

All pet owners have a responsibility to look after and care for their pets. If you're thinking about having rabbits as pets, learn as much as you can about how to care for them beforehand. You should take your lifestyle and household into account when deciding whether you can offer them a good home. This leaflet explains rabbits' basic needs so you can decide if they're right for you...

## Rabbits as pets

Rabbits are ideal pets for older children. They can appear nervous but rarely bite. They're inquisitive, friendly and like to come out and play regularly. Rabbits live for 6 - 8 years. Both males and females make excellent pets although neutered male rabbits are generally more laid back and friendlier.

## Do I like company?

Rabbits are very sociable and are happiest when they have another rabbit for company. However, they should be neutered to prevent breeding or fighting. Neutered rabbits tend to live happily together. The best pairing is usually a neutered male with a spayed female. Young rabbits may need to be housed separately until they're old enough to be neutered. A vet will usually spay a female rabbit when it's around 6 months old and will neuter a male rabbit when it's approximately 5 months old.

## Where do I like to live?

Rabbits can be kept outdoors all year round but ideally they should be brought into a shed or unused garage for the winter. Never put your rabbits in a used garage as the exhaust fumes from your car can be very dangerous. When choosing a home for your pets, buy the largest hutch you can afford. The hutch should have a separate living area and bedroom to allow your pets enough space to stand up on their hind legs or stretch out. If you're planning to

keep your rabbits outdoors, make sure the hutch is draught-free and fully weatherproof. A hutch cover provides extra protection from bad weather, helping to keep your pets warm and dry. The hutch must be raised off the ground to keep the floor dry and to protect your pets from predators such as cats and foxes. Cover the base of the hutch with woodshavings to form an absorbent layer. During winter use straw as it will help to insulate your rabbits' home. Fill the bedroom area with a cosy bedding material such as hay so your pets can snuggle up at night. Rabbits can be litter trained and using a litter tray is a hygienic option. Rabbit accessories such as rabbit igloos, large cardboard tubes and rabbit toys will allow your pets to explore and play. Take a look at Pets at Home's bunny villages to get some fun ideas.



Your rabbits will need space to exercise. Use a run in your garden with rocks, large terracotta plant pots, logs and toys for them to play amongst. The run can go straight onto the grass but remember to move it regularly to make sure that your rabbits are not trying to burrow out and to prevent overgrazing. It's important to allow your rabbits some time to run around every day – it'll keep them happy and in good shape too!

**We recommend that adult rabbits are NOT housed with guinea pigs – rabbits naturally frolic and kick which could injure guinea pigs.**

## House rabbits

Rabbits can live quite happily indoors and there are cages designed especially for indoor rabbits.

Rabbits usually use a particular area of their cage as a toilet so a corner litter tray is a great idea. To train your rabbit, simply place some soiled shavings in a litter tray. Wood litter pellets are ideal as they help to reduce odours and are highly absorbent. Neutering your pets will help to curb their natural tendencies to mark their territory and so may aid litter training. Rabbit-proofing your home is essential and a small pet playpen may be useful for playtime indoors. For further information on keeping a house rabbit pick up The Pets at Home guide to Rabbit Care in Winter or contact the Rabbit Welfare Association ([www.houserabbit.co.uk](http://www.houserabbit.co.uk)).

## Playtime

Rabbits can get very bored if they're left alone in their cage or hutch when you're not around. Stimulating natural behaviour by hiding treats around their cage and providing lots of gnawing toys can enhance their quality of life. Houses and hideaway holes allow them to snuggle up just as they would in the wild and wooden or willow toys are not only fun to play with, they help to grind their teeth down too.



## What do I like to eat?

There are two types of rabbit food, muesli and nuggets.

Muesli is very nutritional. However, if your rabbits pick out the bits of muesli they prefer, they'll miss out on essential nutrients. We call this 'selective feeding'.

In contrast, nuggets are extruded - all of the ingredients found in muesli are crushed and shaped into nuggets so your rabbits gain essential nutrients in every mouthful. Whilst in our care we feed Pets at Home nuggets to rabbits and recommend that you continue to do so when you take your new pets home. This will help to avoid stomach upsets caused by changing their food. If you do wish to change their diet, introduce new food slowly over a period of about 10 days, phasing out the old food completely. This gradual introduction will allow their digestive systems to become accustomed to the new food.

Rabbits need extra fibre in their diet to aid digestion. Hay is a natural long fibre and should always be available in your pets' home. It also helps to grind rabbits' teeth down, preventing them from growing too long and becoming painful.

Small quantities of washed fresh fruit and vegetables such as apples, broccoli, kale or freshly picked dandelions can be given to rabbits over 16 weeks old but remember to introduce new food gradually to avoid stomach upsets. Too much green food can

upset a young rabbit's stomach. Never give your pets any food which has been frozen.

For a full list of recommended foods for rabbits visit [petsathome.com](http://petsathome.com).

**A bottle snug is ideal for your rabbits' water bottle – it'll keep the bottle cool and algae free in the summer and prevent it from freezing in the winter!**



Heavy ceramic feeding bowls are great for rabbits as they're difficult to knock over and easy to clean. Give your pets fresh water daily.

## How to handle me

Your rabbits are likely to be nervous when you first take them home. It's best not to handle them for a few days. You should talk to them and after a few days gently stroke them. When your rabbits are used to this and are more comfortable and confident, you can pick them up. Use both hands, placing one hand under your rabbit's chest and the other hand under its bottom. Hold your pet close to you so that it feels secure and to prevent it from falling. Children should always be supervised and encouraged not to pick a rabbit up too often as they're very strong and struggle if they're nervous. Once they get to know you they'll love the attention and coming out to play.

**Never pick a rabbit up by its ears.**

## Keeping me clean

Replace soiled bedding or litter daily. The entire hutch or cage should be cleaned thoroughly once a week using a pet-safe disinfectant.

**Regularly check your rabbits' bottoms to make sure that they're clean. You should do this daily because dirt attracts flies and could cause an attack of flystrike which can be very serious.**