



Rabbits

You want your new pets to be happy – and so do we. So we've put together this guide to caring for rabbits. Handy if you already have rabbits or are thinking about getting them. The inquisitive nature of rabbits means they can make good pets for adults and older children, but they're not suitable for younger children. Whether you keep rabbits outside or indoors, they'll need plenty of room to exercise.

Rabbits are likely to live 8 – 12 years.

Rabbits are happiest living as a compatible neutered pair. They don't usually like living alone. A male and a female rabbit who are both neutered make a good twosome.

Rabbits, whether kept outdoors or indoors, need a lot of space, a big shelter and a spacious living area. The shelter is somewhere for your rabbits to rest, hide and feel safe. This area needs enough space for all your rabbits to rest together and spend time apart if they wish. Layer the shelter with newspaper, then plenty of shredded paper, hay or straw to make it cosy, comfortable and warm. During winter, plenty of extra hay and barley straw will help to insulate your rabbits' home.

The living area should be large enough for your rabbits to run, jump, explore, dig, graze, forage and play (for fun ideas see our 'Busy Bunnies' section). Your rabbits should ideally have access to the living area at all times and at least in the early morning, late afternoon and overnight, when they are most likely to graze and socialise.

Litter-training rabbits

Rabbits are clever little things and can be trained, over time, to use a litter tray. Not only will litter trays help keep their exercise area more hygienic, they make cleaning up after them much easier too. Your rabbits will naturally select an area of their home to use, which is where the litter tray should be placed. You should always use rabbit-friendly litter, such as hay or paper-based varieties.

Cleaning your rabbit's housing

You'll need to thoroughly clean their housing weekly using a pet-safe disinfectant; however, soiled bedding and litter will need removing daily. Rabbits should be removed from their home during cleaning until all areas are dry. Cleaning and changing bedding can upset rabbits by removing their own scent, so place some dry used litter and bedding back into their litter tray and home to make sure some familiar scent remains.

The right place

Whether outdoors or indoors, your rabbits' accommodation should be well-ventilated, draught-free, protected from extreme temperatures and secure enough to prevent rabbits from escaping and stop predators from getting in. Make your home rabbit-proof by covering electrical wiring, removing poisonous household plants and supervising your rabbits, or using a large rabbit playpen for unsupervised playtime. Outdoor homes should be weatherproof, with a raised floor to keep them dry and improve ventilation. Indoor shelters should have natural light and ventilation. Never put your rabbits in a used garage as the exhaust fumes from your car can be very dangerous. Rabbits need permanent access to an exercise area at all times. All areas must be large enough to allow rabbits to stand on their hind legs without their ears touching the roof, to turn around easily, to lie fully stretched out, to run and to take several hops in a row.

Time to eat

Feed your rabbits daily with a healthy, balanced, high-fibre diet. A good guide is 80 – 85% hay, 5% nuggets and 10 – 15% suitable fresh, washed leafy greens or special dried forage plant foods. Rabbits need a bundle of hay as big as they are every day.

Eating well

Hay and grass need to be constantly available as they help to wear down rabbit teeth, whilst specialist rabbit nuggets can provide extra nutrition. Hay feeders come in all shapes and sizes and can stop hay from getting soiled if placed off the ground.

Going green

our rabbits will love leafy greens, but only need a little. An outdoor run may allow them to munch on grass, but you should never feed them grass cuttings. Fruit and root veggies are high in sugar, so make these occasional treats.

Freshen up

Fresh water is a must for all animals, so should be checked twice and changed once daily. You could use a water bottle or a heavy-bottomed water bowl. In the summer, ensure water is kept free from algae. In winter weather, make sure any outdoor rabbits' water doesn't freeze.

Happy tummies

As our rabbits are fed on Pets at Home food, we recommend you do the same to prevent upset tummies from a change of diet. If you do want to change their food, do it slowly. Introduce new foods over 10 days or so and phase out their old food completely.

Take your time

Although it's hard, hold back your excitement and give your rabbits plenty of time to get to know both you and their new home. Being handled doesn't come naturally to rabbits as they are a prey species. You'll need lots of patience to build up a trusting relationship. The good news is, that means spending lots of quality time with your furry friends.

Let's get acquainted

Moving house can be stressful for small animals too. Your rabbits will be feeling twitchy, so give them time alone to settle in and explore their new surroundings. At first, you should spend time sitting quietly with your rabbits. Offer them healthy treats to make friends. Once they're familiar with you, you can try gently picking them up.

Handling your rabbits

It is important that you handle rabbits correctly when checking over and grooming. To pick up your rabbits, pop one hand under their chest and the other under their bottom. Stay close to the ground in case they hop away. Never pick up rabbits by their ears or the scruff of their neck, and always supervise children handling rabbits to make sure both rabbits and children are happy. Holding rabbits close to you will help them feel secure and prevent them from falling.

Busy bunnies

Making sure your rabbits have plenty to do will stop them from getting bored and stressed. This could be places to hide, platforms to jump up on and items to explore like tunnels, boxes, large plant pots and willow toys. Think about what rabbits get up to in the wild, and you'll have a good idea of what they'll enjoy.

Naturally fun

Rabbits love gnawing, and it's good for their teeth, so try adding chew toys, like natural willow balls. Rabbits are used to foraging for food too – hiding food in different places each day makes feeding time much more interesting for them.

Visit the vet

Register your new rabbits with the vet and take them along for a health check and micro-chipping. It's important to speak with your vet about protecting your rabbits by vaccinating against the highly contagious diseases myxomatosis, RHD1 and RHD2. Also, if your rabbits are not neutered, your vet can give you advice. Neutering helps to prevent uterine cancer, fighting

and spraying. Regardless of which sex rabbits you have, it is recommended that all are neutered. When travelling with your rabbits, keep them together in a secure plastic carrier and add something that smells familiar to them to help them relax.

Happy bunnies

Get to know your rabbit – check them over daily.

A healthy rabbit has:

- Bright eyes
- Dry nostrils
- Clean, shiny coat

An unhealthy rabbit may have:

- Running nose or eyes
- Cough
- Diarrhoea
- Lack of appetite
- Lethargy
- Aggressive behaviour

Avoiding flystrike

Flystrike can be fatal to rabbits. It's a condition caused by flies laying eggs on the rabbits, usually near their bottoms, and maggots hatching out of the skin. Check your rabbits' bottoms twice daily (especially in summer), and clean and dry them if necessary. If you suspect flystrike, contact your vet immediately.

Brush up on grooming

Grooming is a chance to check your rabbits' health and gets them used to being handled. Brush with a soft, delicate brush as their skin is sensitive. Rabbits will usually keep themselves clean. Do not give them a bath as this can be very stressful for them. Check your rabbits' teeth and nails regularly and talk to your vet if they look like they are getting too long or appear damaged.

Health and hygiene

All pets can carry diseases, some of which can pass to people. Always clean your hands with soap and water after handling or feeding your pets, or cleaning their home and equipment, and ensure children do the same. Always supervise children to ensure they do not put pets (or objects that pets have been in contact with) near their mouths. It is best to avoid kissing your pet.

Children under 5, pregnant women, the elderly and people with weakened immune systems should pay extra attention to hygiene when feeding, handling or cleaning out pets, their housing and accessories. Do not clean pet equipment with your normal washing-up.

Adopting rabbits

Caring for rabbits is a big responsibility. If you think you're ready, have researched their welfare needs and you are committed to caring for them for their whole lives, why not consider giving a home to one of the rescue rabbits at our 'Pets Foundation' centres, RSPCA animal centres across England and Wales and other animal charities.

The five welfare needs

A good home - Your rabbit needs a suitable place to live with a large shelter and an exercise area

A healthy diet - The right food for a healthy, balanced diet and fresh water on tap

Ways to stay happy - The chance to do what rabbits like to do with somewhere to dig and toys to play with

The right company - Being with, or away from, other animals

Help to be healthy - Protection against pain, injury, suffering and disease

Pets bring so much joy to children and adults alike that they soon become a much-loved part of your family. But ownership is a big responsibility. There can be unexpected vet bills, and not every pet can be insured. So, please think carefully before buying one, and make sure you can afford the potential costs involved. Not only is it the right thing to do, but under animal welfare law, you're legally obliged as an owner to give your pet any care they might need during their lifetime.

Are rabbits the right pet for you?

Is this pet right for me?

We know getting a new pet can be an exciting time, but before you commit, why not take some time to talk through these questions with your family...

Who are the rabbits for?

Rabbits are not suitable for young children, and even if older children look after them, remember an adult will be responsible for ensuring they are cared for properly every day.

Do I have enough space?

Rabbit housing will take up a large area of your house and/or garden, so make sure you are prepared to sacrifice this space. Rabbits can be messy and destructive if kept in the house.

Can I afford rabbits?

Rabbits are not cheap pets. Consider the costs of yearly vaccinations, insurance, microchipping, neutering, other veterinary fees, housing, holiday care, food, bedding and toys. Remember that you will need to consider the cost for two rabbits.

Do I have the time?

Don't forget to spend vital time with your rabbits every day as it is important to look after their welfare. It can also be a fun and positive way to bond with your rabbits. Feeding, cleaning and health-checking rabbits takes time. These are daily tasks which are vital for your pets' wellbeing.

Can I commit to looking after rabbits?

Rabbits are a long-term commitment and can live for 8 – 12 years. If you're getting rabbits for older children, have you thought about what will happen when they leave home? Also, think about any big changes coming up, how often you go away and who'll care for your rabbits if you do, as it's important to interact with pets every day. Rabbits can be wonderful pets, but they need wonderful owners too.

Happy rabbit checklist

- Outdoor/indoor rabbit housing consisting of a large shelter and large exercise area with another rabbit companion
- Ceramic food bowl, food-dispensing ball or puzzle feeder
- Water bottles or heavy-based water bowls
- Hay feeder
- Fresh, dust-free hay
- Pets at Home rabbit nuggets
- Litter tray and litter

- Toys such as chewing sticks and large cardboard tubes, boxes and platforms
- Bottle brush
- Pet-safe disinfectant
- Brush/comb
- A book on rabbits
- Insurance
- Local vet to register your rabbits with

Pets at Home

Visit your nearest pet care centre to pick up essentials for your rabbit, or you can shop online at www.petsathome.com.

The Pets Foundation

Changes do happen, and if you can no longer care for a pet you've bought from us, please get in touch so we can try to rehome them. Never abandon your pet or let them loose in the wild.