

## Keeping Rabbits - General Care & Information

Rabbits are very sociable animals that require contact with other individuals, perhaps another rabbit or their owner, on a daily basis. The average, healthy, domestic rabbit will live from 5 to 8 years, although as a general rule smaller rabbit breeds live longer than the larger ones.

Rabbits are prey animals and they exhibit many physical traits that have developed to help them avoid predators – these include eyes on the side of their face so that they can see all around, ears that are enlarged and able to move to pick up sounds, long hind legs so that they have the power to run away, a good sense of smell and a sensitivity towards sudden movements or attempts to pick them up.

Young rabbits are called kittens and they should be homed when they are 8 weeks old. Kittens that have been handled regularly at an early age will make better companion rabbits as they will be well socialised and accustomed to being picked up correctly.

**Allogrooming** - one rabbit grooming another rabbit. This behaviour is often used to strengthen relationships and appears as licking when directed towards the owner.

**Chin rubbing** - rabbits mark anything that doesn't smell of them with the scent glands that are located under the chin. In the wild this behaviour lets other rabbits know whose territory they have entered – in the home, the behaviour may be seen around new items of furniture or even the owner's legs.

**Circling** - Female rabbits circle male rabbits during courtship and this is often combined with some grunting. When a rabbit is kept alone the behaviour can be directed towards the owner.

**Foot thumping** - rabbits thump their feet quite rapidly to alert the rest of the group to danger. Domestic rabbits, even living alone, may do this if they feel under threat by an owner or another animal when they are in their hutch.

**Fur Plucking** - Generally speaking this is a sign of a pregnancy, or a phantom pregnancy – when a female rabbit plucks the hair off her chest to line a nest made from bedding. In some situations rabbits pull their own hair out or over groom a companion through stress or boredom.

**Growling** - rabbits growl when they feel threatened. This may occur between individuals or towards owners when they approach the rabbit suddenly or put a hand into the rabbits' territory.

**Their own faeces!** - Rabbits have a very unusual digestive system that relies on the consumption of the first set of faeces that they produce to absorb as many nutrients as possible.

**Fibre** - A rabbit also requires a large amount of fibre to keep its digestive system functioning and its teeth worn down.

**Hay** - They should also have a good quality dried hay freely available at all times to enable them to graze and forage. The more time a rabbit spends grazing and foraging the better – in the wild they would spend 70% of their time out of the burrow grazing.

**Treats** - The best treats for rabbits are those that are not processed – these can include small pieces of green vegetables, fruit or stale bread. If they are hung from the roof of the hutch or the indoor cage they will help prevent the rabbit getting bored

**Don't overfeed** - You should try and avoid overfeeding your rabbit.

**Plenty of water** - Rabbits should have unlimited supplies of water, either in a bowl or in a gravity bottle.

All rabbits should be vaccinated against VHD and Myxomatosis each year. A rabbit should be taken for a health check as soon as it is obtained. This will enable the vet to advise on vaccinations, weight maintenance, neutering, insurance and nail clipping whilst checking the rabbit's general health. Any rabbit that is not going to be used for breeding will benefit from being neutered. If they are female, this will prevent the development of uterine cancer but in both sexes this can make them easier to handle and litter train.

**Rabbit Housing** - There is no hard or fast rule – what is more important is the amount of space that they are given and the level of social contact that they receive. If a rabbit is going to live outside then it must receive daily contact with an owner and preferably another rabbit. The rabbits should also be exercised in an outdoor run or the home as often as possible.

Both the hutch and run should be placed in a location where the rabbits are safe but protected from the sun, wet weather or frost. If a hutch is raised a few feet off the ground this will protect the rabbits from potential predators and makes the owner appear smaller when they try to handle them. Rabbits also make great indoor animals and can be litter trained as easily as a cat. However, the rabbit should be given its own indoor cage and time should be spent 'bunny-proofing' the home before the rabbit is let out as electrical cables, indoor plants and books can all be nibbled. If there are other domestic animals in the home they should be trained to accept the rabbit and not be left together unattended.

Within an outdoor hutch, rabbits should be kept on a bedding of straw or wood shavings, as these are easy to replace when the hutch becomes soiled. An indoor, litter-trained rabbit may sleep on a piece of carpet, a blanket or towel. A brand of non-clumping cat litter can be used within the rabbit's tray.

It is imperative that rabbits are cleaned out at least once a week in the winter but twice a week during the warm weather. Once the hutch or

indoor cage is empty, it should be sprayed with a good quality disinfectant and left to dry.

It is really important to keep flies to a minimum around the rabbit hutch during the warmer months. This is to prevent a rabbit getting fly strike, which occurs when flies lay their eggs around the rabbit's anus. The eggs hatch into maggots that burrow under the skin and this can lead to extreme illness, and even death, within a short space of time.

Some of the longer-haired breeds - such as the Cashmere Lop, Angora, Lionhead and Swiss Fox - as well as some crossbreeds will require daily grooming to remove loose hair and mats. Longhaired rabbits that are not cared for properly are at risk from fly strike as their faeces collect in the matted hair. Every rabbit should have its eyes, ears, nose, mouth, bottom and nails checked daily.

Techniques for handling a rabbit will vary according to the size of the rabbit but it is important that the rabbit feels safe whenever it is picked up. Never pick it up by the ears or the scruff of the neck. One hand should always take the majority of the rabbit's weight by being under the bottom.

A rabbit that is not happy to be handled may feel scared or may not have been handled enough as a youngster. This can take some time to overcome but is often helped by gradually introducing stroking and handling whilst feeding the rabbit a treat such as a piece of carrot.

Because indoor rabbits receive regular contact with their owner, they can often live alone but a rabbit living outside in a hutch should have the company of one or more rabbits.

This enables the rabbit to exhibit normal social behaviour, which is important to an animal that would live in a group of 2 to 14 individuals in the wild. Introducing a new rabbit to an existing rabbit is reasonably easy if it is done in a neutral area (i.e. not the rabbit's hutch or indoor cage). By placing the new rabbit in an animal basket or cage, the existing rabbit can get used to its presence. With time, and success, they can be let out to run around together. Whilst putting two males or two females together would prevent any unwanted pregnancies they are more likely to become competitive and show aggression to one another.

The best pairing is a castrated male and a spayed female. Keeping a guinea pig with a rabbit is not always advisable unless they have been reared together. Even then, the rabbit may start to bully and injure the guinea pig as they reach puberty.

© 2008 - The Rabbit Hutch Supplies Store