

How to Have a Happy Rabbit

First of all rescue one, please do not go to a breeder or a pet shop

Rabbits are possibly the most misunderstood companion animals that have ever been kept. Whilst they may be the third most popular pet they are also considered to be the most neglected. This guide is to help you make your rabbit happy and enrich their world so that they can enjoy a life worth living.

The Basics

Rabbits are naturally inquisitive, playful and social creatures and as carers we must do all we can to meet their complex needs. The behaviour of domestic rabbits is very similar to that of the ones we see in the wild. Understanding the behaviours of wild rabbits and knowing how they live can help us to understand and meet our companion rabbit's needs better.

Space

Rabbits value space and are greatly motivated to seek more space than is available in conventional housing and that traditional small housing definitely compromises rabbit welfare. Essentially, when it comes to housing rabbits there is no such thing as a 'minimum' amount of space.

Rabbits need to be kept in a space that allows them to exhibit their normal behaviours during the times when they are most active (dawn and dusk). For example, if you place a rabbit in a hutch with no permanent exercise space attached you are effectively denying them the opportunity to exhibit fundamental behaviours such as stretching, running and jumping.

Placing a rabbit in an exercise run - rather than having a run permanently attached to their accommodation, does not fully meet their needs either as you are dictating when they should enjoy the space provided. It is no different for a house rabbit. Containing them in an indoor cage, no matter how large, does not allow for them to exercise when they need to.

To meet a rabbit's need for exercise, they must be given the opportunity to exercise regularly every day. Our branch recommends that this is for a minimum of 5 hours a day, at times when they are most active.

There are many different indoor & outdoor housing options. To learn more see our 'Guide to Rabbit Accommodation'.

Enrichment

Enrichment is all about seeking ways in which to improve the quality of your companion animal's environment by providing a greater choice of activity and offering them some degree of control over their spatial and social surroundings.

Partitioned areas act to break up the environment in which your rabbit lives in and thereby makes it more interesting and complex. Partitioned areas also offers the additional benefit of allowing a pair or group of rabbits that are housed together a chance to escape from the others when they want to.

Providing shelters or hidey holes gives the rabbit somewhere to hide, which is something they instinctively need to do as ground dwelling, prey creatures. Shelters can be as simple as a large tunnel/tube, a pet carrier with the door removed or a cardboard box with entrance and exit holes cut out. Hiding places really help to reduce stress levels but it is essential to always provide one hiding place per rabbit so they can get away from one another if they choose. It is also important to ensure that where possible hiding places have two entrance/exit points, to prevent

dominant rabbits becoming territorial or aggressive to subordinates inside shelters. These refuges are in addition to the main shelter.

Platforms offer the opportunity for rabbits to express their natural instinct to observe the environment from a vantage point. It can also provide great weight bearing exercise for them, which in turn helps to build bone density. Ensure any platforms are made of non-slip material and are strong enough to withstand the weight of one or more rabbits jumping onto them. Platforms can easily be provided by an up turned banana box, up turned storage boxes, pet carriers or shelving. N.B. If your rabbit has recently been rescued from poor conditions where he/she was kept in a restricted environment, seek veterinary advice before introducing platforms to ensure your rabbit does not injure himself/herself.

Litter trays have so many benefits - they are a bed area, toilet area, digging place, container for hay, they make cleaning out your rabbit's space/home an easy job and also help to increase the 'life' of the accommodation it is placed in. Rabbits are naturally very clean animals and only tend to go to the toilet in one or two places. This means they can be easily trained to use a litter tray (assuming they are neutered and are not competing for territory with lots of other rabbits in their environment). Ideally, litter trays should be lined with newspaper/shredded paper/wood shavings/wood or paper based litter then covered with dust-free hay as rabbits like to eat whilst they toilet. The best design of litter tray are ones that have one low lip, for ease of access, along with some high sides such as a plastic dog bed or corner shaped litter trays, as rabbits tend to lift their bobs tails when they urinate therefore the high sides prevent spillage. It is important to provide one litter tray per rabbit.

Dig Boxes - digging is a fun activity for rabbits and you can create digging boxes to enable your rabbit to express this behaviour and save your carpet/garden from being dug up. Digging boxes can include litter trays as detailed above, or be made from open cardboard boxes with shredded paper placed inside or boxes with soil or child's play sand inside.

Toys - are a great way of providing additional enrichment to your rabbit's living space and should allow rabbits to perform normal behaviours, such as gnawing and chin marking on objects. However, toys tend to have a limited attraction time so it is important to rotate them regularly. Initially offer a variety of toys until you find out what your individual rabbit enjoys, as different rabbits enjoy different toys. Toys should allow rabbits to perform normal behaviours, such as gnawing, digging and chin marking on objects.

There are plenty of outlets that sell rabbit friendly toys but cheap/free ones are often just as effective such as:

- Solid plastic baby toys such as 'key rings', rattles and stacking cups (ensure there are no small parts that could be swallowed).
- Plastic plant pots
- Balls
- Paper sacks
- Telephone directories with the covers removed
- Toilet roll tubes stuffed with very small quantities of commercial rabbit food, vegetables and/or hay.
- Tunnels - ask your local carpet store to save you a card tube or you can buy tunnels from builder's merchants or purchase cat tunnels.
- Branches of pear, apple or willow trees that have not been sprayed with chemicals.
- Anything made from untreated natural materials such as seagrass coasters, coir mats, wicker baskets etc.

Dietary Enrichment

A wild rabbit spends 70% of their day above ground eating grass and coarse green matter. The activity of foraging and eating for so long keeps them both psychologically and physically healthy. To keep our domestic rabbits in optimum health we must mimic the diet of the wild rabbit as far as possible.

A rabbit's top front (incisor) teeth will grow approximately 3mm a week; that's over a centimetre a month! The best way to help rabbits to sufficiently wear their teeth down is by providing a suitable diet.

HAY YOU! - Did you know that a domestic rabbit needs to eat their own body size in hay every day? Hay and/or grass should make up the majority of your rabbit's daily diet with the remainder being made up with a variety of fresh, dark green, leafy vegetables such as spring greens and kale. If you cannot provide your rabbit with 3 different suitable vegetables a day then an egg cup full of good quality pellet food is acceptable but never any more. Fresh hay should be given daily and should never be seen as optional, it is essential to your rabbit's health and wellbeing.

Dried food does not promote teeth wear and can be detrimental to a rabbit's dental health as it does not allow the same grinding action as hay and coarse greens provide. Very many companion rabbits suffer with dental problems, much of which is as a result of being fed too much dried food and not enough hay.

If your rabbit won't eat hay consider the following:

- How palatable is the hay that you feed your rabbit? A lot of shop bought hay has been placed in a type of 'tumble dryer' to extract the dust, shrink wrapped and then sat in a warehouse for a long time, turned brown and lost its freshness and inevitably some of its nutritional value too. Hay should have a fresh sweet, grass-like smell with a rich variety of different green shades. The freshness and quality of the hay you provide your rabbit will really determine how much s/he is willing to eat. The most cost effective way of buying hay is in bales from your local livery or farm shop which can be stored for several weeks in a damp free environment. If your rabbit will not eat hay at first please persevere and make sure your rabbit is eating and passing droppings every day.

Foraging - Rabbits in the wild naturally spend hours searching for food to eat. Foraging for food is a great way of keeping your rabbit entertained and relieving their boredom. You can create foraging opportunities for your rabbit simply by taking part of their daily food ration and scattering it in their surroundings instead of placing it in front of them or in a food in a bowl. You can also hide commercial food, leafy greens or dried grasses in their bedding, in cardboard tubes stuffed with hay, under plant pots, in food balls* or in small card boxes. Feeding your rabbits from a bowl is too easy and it is much better to make them work for their favourite foods!

They love dandelion, grass (but not lawn mower clippings) and clover washed in a bucket and fed every other day when it is growing fresh in country fields or lanes - not polluted with car fumes though as it should be a healthy fresh green colour - again scatter round the run or enclosure let them find it!

A few tasty treats to try - small amounts of one or two of the foods at a time

Apple Broccoli Brussels sprouts Cabbage	Cucumber Kale Parsley Parsnip	Romaine lettuce (never use iceberg) Spring greens Swede Turnip
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*Food balls or puzzle balls are designed to provide mental stimulation and encourage rabbits to exhibit natural foraging behaviour. Please follow the toys safety tips to make sure they are fit for purpose and are easy clean.

Routine - Rabbits thrive on routine and become distressed when their feeding times and environment change greatly. A predictable routine of being fed in the morning and evening will suit them best and enable them to settle in their environment, which in turn will help to reduce stress. If rabbits are given regular access to an exercise area outside of their normal home, then predictable exercise times will also help reduce stress.

Social Enrichment

Keeping rabbits in pairs or groups is the most fundamental way of enriching their lives; rabbits are highly sociable creatures that greatly benefit from the company of each other. Friendly ('bonded') rabbits will interact with one another on a social basis spending hours sitting side-by-side, regularly grooming each other and will follow one another around playing and learning together. A strong pairing can also encourage protective qualities, a strong sense of loyalty and traits similar to mourning at times of the loss of a 'partner'. Bonding rabbits can only be successfully achieved if both/all the rabbits are neutered and introductions are done slowly and on neutral territory. The best match is a neutered male and neutered female. It is rare that a rabbit will shun all other rabbit company, but where this does happen the best way to overcome it is by introducing a baby rabbit. Young rabbits are sometimes deemed less threatening to the older, apprehensive rabbit because they have yet to sexually mature. If you choose to try this option, as with all bonding, close supervision is essential to keep baby safe from harm.

Sometimes it is not practical or desirable for there to be more than one rabbit in the home, in which case a rabbit should never be left to live alone outdoors. In the branch's opinion, keeping a single rabbit as house rabbit is the only acceptable option providing there are plenty of opportunities for the rabbit to interact with humans. To keep a rabbit outdoors alone, or shut away in a room for hours at a time, is to condemn him/her to a life of isolation and misery and in no way meets his/her welfare needs.

In many rescue centres every effort is made to ensure that single rabbits get plenty of 'non-contact' with other rabbits by offering the sight, sound and smell of their own kind. Whilst it is not a long term solution it can greatly increase the happiness of a rabbit whilst it awaits a new home and is worth bearing in mind if you have rabbits at home and one or more are not paired up. Rabbits must always be able to escape from other rabbits and get out of sight if they want to. They require a hiding place even if housed alone. To learn more about interacting with your rabbit, please contact us!

Whenever we hear people say 'rabbits are boring' our first thought is always that their rabbits are simply bored AND their owners have not given any thought to the rabbits well-being. By adopting many of the ideas explained in this document you will go a long way to ensuring your rabbits are never boring or bored!



Many thanks to our great friend Gilly.