



## **Rabbit Care**

Rabbits are the third most popular pet and in the right circumstances and with thorough preparation, they make ideal companions. Many breeds of rabbit can live over 10 years and they do require dedication and commitment. They require as much time and money as a cat or dog and are very social animals. Putting them in a hutch at the bottom of the garden and checking them once a day is not enough for them!

### **Which breed of rabbit?**

Rabbits come in all sorts of shapes and sizes from the smallest Netherland Dwarf to the Flemish Giant. Each individual rabbit has a different personality so it is not easy to make generalisations about breeds. However, medium to large sized rabbits are usually better for children as they are easier to pet, are less excitable and more likely to command respect. Dwarf breeds can be very energetic and difficult for a child to handle. No matter what the breed, a rabbit needs to be regularly handled to become at ease with human interaction.

### **Companionship**

Rabbits are very sociable creatures and in the wild would live as a colony. Therefore domesticated rabbits should never be kept on their own; they are best kept in pairs. The best pairings tend to be a male and a female providing that both are neutered, otherwise your rabbit numbers will increase considerably and quickly! Two males also work providing they are bonded when young and both are neutered, otherwise they will fight. Two females which aren't neutered will likely always fight.

### **Housing**

The Rabbit Welfare Fund recommends a minimum hutch size of 6ft X 2ft X 2ft with an attached 8ft run as an absolute minimum for 2 rabbits. This size hutch is a minimum and should be extended depending on the size of the rabbit. The rabbit should be able to stand up on its hind legs without hitting its head on the roof. It should be able to lie down and stretch out fully and should be able to take at least 3 full sized hops along the cage. Giant rabbits need at least 6ft X 3ft X 3ft and preferably more.

Housing can be extended by purchasing tunnels and tubing which can interlink with other areas, creating more space and allowing the rabbit to exercise more natural behaviour. This will also reduce the risk of boredom.

It is also possible to litter tray train rabbits, making them suitable as house pets. However, their space requirement still apply.



## **Mental stimulation**

A rabbit shut in a hutch at the bottom of the garden will have no mental stimulation. Apart from companionship and good housing, it is important to include other forms of mental stimulation for your rabbit. In return they will be a much more rewarding pet to own. There are many different toys and articles available from Mole Valley Farmers to enrich your rabbit's life. A simple branch from an apple or willow tree will also be much appreciated!

## **Feeding**

A wild rabbit would live on grasses, plants, twigs and seeds. When feeding a domesticated rabbit it is essential to try and provide a diet which is a close to what they would get in the wild, this is especially important for their digestive system and dentition. The ideal rabbit diet consists mainly of fresh grass or hay with a couple of small handfuls of vegetables/fruit and a tiny portion of dried concentrate food. It is important that the concentrate food is in pellet form otherwise there is a high risk that the rabbit will selective feed, and will not get a balanced diet. It is also wise to avoid lawn clippings and lettuce as these can cause diarrhoea.

## **Veterinary care**

It is important to vaccinate your rabbit against Myxomatosis and Rabbit (Viral) Haemorrhagic Disease. Many rabbits remain unvaccinated and therefore vulnerable to disease that can not only cause great suffering but can also be fatal. Both 'Myxy' and RHD are found throughout the UK where both indoor and outdoor rabbits are at risk.

### **MYXOMATOSIS:**

- **Cause:** A virus.
- **Symptoms:** The first signs of infection are puffy, fluid filled swellings around the head and face. Within a few days, these swellings can become so severe that they can cause blindness. Eating and drinking becomes more difficult and death usually follows within 12 days.
- **Spread:** 'Myxy' is most commonly spread by the rabbit flea but it can also spread between rabbits in close contact.
- **Prevention:** This includes the use of a safe and effective anti-parasiticide alongside vaccinating your rabbit once yearly. We use Novibac MyxoRHD which is effective in controlling Myxomatosis and VHD (strain 1) but unfortunately offers little or no protection against the [new variant RHD](#) (RHDV2). A separate [vaccine](#) is required against this disease.

### **VIRAL/RABBIT HAEMORRHAGIC DISEASE (RHD/VHD):**

- **Cause:** A virus, with 2 different strains
- **Symptoms:** Most affected rabbits will die rapidly without showing any signs. In those that survive longer, the signs can be quite varied but may include fever and convulsions, progressing rapidly to a terminal coma with affected animals usually succumbing within 12-36 hours. In a number of cases a bloody discharge from the nose may be seen just before death.



- **Spread:** The virus is shed in the urine, droppings and respiratory secretions of affected animals and readily spreads to other rabbits either by direct contact, or indirectly by biting insects or via contaminated clothing, hutches, water and feed containers and other objects. VHD2 in particular is highly infectious and contagious.
- **Prevention:** At present you may or may not be aware that VHD has been a source of real concern for rabbit owners all over the UK. There has been the emergence of a new strain of VHD, it has been reported as close as Plymouth! As a result it is wise to reduce interaction with other rabbits outside of their home group, to protect against blood-sucking parasites and above all, it is *highly* recommended to vaccinate them against VHD2.

**Prevention:**

There is an annual vaccination for rabbits which protects against Myxomatosis and VHD 1+2

- Onset of immunity – 2 weeks
- Can be given from 5 weeks of age, but only lasts for 12 months if given 7 weeks or over
- Cost - £60.50 which includes a full health check