



RABBIT CARE INFORMATION PACK

This information pack provides you with all the information required to care for a rabbit's complex dietary and social needs. The Beaumont Sainsbury Animal Hospital has been awarded the Gold Standard accreditation by the Rabbit Welfare Association Fund (RWF). The Gold standard is the highest possible endorsement awarded by the RWF and signifies the best standards in rabbit care and wellbeing at a veterinary surgery or hospital. We have also been awarded Burgess Rabbit Practice of The Year. We are here for all of your rabbit's needs.

Housing and environment

- Rabbits that are housed in cages should not be kept confined 24 hours a day. They must have an attached run or frequent (daily for several hours) access to a run or backyard for exercise. 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.
- Daily excursions into the backyard should be supervised to prevent problems with predators such as foxes and cats. You will also need to be careful to prevent burrowing and escape. Alternatively, a predator proof and escape proof run can be used.
- Cage floors should be either slatted wood or solid with padded bedding over the top. Wire floors can cause injuries to rabbit feet which have no protective pads. A non-slip surface such as a rug should be provided to prevent foot problems. The floor can also be covered in a deep layer of straw which should be kept dry and changed every 1 - 3 days.
- 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. Ample access to hay and a companion can also reduce destructive





behaviour (see later) 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.

- 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. They also cannot communicate effectively, have different dietary requirements and bullying may occur.

Litter Training

Rabbits mark their territory with both urine and faeces so to achieve success with litter training, neutering is recommended. Neutered rabbits are much less likely to mark territory with wastes. Unlike most species, rabbits eat, poo and wee in the same place and so providing a hay rack over the litter tray or using hay as the litter material can encourage your rabbit to toilet in the tray. Remember rabbits are prone to eating their litter so avoid sawdust and clumping litters as they can be toxic. During training, if your rabbit defecates elsewhere sweep it up and add it to the tray. If they urinate in the wrong spot, then having several trays changed regularly in those places can help. Initially make sure the only place they have access to hay is in or near their litter trays. Territorial marking such as weeing on couches etc can be discouraged by placing a blanket your rabbit has slept on over the area. This will then already smell like them, reducing their likelihood of marking that area.

Companionship

In the wild rabbits naturally live in very large groups and companionship is vital to their well-being. **Keeping rabbits alone can lead to a miserable and dull existence. Rabbits have complex social needs and are happiest when kept with another friendly rabbit-therefore, rabbits should live ideally in pairs.** A male / female neutered pair works best but due to being territorial the rabbits need to be introduced in such a way to maximise acceptance – simply buying a new rabbit and putting it in the cage with the other may result in serious injury or death due to fighting. We do recommend neutering rabbits (see later) for many reasons, including to ensure no unwanted babies are born and to reduce the likelihood of fighting between rabbits.

If you consider that you want to get a friend for your current rabbit we would always recommend a local rescue shelter. Not only does this save a life, but also ensures they are healthy and will allow you to take time to bond them. Certain rescues will even do this for you to ensure that they get on well together. However, for more information on this please come in for a rabbit bonding clinic. We can provide you with a lot more information and tips. Ensuring your rabbits are kept in pairs will massively improve their quality of life.

Diet and feeding advice

Don't forget 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 warren for this purpose.

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

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 it has been noted that there is a significant correlation between muesli foods and serious health problems. 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 twice 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
- Hay must be of high quality such as timothy hay, grass hay, orchard hay be careful not to accidentally buy poor quality bedding hay as they will not eat it.
- A complete pellet diet is not essential but if fed be sure not to over feed as they will often eat less hay if they fill up on other foods. This can lead to digestive upsets and dental disease. If you choose to feed pellets the ideal amount of pellets will depend on your individual rabbit and their weight, activity levels and growth but we usually start with 15 – 20g of pellets per kg of rabbit. Senior, indoor rabbit and low fat pellet feeds are available. This should be scatter fed or placed on foraging toys to encourage activity and foraging behaviours – never fed out of a bowl.
- **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 and carrots (anything that can be pureed) are not recommended as the sugars and starches can upset the bacterial balance of the gut.
- Don't forget to make things fun with feeding games and toys (enrichment)

Any changes to your rabbit's diet should happen slowly over the course of a few days – rapid changes can lead to lack of acceptance, diarrhoea, gut stasis or weight loss. Some rabbits may develop diarrhoea when greens are initially offered. If this happens please seek advice.

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

Peas (including leaves and pods)	Rocket	Spinach (occasionally)	Spring greens	Turnip (occasionally)
Radish tops	Curly kale	Fennel	Green beans	Basil
Watercress	Asparagus	Beetroot (care with leafy tops, high in oxalic acid)	Carrots and tops	Kale
Broccoli	Cauliflower	Mint (peppermint)	Thyme	Dill
Cabbage	Chicory	Parsley	Basil	Courgette and its flowers
Cucumber	Coriander	Oregano	Sage	Rosemary

Neutering

We recommend spaying of female rabbits from 5 months of age in order to prevent unwanted litters, aggressive behaviour and most importantly uterine cancer. Up to 80% of unneutered female rabbits have been found to suffer from this painful fatal condition which will be completely prevented by spaying.

We recommend castration of male rabbits from 4 months of age in order to prevent fighting, urine spraying, breeding and other undesirable behaviour.

Vaccinations against deadly diseases

Myxomatosis

Myxomatosis is a common disease in rabbits caused by the myxoma virus – a pox virus. In the domestic rabbit it is almost always fatal. The virus is most commonly spread by vectors, such as mosquitoes, fleas, flies, fur and harvest mites.

The most commonly reported clinical signs are: swellings of the eyelids and genitals, white eye discharge, fever, lethargy and anorexia. Rabbits showing such signs will usually die within 14 days – often from secondary bacterial infections. Due to the poor prognosis, euthanasia of these rabbits on humane grounds is recommended.

A milder form of the disease is encountered with previously vaccinated rabbits. In such rabbits the virus is confined to the formation of circular skin lesions. Such rabbits will often present with pox marks on the nose, face and ears similar to chicken pox. Treatment of rabbits with these milder clinical signs may be successful.

Preventing myxomatosis

- The most important step in preventing myxomatosis is annual vaccination of your pet rabbit. Vaccines are advised for all rabbits, even those kept indoors as they may still have contact with insects. Vaccines can be given from 5 weeks of age and protect against myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease strains for a period of 12 months – **please speak to any of our team for more information on getting your rabbit vaccinated**

Viral Haemorrhagic Diseases 1 and 2 (VHD or RHD 1 & 2)

VHD 1: In rabbits this is an invariably fatal disease caused by a calicivirus. The virus is very severe and rabbits are usually found dead with bleeding from the nose and mouth. The virus infects rabbits older than 6 weeks of age (rabbits of 4 – 6 weeks may become infected and survive).

The virus is passed on through direct contact or on objects such as bedding and clothing. It can be transmitted via insects and brought into the house on clothing or shoes.

VHD 2: In recent years a new strain of this virus called VHD2 has been responsible for the deaths of rabbits across the UK. The new strain of this virus is less virulent (kills less rabbits) but is capable of infecting and killing young rabbits who normally would not have succumbed to VHD1. Unlike VHD1 it does not kill every rabbit it infects. Some rabbits will survive if hospitalised for aggressive supportive care.

Preventing VHD 1 and 2

- The most important step in preventing VHD is annual vaccination of your pet rabbit. Vaccines are advised for all rabbits, even those kept indoors as the virus can be spread indirectly on bedding, hay or clothing.
- Vaccines can be started from 5 weeks of age and protect against VHD 1 and 2 and myxomatosis for a period of ~12 months – **please speak to any of our team for more information on getting your rabbit vaccinated**

Other preventative healthcare

Rabbits do not usually need regular worming treatment but may need treatment for other parasites.

Flystrike is a potentially fatal condition caused by flies laying eggs on your rabbit (usually around their back end or any warm moist areas). These eggs then develop into maggots which rapidly cause tissue damage and death. We recommend checking your rabbit every day for flystrike particularly during warm periods. Preventative treatment with cyromazine may be necessary at high risk times. One treatment will help prevent flystrike for 8-10 weeks in combination with environmental control of flies. Flystrike is highly unlikely to affect normal healthy rabbits – flies are usually attracted by the presence of urine or faeces on your rabbit's coat. If your rabbit is getting urine or faeces on their coat or skin, they should be examined by a vet as this indicates underlying disease. Healthy rabbits are usually fastidiously clean.

E. cuniculi (*Encephalitozoon cuniculi*) is a fungal infection which is widespread throughout the pet rabbit population with 52% of rabbits having been exposed. Some rabbits show no signs at all but in others it can cause both neurological and urinary issues. Signs include a head tilt, hind limb weakness, urine scalding, weight loss and cataracts. A one-off 28 day course of fenbendazole may be

recommended when introducing new pet rabbits or at times of stress to prevent infection during this time period and treat any infection already present. Both the new rabbit and any in-contact rabbits should be treated. *E. cuniculi* can potentially cause disease in immunosuppressed people too so it is important to prevent infection both for the sake of the rabbit and any in-contact people



Dental checks

We recommend dental checks every 6 months for pet rabbits as dental disease is such a common problem and more easily treated if detected at an early stage – **you can register for automatic reminders**

Dental disease is often caused by the rabbit not eating enough good quality hay and genetic predisposition such as very flat faced (brachycephalic) and dwarf breeds.

Rabbit 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. 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.

We hope that this pack has been useful to you and has inspired you to join us in our passion for rabbits. This pack is to ensure that you and your rabbit are safe and live a long healthy and most importantly happy life.

Please do not hesitate to call us with any concerns.

