stick to coat!
- Lavender
- Mallow
- Nettle
- Nasturtium (leaves and flowers)
- Shepherd's purse
- Sow Thistle
- Plantain
- Yarrow