



Wellington
Rabbit Rescue

Care Guide



www.wellingtonrabbitrescue.org

Diet

Rabbits need unlimited access to hay and/or grass. They are fibrevores; which means first and foremost, they need fiber. Therefore the most essential part of any rabbit's diet is both grass and hay.



Water... Rabbits need access to clean drinking water 24/7. Depending on your rabbit's preference, this can be in a heavy bowl (they tend to tip over plastic bowls), a licker bottle, or both. You should clean out and change your rabbit's water container regularly.

Hay... provides long-strand fiber, which is essential for a rabbit's gut. It also helps to keep a rabbit's teeth in order. Rabbit's teeth grow continuously throughout their life and they need to eat fibrous foods in order to keep their teeth worn down. Rabbits that don't eat enough hay develop painful spurs on their teeth, which if left untreated will make it painful for them to eat. They may even stop eating which in a rabbit is fatal.



Rabbits will naturally graze all day long so they should always have access to fresh, good quality hay. You can purchase hay from local farm stores such as Rural Trading Post & Sharpe's. You can also find a variety of hay at pet stores.

Grass... the fibrous content of grass keeps a Rabbit's gut mobile. The action of them nibbling on grass is also good for their teeth.

Please be aware however that rabbits cannot eat lawn mower clippings! The mower causes the grass clippings to ferment very quickly and this can be very dangerous for a rabbit. You can pick handfuls of fresh grass for your rabbits if you don't have any that they can graze on. Just be sure to check it has not been sprayed first.

Vegetables... Rabbits love green vegetables and a good guide is about a cup of fresh vegetables per day. Leafy greens are best such as Kale, Broccoli including broccoli stalks & leaves, Silver-beet, Celery, Spinach and herbs such as Parsley and Coriander. Rabbits also love carrot tops, the carrot itself should be fed in moderation as it has a high sugar content so too much is not good for your rabbit.

Please be aware any vegetables that are high in water content are not great for your rabbit, iceberg lettuce in particular should be avoided. If you do feed your rabbit lettuce ensure it's a small amount and your rabbit has access to plenty of fibrous food such as hay.



Fruit... Rabbits naturally have a very sweet tooth and fruit is a great way to give them a treat. About 1-2 tablespoons of fruit a day is recommended. Rabbits love bananas, apples, grapes, mango and pears. Dried fruits are also great treats, for example raisins, dried pineapple, dried apricots and dates etc. Please remove the pips from all fruit where possible.

Rabbit Pellets... The general rule with rabbit food is that the plainer it is – the better. Where possible avoid muesli style food and opt for a plain high fiber pellet.

The best rabbit pellet brands available in NZ are Oxbow & Burgess Excel. If you are buying from a farm store then the best brand is NRM.

Forage... Several common garden plants are safe for rabbits to eat and they are generally good at knowing what they can and can't eat. However, please only feed plants that you know are not poisonous to your rabbit and ensure they have not been sprayed with weed-killer or pesticides. As with any new food, add it in gradually to your rabbits diet and keep an eye out for any changes in your rabbit's poo, especially diarrhea. (If your rabbit has diarrhea contact a rabbit savvy vet immediately).



Branches are great for rabbits to chew on and again this is good for their teeth. Try Willow or Taupata and fruit branches such as Apple. Flax is also good for them to chew on and will keep them occupied.

Caecotrophs... As part of their normal diet rabbits eat a particular kind of their own droppings called Caecotrophs. They do this as they cannot extract all the vital fiber and nutrients they need first time around. Unlike the normal dry droppings you often see caecotrophs are shiny, sticky and smelly droppings. Rabbits eat these directly from the anus so you shouldn't see them often. To see them occasionally is normal but regularly may mean your rabbit's diet is either too rich or they are having problems eating them possibly due to obesity, large dewlaps, dental problems etc. You should contact a rabbit savvy vet if you have any concerns.

Housing

When it comes to housing your rabbit the general rule is the more space the better. Rabbits need lots of exercise!

WRR has a minimum space requirement of 1m wide x 1m high x 2m long – this should include a warm dry ‘bed’ space of at least 61cm x 61cm

Most hutches available on the market are too small to be the only place for rabbits to live in.

They can easily be adapted by permanently attaching runs or pens. Pens can be made more secure by adding a roof. If you have a secure property then you could use something as simple as bird netting or chicken mesh over the top. If you feel predators could be an issue you should use weldmesh.

Areas of your home and garden can also be made rabbit proof so your rabbits can live free range. Feel free to message us for suggestions and advice!

Rabbits are very tidy creatures and can be litter trained. You can use a cat litter tray (I find this works best) or the corner litter trays designed for rabbits. You can use many different things for litter – the best type of litter is recycled newspaper litter. A good idea is to line the tray with newspaper, put down the recycled newspaper litter and then put straw over top.



Litter training is SUPER easy! Every time they poop just scoop it up and place it in the litter tray until your bunny gets the idea. If you find they aren't choosing to pee in their litter tray then if you place a tissue in their pee and then place it under the straw in the litter tray this will help them know where to go.



If you are planning on having indoor – litter trained rabbits then you need to “rabbit proof” your house. Rabbits love to chew cords – whether they are plugged in or not... to save your bunny getting shocked and your wallet in replacing cords we recommend having any cords tied up and well out of bunny reach!

Enrichment

Rabbits are highly intelligent and are often misunderstood due to their quiet nature. They need lots of stimulation to prevent them from getting bored. These don't need to be expensive toys.



A great bunny toy is a simple cardboard box, just cut two door holes in it and they will happily explore it and enjoy “renovating” (chewing their own holes)! A cardboard tube/empty toilet roll or egg box stuffed with hay and a few raisins makes a great toy, as do fabric tunnels. They also love digging and jumping so fill a box with soil or try giving them a sandpit.

Socialisation/Rabbit Bonding

Rabbits are very social animals and thrive with company of their own kind. In the wild they live in large colonies and this social side of their nature is still very evident in the domestic rabbit. At WRR we don't believe any rabbit should live alone. This is partly for its mental health; they need interaction and a friend for company, but also for their physical wellbeing. Rabbits are very clean animals and will 'groom' each other. This is also a sign of affection between rabbits.



Rabbits are however also very territorial. You can't simply put two rabbits together and expect them to get along. As a general rule the best pairing for rabbits is a desexed male and a desexed female, but this is not always the case. Some same sex pairs can get along great, as can groups of three, four or more rabbits - given the right conditions.

Young rabbits housed together will often begin to fight when they reach sexual maturity and if the fighting leads to biting or any skin injury they need to be separated until they are desexed.



WRR help to 'bond' rabbits. Bonding involves introducing rabbits on neutral territory; where neither rabbit has been before, for short periods of time depending on how they get along. For more information on bonding two rabbits please contact us.

The Rabbit Human Relationship

Rabbits are prey animals and contrary to popular belief, most do not like being picked up. This is because to a rabbit, being picked up off the ground is similar to being caught by a predator.

Rabbits do however like receiving attention with all four legs on the ground. They love having their heads and ears stroked and many like their cheeks rubbed.



You do however often need to earn a rabbit's trust. A good way to let your rabbit know you aren't a threat or a predator is just to spend time with it. Get down to their level and sit or lie down in their pen, allow them to come to you in their own time. This may take some time but it's worth being patient. Rabbits love treats like dried fruit so try hand feeding them one or two morsels when you sit with them. They will soon start to associate you with treats and before too long will run up to you and allow you to pat them.



Desexing

ALL rabbits should be desexed and vaccinated. Here are a few good reasons why:

- There are too many unwanted rabbits in animal shelters all over the New Zealand Unfortunately a huge number of healthy rabbits are euthanised each day because there are not enough homes or spaces in shelters for them. Desexing your rabbit means preventing more animals suffering this fate. (WRR never euthanises rabbits unless they are too sick or injured to survive and it is in their best interest. This decision is never taken lightly.)
- Rabbits breed like rabbits and they are very virile; a female rabbit can have up to 10 babies per litter and can get pregnant again as soon as she has given birth. It is very important to desex your female rabbit even if she is not housed with a male rabbit. For example - we have many cases where unspeyed female rabbits become pregnant to wild male rabbits. Wild rabbits can break into a female rabbit's cage or if the female is feeling very hormonal she may even break or dig her way out!
- Desexing your rabbit also prevents health problems in the future... female rabbits for example are extremely prone to uterine cancer, which is fatal.
- Rabbits are very hormonal creatures and being entire (not desexed) can cause them mental stress. They are likely to pace, spray, dig and just be destructive in general. Desexing your rabbit helps relax their temperament. It also helps prevent female rabbits from having 'false pregnancies' which are very, very common. A false pregnancy can drive a rabbit to pull out her fur, make a nest and even produce milk which is all very stressful on a her body. This can happen even if you have NO male rabbits around.
- Desexed rabbits are also a lot easier to bond. They are less territorial and enjoy the company of other rabbits without the hormonal stress.

Rabbit Health

Rabbits are quite fragile creatures and as prey animals they hide pain and injury well. They do this so as not to draw attention to themselves (from potential predators). This means that often by the time your rabbit shows outward signs of illness it could be very serious!

Here are some common problems rabbits in New Zealand face:

Gut Stasis:

If your rabbit stops eating or appears to be off its food it is imperative you keep a very close eye on them. If a rabbit stops eating his gut may go into stasis and this can be fatal within just 24hrs. If you put down their favourite food and they turn their nose up at it take them straight to a rabbit savvy vet.

RHD/Calici Virus:

Rabbit calicivirus disease (RCD), also known as haemorrhagic viral disease (RHVD), is a disease that kills rabbits. It was illegally introduced into New Zealand in 1997. Thirty to eighty percent of animals exposed to the virus will develop the disease. Almost 100% of infected animals will die.

It is unsure how the virus is transmitted, but at this stage it is assumed that rabbits acquire this highly infectious virus by breathing it in, ingestion, direct contact or through infected urine or faeces. Insects are also able to carry the virus, so isolation from other rabbits is not enough to prevent this nasty disease affecting your rabbit.

The incubation period is 1-3 days and research has shown that rabbits younger than 8 weeks of age are usually resistant to the virus. There are three forms of the disease which, in severe cases, causes bleeding in the lungs, the windpipe, liver, spleen, kidneys and the heart.

1. Death without any other signs.
2. Depression, anorexia, difficulty breathing, shaking, and death within one to two days. Other signs may include a foamy or bloody discharge from the nose or anus, nervous signs or rapid death. Rabbits may appear to recover, then die several days later
3. Mild form – depression, anorexia followed by recovery. These animals become immune from re-infection
Rabbits can be vaccinated from 6 weeks old, at which age they will require boosters every 3 to 4 weeks until they are 3 months old. If vaccination commences at 2.5-3 months old, they will not require another booster that year. In order to maintain immunity, it is recommended that all vaccinated rabbits receive an annual booster.

Coccidiosis:

Coccidiosis is a widespread parasitic infection that can cause disease in rabbits. Coccidiosis is caused by a type of parasite called a coccidian protozoa.

Rabbits are more susceptible to the disease for the first 8-9 months of their lives. Older rabbits appear to be more resistant to infections, but a rabbit immune compromised, or weakened in some way may also be susceptible.

Almost all rabbits carry small numbers of coccidia as a normal part of their gastrointestinal flora. In some cases these parasite can overwhelm the immune system and build up to high numbers. This can cause illness and in severe cases, death.

Signs your rabbit may have coccidiosis:

- Diarrhoea (or runny poos)
- Weight loss
- Lack of appetite
- Lethargy

If your rabbit is showing any of the above signs please take him/her to your local rabbit savvy vet immediately.

Treatment:

There are many different products available to treat coccidia. We have found baycox to be the most effective treatment in cases we have seen. Your local vet can prescribe this for you.

Due to the life cycle of the parasite Baycox should be given at a rate of 2.5 to 5mg/kg for two consecutive days, then wait five days and repeat the treatment.

Almost all animal species have their own species specific form of coccidia parasite. Rabbit coccidia only affects rabbits, and is not infectious for humans or other non-rabbit pets.

Dental Health:

A rabbit's teeth grow continuously throughout its life and it is vital they eat high fibre food to wear these down. Sometimes a rabbit's teeth can grow and develop spurs which cut into their mouth, this can be very painful and deter them from eating.



A very common dental problem for rabbits is malocclusion. This means their teeth do not meet, therefore do not wear down the way they should. If your rabbit is exhibiting any of the following signs please get your rabbit to a vet ASAP:

- Weepy Eyes
- Lack of appetite
- Wet chin/Dribbling
- -Swelling around the face/mouth

Flystrike:

Rabbits with runny poos/diarrhoea or injuries (infected wounds in particular) can be prone to flystrike, particularly in summer. Flystrike occurs when the fly lays its eggs in the poo around the rabbit's bottom or near/in the any wounds your rabbit might have. The eggs then hatch into maggots which burrow into and eat the skin of the rabbit causing severe pain and often death from shock. Flystrike rarely if ever affects healthy rabbits. It is VERY important to keep your rabbit clean if it has diarrhoea. You can do this by clipping the rabbit's fur around its bottom and keeping the area clean.

Please DO NOT bath your rabbit and check with your rabbit savvy vet if you wish to use shampoo to clean your rabbit's bottom. We only use Whoop Itch & Ouch shampoo on rabbits here at WRR and only when the situation is dire! Rabbits cannot regulate their body temperature well and when bathing a rabbit the water penetrates right through the fur; unlike rain, which runs off their fur and doesn't penetrate right through to the skin. It is important to check your rabbit for flystrike in the summer months. If your rabbit has any signs of flystrike take it straight to a rabbit savvy vet!

Heatstroke:

Rabbits do not cope well in the heat and need a helping hand in the summer months. Always ensure your rabbit has shade and plenty of water. A good idea is to wet towels and hang them as shade cloths - the moisture in the towels helps to cool the air. A good trick is to freeze water bottles and then place them in your rabbit's hutch or run for them to lie next to on hot days, you can wrap the bottle in a tea towel.

A fun way to keep your rabbit cool & give him enrichment at the same time is to freeze pieces of fresh fruit with water in ice cube trays which are like popsicles when popped out and given to your bunny a few at a time.

If your rabbit is indoors ensure the curtains are pulled to give them shade and you can use a fan to keep the air flowing and cool.

Pastuerella/Rabbit Snuffles:

All rabbits carry a bacteria in their respiratory tract called Pastuerella. Some rabbits are more susceptible to the symptoms of this bacteria and some only develop symptoms in times of stress or ill health.

The pastuerella bacteria can cause your rabbit to have cold like symptoms. Some rabbits get over this quite quickly on their own, but sometimes it can develop quickly into a more serious or recurring illness of the respiratory tract. If you notice your rabbit is sneezing, look out for it producing any mucus from the nose or eyes. Rabbits often use their front paws to wipe their faces so if you see mucus on their front feet this is a tell-tale sign.



Take your bunny to see a rabbit savvy vet if your rabbit has mucus, appears lethargic or as with all other rabbit illnesses – if he stops eating/pooing/peeing!

Fleas/Mites:

Rabbit's aren't as prone to getting fleas as a dog or cat, but mites are very common particularly during the Spring/Summer months. You can treat your rabbit with Revolution Small Animal for both Fleas and Mites. Please talk to your vet about the dose rate before giving your rabbit Revolution as some smaller breeds of rabbit and Guinea Pig may not need an entire pipette.

Thank You





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Thank you !