



Rabbit Care: Life span: 7-10 years +

Rabbits are very social and affectionate animals that benefit from daily interaction with humans and other rabbits. We recommend that pet rabbits be kept indoors, due to the many dangers associated with climate, predators and mosquito-borne diseases (Calicivirus and Myxomatous). Rabbits are very intelligent and benefit from mental and physical stimulation – see our handout on enrichment for herbivores.

Nutrition is very important for rabbits as they can develop severe illness if their diet is not adequate. Being herbivores, they need a constant supply of hay and fiber to allow their gastrointestinal tract to keep moving and digesting food. Without hay, rabbits can develop dental disease and other serious diseases including gastrointestinal stasis. We recommend that rabbits are fed mostly grass hay, making up approximately 80% of diet, with the remaining 10-20% comprising of pellets, greens, and a small amount of treats.



Hay:

Adults should have free access to good quality grass hay (timothy, orchard grass, oat hay) at all times to promote healthy teeth and gastrointestinal function. Juveniles (less than 6 months) should have free access to good quality alfalfa hay at all times. Alfalfa hay is higher in calories, calcium and protein and so can also be used for rabbits that are pregnant or lactating. If fed to adults, it can cause problems with excessive body calcium levels and urinary tract disease.

Pellets:

Adults should have access to a limited amount of timothy hay pellets so that they are encouraged to consume more hay and to prevent obesity. Juvenile rabbits or those that are pregnant/lactating should have free access to an alfalfa-based pellet. All rabbits should be fed a pelleted diet that does not include any extra additives such as dried fruits, seeds, grains or nuts as these can be high in calories and lead to obesity and selective eating. Please consult with a veterinarian to determine the appropriate amount of pellets to feed your pet rabbit.



Greens:

Greens and vegetables can provide great enrichment and can help to maintain hydration, however can sometimes cause diarrhea if not introduced slowly and in small amounts. All rabbits should be provided with a salad mix which is approximately 1 packed cup per 1.0kg of body weight per day. We recommend feeding a variety of different dark leafy green vegetables- please see our greens handout for recommendations.



Treats:

Please limit treats to 1 heaping tablespoon per 1.0kg of body weight per day.

- Strawberries, blackberries, blueberries, raspberries, cranberries
- Apple, kiwi, peaches, cherries, pears, mango, melons, papaya
- Peppers, cucumber, carrots, turnips, beets, sweet potato

Please avoid commercial treats such as yoghurt drops and seed balls, which are high in fat and sugar. These can lead to obesity and gastrointestinal upset. Oxbow make a range of healthy treat options made from freeze dried fruit (strawberry and banana) as well as hay-based cookies.



Water:

Rabbits should have free access to water at all times. Water bottles need to be checked daily to make sure they are clean and working properly. Some rabbits prefer to drink from a bowl, so please make sure water is available in this form also. Make sure to choose a heavy, wide-based ceramic bowl to prevent spills. Mineral blocks and supplements are generally not required provided your pet rabbit is on an appropriate diet.

Housing:

- Minimum cage dimensions (bigger is better!)
 - Small breeds: 104cm x 55cm x 94cm (41"x22"x37")
 - Large breeds: 120cm x 60cm x 92cm (46.5"x24"x36.25")
- Should have solid floor area to avoid foot sores
 - Appropriate bedding options include recycled paper bedding, fleece, or area rugs. Avoid wood shavings, which contain respiratory and skin irritants and (in some cases) liver toxins.
- Avoid cages with solid walls to allow good ventilation
- Many rabbits also do well being free-range in a rabbit-proofed room or exercise pen.
- Please make sure rabbits are confined during the day when you are not at home.
- Bunny-proofing your home is very important as it is natural for rabbits to chew. This could lead to ingestion of furniture, rugs, drapes or electrocution from electrical cords. Cords must be hidden so that rabbits cannot reach them. By providing your rabbit enough attention and safe things to chew on to keep them distracted. Young rabbits (under a year) are more inclined to mischief and require more confinement and/or bunny-proofing than mature rabbits.

Desexing Rabbits:

- Spaying of female rabbits is recommended for a number of reasons – first to prevent unwanted pregnancy, but also to prevent cancer. Female rabbits over the age of 3-4 years have an 80% chance of developing uterine cancer, which can be prevented with early spaying before 6 months of age.
- Castration of males is optional, however can be beneficial for several reasons. Unneutered males (and some females) will often urine spray to mark their territory and may show signs of aggression, this is under hormonal control and can be reduced with castration.
- If you have more than one rabbit, keep your intact males separated from each other and from females. Non-neutered males will fight with each other whether there are females around or not.
- For rabbits older than 2 years of age a veterinary visit is recommended before scheduling surgery.



Litter box training:

- Start with a small area, pick a corner where the rabbit has already used, add a litter box to that corner.
- Recycled paper or pelleted litters should be used – avoid clay cat litter.
- Add a small amount of hay on top of the litter to entice the rabbit to sit in the box
- Reward pet when it uses the box, **NEVER** punish pet while in the litter box
- **REMEMBER:** Rabbits are not cats, and are not likely to use the litter box 100% of the time!

Exercise and enrichment:

- Rabbits need plenty of time (at least a few hours) out of the cage daily to provide exercise. Lack of exercise may contribute to the development numerous medical problems, including obesity, sore hocks, and bladder sludge.
- Make your rabbit work for their food by offering greens stuffed in a toilet paper roll or pellets in a cardboard egg carton. A cardboard box stuffed with hay makes an inexpensive play box.
- Provide lots of items for your rabbit to chew on, including chewing sticks (pesticide and dye free, of course!), and wicker or grass-based toys.
- Many rabbits enjoy supervised time outdoors. Be sure that your rabbit's outdoor time is always supervised and in an escape-proof area that is not treated with pesticides.
- Rabbits overheat easily, so limit outdoor time to dawn and dusk in the summer and ensure the enclosure is insect-proof to limit exposure to viruses

Rabbit Viruses and Vaccination in Australia

- Since rabbits were introduced into Australia in the 18th century, they adapted well to the natural environment and spread across the country. The government has since been trying to control the wild populations and subsequently introduced the disease Myxomatosis.
- Myxomatosis causes fatal inflammation and swelling of the eyes, ears and genitals of rabbits and in most cases is fatal. There is no current vaccine available for Myxomatosis in Australia.
- All pet rabbits in Australia should be vaccinated against Calicivirus. The virus causes haemorrhage, liver failure and acute death in infected rabbits. The virus is spread by direct contact and mosquitoes.
- If a rabbit has not been vaccinated before, they require two shots, 4 weeks apart.
- A booster vaccination is recommended every 6-12 months and can be discussed during health checks.

Schedule of veterinary care:

- Annual physical exam (every 6 months for older rabbits over the age of 5 years)
- Desexing at 3-6 months of age
- Nail trims as needed, if unable to trim at home
- **NOTE:** Rabbits that are not eating or producing normal faeces for more than 12 hours should be evaluated by a veterinarian as soon as possible.