

CARING FOR YOUR PET RABBIT

Rabbits can make entertaining and affectionate pets and can be an interesting alternative or accompaniment to pet dogs and cats. They have an average lifespan of 6-8 years (maximum 15 years) and come in a range of breeds of varying sizes and coat types. Rabbits can make great indoor or outdoor pets.

Frequently handled from a young age rabbits can become quite tame and friendly and develop great bonds with their owners.

They have generally clean habits - they tend to deposit their urine and faeces in the same place each time - and can be readily trained to use a litter tray from a young age, meaning they can be given free range inside if desired (ask for our handout on litter-training your rabbit!).

There are some special considerations to be made with the housing, diet and health care of pet rabbits...

HOUSING

Rabbits housed in hutches should preferably be provided with a sheltered area for lying, sleeping and hiding in and an area for activity, long enough for a minimum of three hops (1.5-2m long for a New Zealand White rabbit) and tall enough for them to stand upright on their hind legs.

Make sure you clean your rabbit's hutch at least once a week to help prevent your rabbit from becoming sick and to control the smell of urine. Mosquito-proofing your hutch with fly wire is also recommended to help prevent myxomatosis.

As rabbits do not tolerate heat very well, shelter from direct sunlight and positioning of the hutch in a cool position is very important. Temperatures above 28 C can be life-threatening for a rabbit as they only sweat from their lips and can't pant effectively, relying on their ears to dissipate heat. Generally they seek shade and try to burrow to keep themselves cool.

A well enclosed exercise run is also recommended. Rabbits should ideally have at least four hours free roam exercise daily with at least some of this outside - being locked in a hutch all day is not a lot of fun and exercise is very important for stimulation of movement of the gastrointestinal tract.

For rabbits housed or exercised inside beware of possible hazards like electrical cords and poisonous plants your bunny may chew on. You can enrich your rabbit's environment by providing safe chew toys like untreated cardboard rolls and wooden bird toys.

If you have more than one rabbit, make sure you house males separately to avoid aggression problems and don't house males and females together unless they are desexed.

DIET

A correct diet plays a big role in helping prevent illness in your pet rabbit. A healthy diet for rabbits should be high in fibre, have moderate protein levels and be low in fat.

Grass hay (NOT STRAW) is the most important component of a rabbit's diet and should be fed in unlimited quantities. Good quality pasture hay meets a large portion of your rabbits nutritional needs (however amounts of lucerne hay should be limited as it may be too high in calcium for your adult rabbit). In addition it has the benefit of relieving boredom and exercising your rabbit's teeth through chewing. Rabbits have continuously growing teeth and they rely on chewing to keep their teeth worn to the correct length. Finally, a diet high in fibre promotes a healthy gut environment and stimulates good gut movement, helping to avoid problems with constipation.

A large and varied selection of FRESH vegetables is an equally important component of your rabbit's diet in providing nutrients and maintaining good gut health. Offer at least three different kinds of vegies including carrots

(with their tops), broccoli, dark leaf lettuces (not iceberg), spinach, tomato, chopped celery, and fresh herbs. A 2kg rabbit should be receiving up to 4 cups of fresh vegies each day in addition to their hay.

A good quality commercial rabbit pellet can provide vital vitamins and minerals that may be missing in a diet of just hay and fresh vegetables. However, very little is required to meet your rabbit's needs. An adult rabbit should be fed no more than 1/4 cup pellets per 2kg rabbit per day - larger quantities can lead to obesity and poor gut health with soft, poorly formed stools.

Fresh fruit should be considered as a treat and only given in small quantities in order to avoid intestinal upsets. Sugary and starchy treats like biscuits and cakes should be avoided altogether as they can alter the bacterial population in the gut and make your rabbit quite sick.

Rabbits are coprophagic which means they eat the soft faeces or cecotropes that are formed in the caecum. These droppings are eaten directly from the anus and are usually produced about 4 hours after eating. Cecotropes are an important way of getting maximum nutrition and vitamins from their food.

WATER

Rabbits have high water requirements - the daily intake of a 2kg rabbit is equivalent to that of a 10kg dog - so adequate supply of freshwater is important and should be provided in a sipper bottle as well as a solid ceramic bowl (rabbits tend to drink more water from a clean bowl than a sipper bottle). Ensure the water is changed daily and that the containers are cleaned thoroughly with hot water and detergent. Insufficient water consumption can lead to drying out of intestinal contents which can lead to constipation and blockages. Rabbits deprived of water quickly reduce their food intake to the point of eating nothing within 3 days (conversely, rabbits deprived of food increase their water intake to up to 6 1/2 times the normal volume within 3 days!).

DESEXING

Rabbits reach puberty at approximately 12 weeks of age and sexual maturity just as their growth phase begins to slow - this can be 4-6 months for the smaller breeds or 5-8 months for larger breeds. Male rabbits reach optimal sperm production about 40-70 days after reaching maturity.

Female rabbits have "rhythms" of sexual receptivity (periods where they will accept being mated by a male rabbit). When receptive to the male her vulva is often enlarged and a red-purple colour. These receptive periods occur at intervals of 4-6 days and the female rabbits are induced to ovulate when mated.

Male rabbits usually emit a jet of urine at their partner during courtship and can also use urine spraying to mark their territory. Desexing of male rabbits is strongly recommended to help curb these behaviours as well as to control aggression problems.

Pregnancies last approximately 30 days, and females can be receptive to a male rabbit again within days of giving birth. They have the potential to have several litters a year (thus the term "to breed like rabbits!"). Where male and female rabbits are housed together desexing of one or both rabbits is strongly recommended if baby rabbits (kits) are not desired!

Rabbits usually give birth in the morning and the female rabbit will pull fur from her dewlap (the fold of skin over her throat) to line the nest a few hours to days before giving birth. The kits are in the nest for about three weeks and healthy kits should "pop" like popcorn when you open the nest.

Mother rabbits mark their young with scent glands in their chin and groin regions and the females are very hostile to young smeared with scents that are not their own, usually killing them. The young are usually fed once a day in the mornings and then left for the rest of the day in the nest while the adults go out to feed.

Desexing, or spaying, is also recommended in female rabbits. Spaying can avoid unwanted pregnancies, help to control aggression problems and stop the development of a cancer of the uterus called adenocarcinoma. Older female rabbits (> 3 years old) have a high incidence (80%) of this tumour.

GENERAL HEALTH

Worms: Some worms that rabbits get do not cause any clinical illness, even when present in high numbers. Others can cause a loss of appetite and weight loss. Worms can be diagnosed via examination of your rabbit's faeces or by taking a tape preparation from around its anus. Rabbits can be safely wormed using piperazine syrup given orally in two doses 2 weeks apart.

Mites: Rabbits can have ear mites which tend to cause your rabbit to scratch at its ears and shake its head. An ear mite infestation can become generalised, also affecting your rabbit's legs and feet. Mites can be safely treated using a topical preparation available from your vet.

Infectious diseases: Two infectious diseases of concern to rabbits are the Myxomatosis virus and the Rabbit Calicivirus.

The myxo virus is carried by mosquitoes and the rabbit flea and unfortunately is fatal in all cases. Infected rabbits usually initially appear as lethargic with red eyes, swollen eyelids, watery ocular discharge and fever. This can progress to swelling and inflammation around the face and genital area. There is unfortunately no vaccine available but some protection can be provided for your pet by insect-proofing hutches and using regular flea control. We unfortunately still see outbreaks of the disease in the local area.

The Rabbit Calicivirus is also spread by insect vectors but can be contracted through contact with the excretions of infected rabbits (either by direct contact with an infected rabbit or with the virus carried on people or other animals). Infected rabbits show no specific clinical signs - usually they are reported as quiet and not eating or drinking, leading to death within 24 hours. The virus causes small blood clots to form in the small blood vessels of the lungs, leading to cardiac and respiratory failure. Most infected rabbits die from the Calicivirus but fortunately there is a vaccine available to protect your pet rabbit. This is given annually from 3 months of age. Although cases have not been specifically identified in the Heathmont area to date, it has been reported to have reached the outer areas of Melbourne, possibly including Mt Evelyn, so that we do advise vaccination to ensure protection.

Handling your rabbit: Care should be taken when handling your pet rabbit. Be sure to support your rabbit's hindquarters when you pick it up as they have delicate skeletons and strong muscles and can cause serious spinal damage if they kick out with their back legs. Never pick up your rabbit by the ears but rather by the scruff of its neck.

Overall, rabbits can make wonderful pets and often have quite distinct personalities. They can be a great introduction to caring for pets for children or a character-filled companion for those with limited space. For more information feel free to contact the clinic or the National All Breeds Rabbit Club, base in Heathmont, on 9725 1838 or e-mail jpawsey@warr.hotkey.net.au.