

## **RABBIT FACT SHEET**

Congratulations on being a proud new rabbit owner! Here is some important information that will keep your pet happy and healthy.

### **GENERAL CARE**

A rabbit can make a lovely pet provided he has the right care and environment. Rabbits are social creatures and need companionship, either of people or other rabbits. The more handling, attention and stimulation your rabbit has, the happier and healthier he will be and the more enjoyment you will have with him. To prevent him from getting bored, your rabbit will need **at least 4 hours of exercise** a day running around in the house, garden or spacious run.

Your rabbit's hutch where he sleeps must be at least '3 hops' long and should be tall enough for him to sit upright without his ears brushing the roof. Current RSPCA recommendations are **at least** 60 inches long by 24 inches wide and 42 inches tall. In the summer make sure your rabbit has access to shade as he may get heat stroke and in the winter, provide adequate shelter. Ideal bedding materials include straw and wood shavings. It's also handy to have a hay rack to keep the hay for eating, clean.

If you keep your rabbit indoors you will need to prevent access to electrical wires and other chewable items, to house train your rabbit and prevent escape. It will be good for your rabbit to get out in the fresh air and natural sunlight as well.

Remember rabbits naturally chew and dig so provide edible sticks from hazel, willow and fruit trees. A sand pit or designated digging area in the garden would be perfect!

### **FEEDING**

Rabbits need a high fibre diet mimicking their diet in the wild; grass. The bulk of your rabbit's diet (even young rabbits from 8 weeks of age) should be fed hay and grass, supplemented with a small amount of pellet food and green leafy vegetables.

The pellet food you offer your rabbit should be grass-based where all the pellets look the same. We **do not** recommend you feed your rabbit a mix or muesli as this can cause serious health problems for your rabbit, most commonly dental disease. **Offer your rabbit 15-25g of pellets per kilo per day.** Your rabbit should then be eating about the same amount of hay as his body per day with a few vegetables. Suitable vegetables include broccoli, cabbage, chicory, chard, celery tops, carrot tops, parsley, watercress, and curly kale.

If your rabbit already eats a cereal mix food they you may have noticed that he picks out the tastiest pieces and leaves the boring bits. This is like a child picking out the smarties and leaving the salad! If you are changing the food to a grass based pellet mix then make sure you change the food over slowly over 2 weeks so that your rabbit's digestion has time to re-adjust. Avoid fruit, sugary foods, bread and biscuits, seeds and corn as they often lead to gastrointestinal upsets. Offer water at all times from a sipper bottle.

### **VACCINATION**

We strongly recommend vaccination against myxomatosis and viral haemorrhagic disease (VHD or RHD). They are both potentially fatal diseases that are relatively common in the UK. We recommend that your rabbit have an annual injection with the

combined VHD and myxomatosis vaccination. When your rabbit comes for the vaccinations, he will receive a full health examination as well.

### **PARASITE CONTROL**

Fly strike is common in warm weather when flies lay their eggs around the rabbits bottom and the maggots hatch out and burrow into the rabbit's skin. The condition is extremely unpleasant for the rabbit and is often fatal if left untreated for more than 24 hours. Prevention involves good hygiene of your rabbit to prevent a soiled bottom. In warm weather you will need clean out the hutch at least every other day and check your rabbit's bottom every single day. We can recommend some topical preparations to repel the flies from laying their eggs.

Fleas and mites can also be problematic especially as they are potentially vectors for myxomatosis. We can recommend safe, effective and licensed products that you can use. Another parasite causing disease in rabbits in the UK is *E.cuniculi*. It is a protozoon and is prevalent in more than 50% of rabbits in the UK. Symptoms of disease usually include a head tilt, loss of balance, blindness and kidney failure. To help reduce the chance of your rabbit becoming affected by this parasite we recommend using a paste called Panacur at least twice a year.

### **REPRODUCTION**

You will soon be overrun with rabbits if you keep an entire female and entire male. To prevent this you can get your rabbit neutered but it is also worth considering neutering your rabbit even if he is on his own or in a same sex pair. This is because males can become aggressive and territorial when they reach sexual maturity and spray urine around the house or even on the owner as they become more territorial and amorous! Females can also become aggressive due to their hormones in the spring and summer months. Uterine cancer and infection are also relatively common in female rabbits and this can be prevented by neutering.

Neutering is carried out under a general anaesthetic from 6 months of age. Most rabbits recover quickly and go home the same day. Pain relief can be dispensed to help with recovery.

### **SIGNS THAT YOUR RABBIT MIGHT BE ILL**

In the wild rabbits are preyed upon by other animals such as foxes. This means that they have developed ways of hiding when they are ill in order to avoid being eaten by a predator. It is therefore important to check your rabbit daily. If you are concerned then call the veterinary hospital for advice or an appointment. Look out for the following:

- Not eating as much as normal
- Not producing as many faeces as normal
- Soft faeces stuck to bottom
- Wet chin
- Wet face from discharge from eyes
- Sneezing or nasal discharge (this is often a sign of serious respiratory disease)
- Not being quite as active as normal or change in temperament
- Dandruff and hair loss