

An overview to having a pet bunny

Rabbits among other small furry pets are seen regularly in veterinary clinics and there are some key things to know about them. Some main things for owners to note are good nutrition including dental requirements, neutering, space and companionship. Rabbits are herbivorous animals that consume large quantities of plant life (including recycling some of their faeces- see below) and it is vital that their owners provide specific things in their diets. Young rabbits are born with a set of teeth that are shed between three and five weeks of age and replaced with a permanent set of 28 teeth. A rabbit's teeth grow continually throughout its life and can only be worn down by long periods of time spent grinding and chewing tough vegetation. As they are naturally preyed upon by a range of predators such as hawks, foxes and cats, rabbit owners need to take this into consideration for their enclosures and housing. They are a member of the order lagomorpha, the family leporidae. There are various breeds of rabbits with a lifespan ranging from 8-12 years. They are naturally very social and inquisitive animals and finding out more about their behaviour tells us that domestic rabbits are more complex than people realise. Owners need to replicate their natural diet and allow for their natural behaviours to keep them healthy and happy.

Handling

As they are naturally a target for predators, rabbits can become stressed quite quickly and it is paramount to handle them correctly to minimise injuries. If they struggle, they may suffer serious injury to their vertebral column, resulting in permanent posterior paralysis. Also severe stress and fear can also cause cardiac arrest. For these reasons rabbits should be handled carefully and quietly.

They should be held with one hand under the chest, gripping each foreleg separately with thumb and two fingers. With the other hand, the hindquarters should be supported as they are lifted clear of the ground. They should be held close to the handler's chest when being carried, and should be put down on a firm non slip surface. They should be grasped by the scruff of the neck if irritable to help reduce the potential for injury.

Behaviour and Housing

Rabbits can be quite territorial and need sufficient space so this needs to be considered when housing as they may exhibit undesirable behaviours. Housing of rabbits in small groups should be encouraged so that the animals can engage in social activities, have enough resources and space to forage (roam around and find food). The smaller the space, means less resources and that more fighting is likely to occur. Rabbits can also demonstrate a number of sexually-driven behaviours including aggression, urine spraying, mounting and nesting. Both male and female rabbits can spray urine as a means of marking their territory.

Rabbits naturally converse with each other subtly using smell, body posture and some discreet sounds. Odorous secretions are deposited within droppings, urine and through chin rubs. As a general rule, unneutered rabbits should not be housed together as this will lead to reproduction and also behavioural problems. The exception to this rule is if females have been reared together, they can co exist easily if they have enough space. Male rabbits should not generally be housed together as they are likely to fight.

If the pet rabbit is housed outdoors all year round, the hutch must be well insulated to prevent extremes of cold in the winter. It should also be dry, draught free and provide suitable shade in the summer. There are various designs of hutch available but they must allow the rabbit to comfortably stretch in all directions, stand on hind legs and perform three continuous hops. Bedding should include newspaper, straw and wood shavings with a separate nest box containing clean dry hay or straw.

If housed indoors, rabbits can be trained to use litter trays with some guidance. This can be accomplished by sweeping up any stray faecal pellets, putting them into the litter box and then immediately putting the rabbit in the box as well. The same can be done for urine. They can also be trained to come when called.

Reproduction- rabbits will breed ... well like rabbits!!!

Main Reproduction Points	
Breeding Season	From January to August (peaks in Spring)
Sexual Maturity	Female (Doe)- three & a half months of age Male (Buck)- four months (testicles descend)
Ovulation	Reflex ovulation- ovulates in response to mating
Gestation	Approx thirty days, average litter size is five
Maternity	The mother rabbit visits her babies for just five minutes every 20hours, this form of parenting is unique to rabbits.
Weaning	Weaned at approx four weeks (they emerge at around three wks old and wean six days later)

Neutering

Routine neutering has three main benefits-

- A) Allows pairs to be kept together,
- B) Reduces aggression and territorial behaviour
- C) Reduction of certain reproductive related diseases (Neoplasias of the female reproductive tract are very common)

Post neutering male rabbits should only be considered sterile after a period of four to six weeks and they should be kept away from entire females during this time.

Nutrition and why do Rabbits eat their droppings?

As rabbits naturally forage for hours in the wild, this should be encouraged in pet rabbits to keep them mentally stimulated and healthy.

Most importantly, rabbits must have a good supply of freshly pulled or commercially dried grass (not cut grass as it rapidly ferments) for fibre, gut health and to promote good dental health by wearing down the teeth. Also they need lesser quantities of hay (certain types) for these reasons. Owners should also provide mixed low sugar vegetables such as broccoli (avoid large amounts of carrots), veg tops etc. Commercial pellet diets are available but should not be fed exclusively, it has been shown that rabbits become bored, suffer from poor gut function and overgrown teeth (may lead to anorexia and oral problems). Also they can become obese and not exhibit their normal behaviours.

As mentioned before, rabbits recycle some of their droppings (called caecotrophy) and they utilise hindgut fermentation, both in order to extract nutrients. Once a rabbit eats, it passes into the digestive system where it is sterilised and split into large and small particles. Then the large particles are passed out of the body as dry, hard droppings. The small particles are composed in a large sac between the large and small intestine called the caecum. Here they are fermented with bacteria and processed into soft, smelly droppings, known as caecotrophs. As these pass out of the rabbit's anus, the rabbit reaches round and consumes them (known as refection) and they are digested again to produce the harder droppings that we are used to finding in hutches. Hindgut fermentation is where indigestible fibre stimulates the motility of the gastrointestinal tract, protects against enteritis and also provides dental wear.

Other things to note

Rabbits should be routinely vaccinated and treated with anti parasitic medications. Myxomatosis and viral haemorrhagic disease are two viral diseases affecting the European rabbit. These are almost invariably fatal, spread by insect vector or fomites and can be prevented via vaccination. They should be treated regularly for external and internal parasites.

They are adaptable pets that can happily co-exist with other species with some exceptions like guinea pig, which they will bully to keep the food. As a rule, as long as they are provided with proper nutrition, housing, space to roam and find food - they are an easy pet to have.