



## **Rabbits – Basic information, feeding and veterinary care!**

Rabbits make wonderful pets! They are generally friendly, inquisitive and cuddly creatures that really become part of the family. Unfortunately, there is a lot of misinformation about the care of rabbits available and many people are given the wrong advice leading to a range of problems. The information that follows covers our recommendations for basic husbandry, feeding and veterinary care. We hope that you will find it informative and enlightening, and hope that we can give you a few tips to keep your rabbit as healthy and happy for as long as possible.

### **Bunny Background Information**

Rabbits generally live for an average of 6-10 years. They are found in most countries around the world and are considered to be agricultural pests in many. They range greatly in size with their adult body weight varying between 1-8kg!



Rabbits are not actually rodents; instead they come from the order Lagomorpha and are more commonly known as lagomorphs. Lagomorphs are characterised by having 2 rows of upper incisor teeth.

Rabbits will start to become sexually active from around 3 months of age. Female rabbits (does) do not have a set oestrous cycle; instead they undergo a process called induced ovulation, in which the act of mating will bring on ovulation in a doe. An average rabbit litter size is between 4-12 babies and the average gestation period of a rabbit is between 28-32 days. Baby rabbits (kits or kittens) are born furless, with their eyes closed and will live in a nest made by the mother for about 3 weeks. Rabbit kittens should be weaned once they reach approximately 6 weeks of age.

### **Choosing a healthy rabbit**

Rabbits are available to buy as pets through many different shops, breeders and rescue organisations. It is important to make sure that you are purchasing your rabbit from a reputable source that takes good care of their animals. The hutches where their rabbits are kept should be in an appropriate area. They should be clean, dry and not overcrowded. There should be appropriate food and clean fresh water readily available.



Regardless of where you choose to purchase your rabbit from it is vital that you perform a basic exam of the rabbit before agreeing to buy. A healthy rabbit should be active, inquisitive but wary, have clear bright eyes, a healthy clean coat with no





patches of missing fur, pink and moist gums, clean and even teeth, clean feet without sores and have well-formed faeces.

It can require some skill to correctly identify the sex of a young rabbit, therefore we recommend buying from someone that has experience in determining the sex of young rabbits. If any problems are identified it may be best to consider having a rabbit vet check up before purchasing your rabbit.

### **General Keeping Recommendations:**

Rabbits are considered to be social animals and benefit from having a companion rabbit. There is little difference between bucks and does as pets, however, it is important to keep in mind that two adults who are unfamiliar to each other will tend to fight one another if introduced suddenly. De-sexing your pet rabbit will help to decrease the risk of any fighting or aggression.



Good husbandry is very important with rabbits, with many diseases being preventable with adequate care. Rabbits do well in a hutch or playpen that is either inside, or outside in an undercover area that is free from direct sunlight, rain and windy drafts. We recommend that each rabbit be provided with an absolute minimum floor space of approximately 1.2m x 1.2m, however, the more room the better. Newspaper can be used to line the bottom of the hutch, with a bedding substrate such as oaten hay on top of the newspaper. To avoid a cage becoming too dirty or too smelly, bedding should be changed at least weekly or earlier if it becomes soiled.



Ammonia is produced in rabbit urine and rabbits are sensitive to high ammonia levels in the air. Keeping a hutch clean and tidy helps to keep ammonia levels down and avoid potential problems. Waste from the hutch makes great compost for the garden.

Rabbits are sensitive to the heat and may experience heat exhaustion when temperatures are in excess of 28°C or they are forced to be in direct sunlight. In some cases, heat exhaustion can be very severe and can lead to death. It is important to keep your pet rabbit cool on hot days, especially if they are living outside the house. Make sure to provide plenty of water and vegetables on hot days and ensure that the hutch is not in full sun and has plenty of shade throughout the day. Frozen water bottles can be provided as a cool object for your rabbit to lay against on a hot day.

If living outdoors it is important that your rabbit is protected from mosquitos and





other insects. Mosquitos can carry the rabbit calicivirus and myxomatosis viruses and can potentially infect your pet rabbit. Biannual vaccinations are available and recommended for the rabbit calicivirus however there is no vaccine available in Australia for the rabbit myxomatosis virus. For this reason we recommend all outdoor hutches be fitted with fly screen to prevent mosquitos entering your pet rabbit's hutch.

### **What to feed my Rabbit?**

Many of the problems we see in rabbits are caused by feeding a poor diet, for this reason it is crucial that you ensure your rabbit is being fed appropriately.



A good rabbit diet will be high in fiber with moderate protein levels as well as provide some fats, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals. This can be achieved by providing your rabbit with ad lib good quality grass or grass hay (such as oaten or timothy hay). This should make up 70-80% of your rabbits diet. A small amount of a good quality chaff or pellet mix (around a tablespoon per day) can also be fed and a range of fresh leafy green vegetables and herbs should make up the rest of the diet. Fresh vegetables and herbs that are appropriate to feed include but are not limited to Asian greens, watercress, cabbage, broccoli, carrot, celery leaves, silver beat, parsley, mint and basil. Fruits should be used as treat items only.

Foods you should never feed your rabbit include but are not limited to iceberg lettuce, onion, garlic, potato, meat, tomato plants, rhubarb and jalapenos.

It is important that your pet rabbit has clean fresh water on offer at all times. This can be provided easily with a dripper bottle attached to the cage or a heavy bowl (so that they cannot knock it over). Many rabbits actually prefer bowls to drink from rather than dripper bottles.



### **What do I need to take my Rabbit to the Vet for?**

Rabbits require regular veterinary care and check-ups. The following is a summary of what we recommend.

#### *Bi-annual check up and vaccination*

We recommend biannual health checks for rabbits. At this time your rabbit will receive a thorough examination to help identify any problems that are occurring. Your rabbit's teeth will also be checked at this point and advice on prevention of dental disease can





be discussed. To prevent your rabbit contracting the potentially deadly calicivirus it is important that your rabbit receives regular vaccinations. The vaccination should be given around 8 weeks of age then again 4 weeks later for juveniles and every 6 months for adults. This can be performed at the same time as their health check-up and all our vaccinations include a full health check.

### *Sterilisation*

We strongly recommend neutering your rabbit for the following reasons:

- Prevents development of uterine cancer, a very common reproductive disease in female rabbits.
- Reducing the risk of fights occurring if you have more than one rabbit
- Decreasing aggression
- Decreasing urine spraying and unwanted reproductive behaviour (humping etc)
- Prevents unwanted pregnancies

### **Summary**

Rabbits make wonderful pets! By following the above advice you can help to reduce the chances of common problems occurring and ensure that your rabbit is receiving the care that it deserves. Unfortunately, even with the best care problems can still occur and if you are at all concerned about your rabbit please contact us to arrange an appointment.



Things to watch out for include but are not limited to the following:

- Lethargy
- Diarrhoea
- Weak hind legs
- Hair loss
- Not eating or not drinking
- Dull eye colour or coat
- Dirty teeth
- Scratching excessively
- Staining around their mouth
- Weight loss or dietary preference change
- Discharge from eyes and/or nostrils
- Lump formation
- Abnormal urine colour

