

Aireworth Vets   
SMALL ANIMAL 

## Care For Your Rabbit



If you have any further queries regarding the welfare of your pet, please do not hesitate to ask a member of staff

We are happy to assist!

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## Rabbits as pets

Although very common in Britain, rabbits are not a native species and are now classed as a pest. Even so, they make very good pets when handled well. Gentle but firm handling is required for a rabbit, and young children should be supervised at all times as a frightened rabbit can deliver a painful bite and hard kick.

## A friend for your bunny

Although sociable by nature, keeping rabbits together can sometimes be difficult.

Two males will nearly always fight even if introduced at a young age. Two females will usually be friends so long as they are kept together from an early age. A male and a female can be kept together if introduced early but will breed.

## Housing your rabbit

Many people keep rabbits in hutches outside. There is nothing wrong with this as a rule, but care needs to be taken to ensure that enough bedding is provided to keep them warm in bad weather. If you would like to take this approach, you should also watch out for their water freezing in the winter, take care that the hutch is out of the wind, ensure that the hutch is raised off the ground to prevent damp and make sure that your pet does not start to chew through it. Rabbits also make good pets to live indoors as they do not have a strong smell. Rabbits can be litter trained so can make lovely house pets.

There are many different bedding materials available for rabbits. Hay and straw are warm and natural and will not harm your rabbit if eaten, however they can be dusty, so shredded paper is a good alternative. There must always be a large amount of bedding available for your rabbit to make its own bed. An outdoor run could be nice for your bunny to run and graze. UV light is also important for healthy tooth development and growth.

## Bunny facts

- The average lifespan of a rabbit is 8-12 years.
- When fully grown, your pet should weigh between 1kg and 8kg.
- Rabbits reach sexual maturity at 16-24 weeks.
- The average litter size is 4-12 and babies are weaned at 7-8 weeks.

## Your rabbit and the vet

Even with the best care and attention, most animals get poorly at least once in their lifetime. Rabbits carry *Pasteurella*, which can flare up causing respiratory disease when they are stressed eg from overcrowding, poor ventilation, overheating, malnutrition, chronic disease etc.

If you notice anything unusual about your pet, please contact the surgery. It may not be anything much, but it could be the start of something more serious. It's better to get it checked.

Ideally, rabbits need vaccinating against myxomatosis and viral hemorrhagic disease as both can be fatal. Initial vaccines are required at 6-12 weeks old and then annually (or every 6 months for myxomatosis in high risk areas).

Females are advised to be spayed before they are 2 years of age to prevent Uterine Adenocarcinoma (50-80% of unspayed females develop it, this cancer can spread to lungs, liver and brain within 1-2 years). Male rabbits can be neutered as well, this is especially recommended if they are a bit aggressive.



## Feeding your pet

Rabbits have a unique digestive system and disease is mostly caused by changes in diet and stress (mainly poor husbandry, malnutrition etc). In the wild, rabbits feed predominantly on grasses. The closer you can feed an animal to its natural diet, the better.

Therefore, grass and hay should make up the basis of your rabbits diet. So feed more mixed grasses, herbs and different types of hay. Rabbits have 21 taste buds and like bitter/spicy things e.g. coriander, parsley, sage, rocket, roses, brambles, strawberry plants, pretty much anything we can eat (with the exception of AVOCADO).



The ideal diet is 2% pellets (1-2 tbsp/day, these provide vitamins and minerals, avoid ones based on alfalfa as it is high in calcium, 28% Veg, Herbs and a small amount of Fruit (avoid those high in sugar eg. banana, but apple, pear and red berries are good in small amounts); 70% good quality grass (fresh is more abrasive and better for teeth than dry hay).

If you need to change your bunny's diet, this must be done gradually over a week, start by reducing pellets and increasing hay, then add in small amounts of leafy veg and slowly small amounts of fruit, herbs etc. Fresh water should always be available, preferably from a water bottle attached to the side of the cage.

They are inquisitive grazing animals, so provide food in different ways e.g. feeding balls, hay in tubes etc., and use pellets as treats or as a training tool.