

Rabbit Basics

Domestic rabbits live 6-14 years and can breed from 4-10 months (breed dependent). Pregnancy lasts 31 days with anywhere from 1-12 kits. Kits are weaned by 4-6 weeks.

Rabbits are social creatures. Living with other rabbits is best for their social and general health. While you will hear of rabbits and guinea pigs living happily together, it is not ideal. Guinea pigs can catch diseases from rabbits and their dietary needs are different.

Learn what is normal for your rabbit: food intake, toileting habits, body condition, eyes, ears, mouth and feet. Rabbits are masters at hiding illness. The better you know your rabbit, the sooner you will notice illness and the more likely that a happy outcome will be achieved.

DIET, DIET, DIET !!

The health of your rabbit rests largely on its teeth and its "gut" (digestive system). Diet is the key feature to keeping these systems functioning normally.

Some breeds are unfortunately predisposed to dental problems eg Netherland Dwarf. It is important that a full dental examination be performed at all annual health checks and anytime your rabbit is sick.

Rabbits in the wild eat primarily grass. Grass is approximately 20-25% crude fibre, 15% crude protein and 2-3% crude fat. A healthy diet for your pet rabbit needs to meet these levels.

Unfortunately most commercial pellets are too low in fibre and too high in protein, carbohydrates and fat. "Museli" type mixes are usually worse and are NOT recommended.

Low fibre diets can cause reduced faecal size and output, predispose to increased weight and worsen dental disease. These changes are seen within 6 months of starting a poor quality diet, but are usually correctable.

Recommended diet: 80% Hay (approximately 1/8-1/6 of a hay biscuit per day)
1 cup (200g) fresh greens/vegetables daily
Can include one small piece of fruit (care with high sugar content)
max 50g/kg body weight of a HIGH FIBRE rabbit pellet (crude fibre >26%)

Greens can include: carrot tops, celery tops, fresh herbs, spinach/silverbeet, kale (not exhaustive list, ask the clinic staff if any queries).

Natural daylight is needed for activation of vitamin D.

Vaccination:

Vaccination against Rabbit Calici Virus is recommended as this disease is fatal.

For rabbits older than 12 weeks a single injection every 8-12 months with a full health check is recommended. For rabbits less than 12 weeks at their first vaccination, 2 injections 4 weeks apart are required, followed by the "yearly" booster.

Rabbits are at risk of Myxamatosis (also fatal), but the vaccination for this disease is not available in Australia.

Worming: Routine worming is not required in pet rabbits. Intestinal parasites are rarely a clinical problem. Treatment is readily available if you see worms in faeces (usually Pin worms).

Fleas: Treatment is recommended when evidence of fleas is found. Revolution (Selamectin) and Advantage (Imidacloprid) are safe "top spots" to use on rabbits. Frontline (Fipronil) is toxic and

potentially fatal - **do not use.**

Remember only 5% of the flea population is on your rabbit, so good environmental cleaning/control is always needed for eradication of fleas.

Desexing is recommended for both males and females at 4-6 months old. This can prevent disease (eg uterine carcinoma) and behavioural problems (eg spraying, fighting) - remember both does and bucks are territorial!

Microchipping is recommended. Even the best loved rabbits can go exploring. A mini chip (yes, they are now smaller than a grain of rice!) is implanted under the skin at the back of the neck. While this can be done at any time, most often it is performed at the time of desexing, when your rabbit is under anaesthetic. The chip carries a 15 digit number which is linked with your details in a central registry - giving the best chance that you and your rabbit will be re-united.

Grooming: Some breeds require regular grooming because of fur type. This will help prevent issues with "fur balls". Nails may need to be trimmed occasionally.

Housing: Mosquito proofing the hutch is worthwhile - for prevention of infection with the Rabbit Calici and Myxomatosis Viruses.

Rabbits are generally hardy creatures, but they do need to be protected from extremes of temperature/weather. Remember in the wild a rabbit would be protected down a burrow.

Commercial hutches are often too small for long term housing, so all rabbits should have the opportunity to exercise outside the hutch a few hours a day - they need playtime and handling. In South Australia pay particular care in summer - heat stroke is common. When temperatures are over 26 degrees C. care needs to be taken, for temperatures over 29 degrees C housing indoors is recommended. Tunnels deep underground can mimic burrows for those rabbits in escape proof outside runs. The hutch should always be shaded and out of direct sunlight. Misting systems can assist cooling, but be sure they are not making your rabbit wet.

Hutches should be raised off the ground to avoid flooding and impede other animals from gaining entry.