

# Pet Rabbit Welfare Guidance



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Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at  
The Scottish Government  
St Andrew's House  
Edinburgh  
EH1 3DG

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## Introduction

Rabbits are the most popular pet mammals after dogs and cats in the UK. Owning and caring for pet rabbits can be great fun and very rewarding, but it is also a big responsibility and a long-term caring and financial commitment. Your rabbits rely on you; it is your responsibility to make sure that their needs are met, whatever the circumstances.

Animal owners and keepers must take reasonable steps to ensure the welfare of animals for which they are responsible. Section 24 of the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 states that:

“A person commits an offence if the person does not take such steps as are reasonable in the circumstances to ensure that the needs of an animal for which the person is responsible are met to the extent required by good practice”.

The Act then specifies that the animal's needs for which the owner or keeper is responsible, include the animal's:

- need for a suitable environment,
- need for a suitable diet,
- need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns,
- need (if any) to be housed with, or apart from, other animals,
- need to be protected from suffering, injury and disease.

People are responsible for animals if they own them or manage their care, on a permanent or temporary basis. When a person under 16 years of age is responsible for an animal, the person responsible for that young person, for example their parent or guardian, is also responsible for their animal. This ensures that an adult can normally be identified as the person responsible for an animal.

Responsibility for an animal includes having an understanding of the specific health and welfare needs of the animal and having the appropriate knowledge and skills to care for the animal properly. Those responsible for animals will also have to be aware of and comply with the legislation, and to know when to seek qualified advice and help. If an owner leaves an animal in the charge of another person, responsibility for the animal transfers to that person. It is up to the owner to ensure that the person is competent and has the necessary authority to act in an emergency.

This guidance provides more detailed information about the needs of pet rabbits and how to meet these needs in accordance with good practice. Your own rabbits might have additional needs that must be met to ensure their welfare. If

you are unsure, if you are worried about the health or behaviour of your rabbits, or you would like advice about their husbandry or future health care programme, you should consult a veterinary surgeon or veterinary nurse competent and experienced in rabbit health and treatments. Your local Scottish SPCA, pet care specialist or animal welfare organisation will also be able to advise you on how best to meet your rabbits' husbandry needs. Some of the main organisations are listed in Appendix 2.

This guidance applies to pet rabbits and is intended to support pet rabbit owners and others responsible for the care of pet rabbits. The guidance is not intended to apply to pet shops as they are subject to a separate licensing and inspection regime, although it may nevertheless provide useful advice.



## **Section 1: Natural characteristics of rabbits**

Domestic rabbits are descended from the wild European rabbit. Understanding the environment, diet and behaviour of this wild species helps us provide a suitable diet and environment for domestic rabbits, thus helping to ensure their good welfare. Human-habituated domestic rabbits are of course far more adaptable, and can become used to situations which may cause stress to wild rabbits, so it is not necessary to provide an environment which exactly replicates that experienced by their wild counterparts. Nevertheless, understanding the needs of wild rabbits is a very useful starting point.

Wild European rabbits generally live underground. They are crepuscular, so are most active above ground in the early morning and evening, around dawn and dusk. They will also come above ground at night, but will spend most of the daylight hours underground. Rabbits therefore spend much of their time in dark or low light conditions and do not like bright lights, although they will also graze and bask in the sun if they are in areas safe from predators.

Rabbits are prey animals whose predators include foxes, dogs, cats, birds of prey and stoats. This affects how and what they eat, how they communicate with each other and how they spend their time.

Rabbits eat grasses and other plants, and their teeth and digestive system are designed for poor quality, high fibre food. They slice the grass stems with their specially shaped, sharp, front teeth and grind them with their back teeth. Their teeth grow continuously throughout their lives. Rabbits spend about 70% of the time they are awake eating, although most of their food is eaten between 5pm and midnight.

Rabbits are social creatures, living in stable groups of between 2 and 10 individuals. A close bond forms between individuals within a group and this helps the rabbits feel safe and secure and gives them the best chance of survival, although during the breeding season rabbits can show aggression towards each other. Amongst the adults of a group there is a hierarchy, in which the dominant rabbits get first choice of food, burrow and who should groom them.

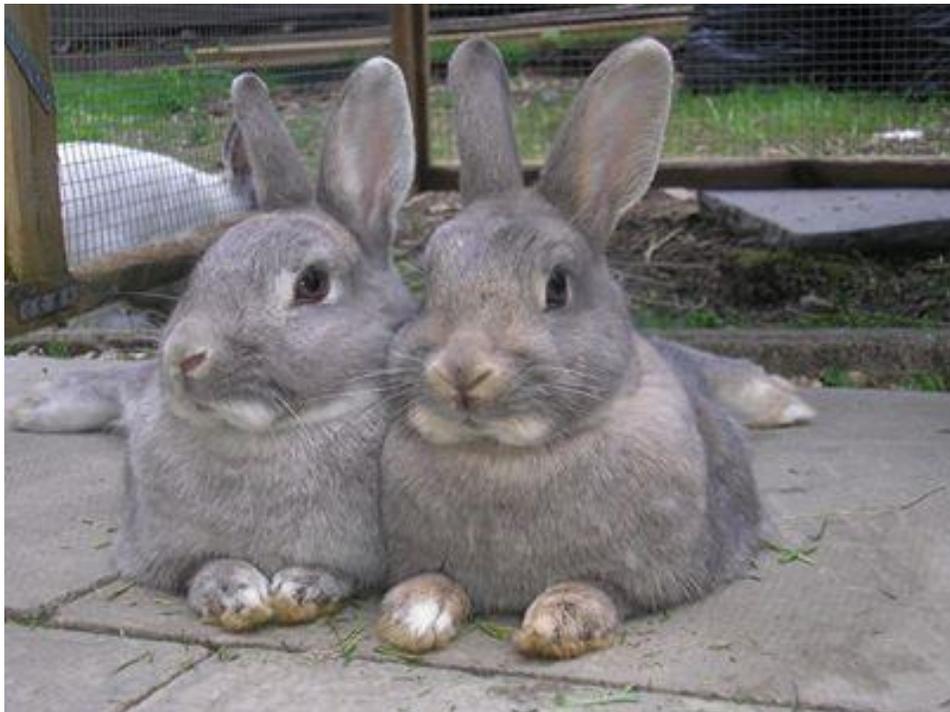
Rabbits show very subtle changes in behaviour to indicate when they are in pain or are frightened. Rabbits make a whole variety of sounds including grunts, growls, purrs and, if extremely frightened, they will scream. They also have a range of body, face and ear postures that can indicate rank, pleasure, pain, fear or aggression.

Scent is an important means of communication for rabbits. Rabbits rub their chin over objects and other rabbits, but this can also include those who handle them. Chin marking denotes territory and also acts as a means of identifying members

of the rabbit's own group. It acts both to reassure rabbits that they are amongst friends, on home territory, and to deter intruders.

Rabbits also deposit scent with their faeces. Rabbits pass hard, small droppings as they move around, especially when feeding. Rabbits will scrape the ground near the boundaries of their territory and deposit a few droppings there as markers. Rabbits also deposit scent through spraying urine. Rabbits spray each other and, sometimes, people or other animals they live with.

Being a prey species, rabbits are very easily frightened and can remember what has frightened them. In the wild, rabbits can be attacked by birds of prey and by other animals on and under the ground. Thus rabbits are very alert to potential danger. Their first response is to freeze, but if the danger comes too close then they will run away to a safe hiding place. They will also thump the ground with their back legs to let other rabbits know of the potential danger. Only if there is no escape route do they tend to fight. Rabbits can be scared by many things, including sudden movements, loud and sudden noises, bright lights and strong smells.



## Summary rabbit facts:

- ❖ Male rabbits are called bucks, females are called does and baby rabbits are called kits
- ❖ Rabbits are herbivores (plant eaters), eating mostly high fibre grass and other plants
- ❖ Rabbits have continuously growing teeth
- ❖ Rabbits produce soft droppings (caecotrophs) which they normally eat directly from their bottoms and then produce hard waste droppings
- ❖ Rabbits are crepuscular, preferring the low light conditions of dawn and dusk
- ❖ Rabbits are a prey species, and have many predators e.g. birds of prey, foxes, dogs and cats
- ❖ Rabbits are social, so need the company of other rabbits
- ❖ Rabbits are active, so need lots of space to perform all their natural behaviours
- ❖ Rabbits are curious, so need mental stimulation
- ❖ Rabbits are fearful, so need places to hide
- ❖ Rabbits in captivity have a life expectancy of 8 to 12 years (can be longer)
- ❖ Adult rabbits will weigh 1 to 10 kg (this varies with breed and sex)
- ❖ A rabbit's pregnancy lasts for 28 to 34 days
- ❖ The size of a rabbit's litter depends on the breed of the rabbit. Generally smaller dwarf breeds will have litters of 2-4, medium breeds will have litters of 4-6, and larger breeds will have litters of 6-10. An average litter is 5-8.
- ❖ Rabbits wean from their mother at 42 to 56 days old
- ❖ Rabbits reach puberty at 4-5 months in small breeds and 5-8 months in large breeds.
- ❖ Neutering age for rabbits is usually >3 months for males and >4 months for females. However early neutering at 8-10 weeks of age can be carried out where needed, for example in the case of mixed gender pairs where there is a risk of early puberty in small breeds.

## **Section 2: Thinking about keeping rabbits**

If you are considering rabbits as pets, there is a lot to think about. You should do your research first, and make sure you know how to care for rabbits and that you can meet their welfare needs. This guidance provides lots of information to help you to decide whether or not rabbits are the right pet for you. It is also a good idea to have a pre-purchase consultation with your local vet, who will be happy to discuss with you how best to meet the welfare needs of rabbits, and whether or not keeping rabbits will suit your lifestyle. The organisations listed at the end of the guidance can also provide information to help you make up your mind.

If you decide to go ahead and give some pet rabbits a home, you'll want to make sure that the rabbits you choose are right for you. Whether you decide to buy rabbits from a reputable pet shop or breeder, or adopt them from an animal welfare organisation or rescue centre, the staff should be able to provide you with information about the rabbits available, to help you make up your mind.

Importantly, you should be satisfied that the rabbits you are thinking of getting are old enough to be rehomed – at least 8 weeks old. Spend some time observing the rabbits. They should be bright and alert and should not appear stressed or lethargic. Remember, though, that rabbits can be shy, especially with new people. They should have clean eyes, noses, coats and bottoms. It is good if you are able to see them in the environment in which they have been living, as this will allow you to see the conditions in which they have been reared, and the general health of any other rabbits there.

You should find out as much as you can about the rabbits, such as whether they have been vaccinated or had any medical treatment, what they have been fed, whether they have any particular likes or dislikes, and whether they are used to being handled. If possible, you should find out what breed they are so you know how big they will be when fully grown and what they require in relation to diet, husbandry and environment. Some breeds are particularly predisposed to certain health conditions, so it is useful to find out about this before opting for a particular breed. Being able to see the parents, at least the mother, is helpful in this regard.

Every animal is different and as you get to know your pets, you will recognise their own characteristics. It is important that you do take this time to get to know them, so that you are able to notice any changes in their behaviour which might indicate that they are bored, distressed, injured, ill, or in pain, or are not having their needs met in some other way.

### Section 3: The need for a suitable environment



Pet rabbits should have access to appropriate places and opportunities to do all of the following:

- rest and sleep in comfort
- eat and drink undisturbed
- toilet in an appropriate place
- exercise freely and explore safely
- hide when afraid or feeling insecure
- shelter from the weather including wind, cold, draughts, rain and sun
- keep warm in nesting materials
- interact with (and escape from) companions
- play, including chewing and gnawing if they want to
- mark their scent on solid objects
- look out for companions or danger
- dig and forage

This section offers guidance on providing your rabbits with a suitable living shelter and exercise area to meet these needs. The space you need depends on

the size of your rabbits – and the size they will become. The minimum total area required for 2 average-sized rabbits is 10ft (3m) x 6ft (180cm) x 3ft (90cm) high.

### **Living shelter**

Your rabbits' shelter should have at least two compartments: a darkened sheltered area for sleeping and another for eating / relaxing. House rabbits should be provided with a secure area where they can feel safe, sleep, toilet and be kept in when unsupervised.

The shelter should be large enough to allow all your rabbits to perform their natural behaviours simultaneously, in order to avoid competition for, and monopolisation of, resources. As a minimum, the shelter should:

- be large enough to allow all your rabbits to lie down and stretch out comfortably in all directions, at the same time,
- be high enough for them to stand up on their back legs without their ears touching the top, and
- be long enough so that they can move around, feed and drink. As a guide, all your rabbits should be able to take a minimum of three big hops from one end to another, at the same time.

The minimum recommended size for a suitable shelter for 2 small or medium breed rabbits is 6ft x 2ft x 2ft (180cm x 60cm x 60cm). The size you need will depend on the size of your rabbits. For example, a giant rabbit's hop can be 4.5ft in length, so accommodation for rabbits of this size will have to be much bigger, and medium-sized rabbits are likely to need a height of at least 75cm to allow them to stand up fully without their ears touching the top.

If your rabbits live outside, their shelter should be sturdy, easy to clean, waterproof, raised off the floor, and positioned out of the prevailing weather, sun and draughts. A shed or playhouse fitted with a cat flap or other device which allows access to a secure run is ideal accommodation. A large hutch with access to a run is a good alternative, although it should be noted that many of the hutches currently on the market provide considerably less space than is recommended for 2 rabbits. If a hutch is used, it should be weatherproof, but can also be brought into a shed, building or outhouse for the winter months to provide protection from bad weather.

### **Substrate and Bedding**

Your rabbits' shelter should be lined with appropriate material (substrate) to catch urine, faeces, food and water spills, etc. This substrate layer helps keep the shelter hygienic, but it should also be comfortable underfoot. Suitable materials include dust-free, non-toxic wood shavings or shredded paper. Sawdust is not suitable as it can be very dusty and may cause respiratory problems.

Your rabbits will spend a significant amount of time on this substrate, so choosing the right product can greatly improve their comfort and quality of life.

Bedding, such as dust-free bedding hay or soft straw, should be also provided to give your rabbits extra insulation, somewhere to hide, and added comfort. It should be clean and dry and should also be safe for your rabbits to eat if they choose to (although their main food should be higher quality feeding hay).



### **Exercise Area – the run**

Rabbits are very active animals and need to be able to exercise appropriately, i.e. hop, run and play. Jumping on and off raised areas, such as platforms or hay bales, helps rabbits maintain their bone and muscle strength. If your rabbits do not have enough exercise, their bones can become weak and break, they can develop muscle wastage and can become obese. Lack of exercise can also have a detrimental impact on your rabbits' mental health.

Your rabbits should have access to a safe, enclosed exercise area where they can run and jump. Ideally, this should be attached to the living shelter, so that your rabbits have constant access to it. However, if this is not possible, they should have access to their exercise area every day. If their living area is moved

indoors in winter, it is important that the exercise area is still available at least daily.

The run should be large enough to allow your rabbits to stretch upwards to full height without their ears touching the roof, and to run, as opposed to just hop at least 3 times. The minimum recommended size for a run for 2 rabbits is 8ft x 6ft and 3ft high (240cm x 180cm by 90cm high), but again the size of your rabbits should be considered and a larger run provided for bigger rabbits.

The run should contain raised areas for jumping on to and preferably should be outside with access to a grassy area. It should be escape-proof to the extent that your rabbits cannot burrow under the sides of their run. It should also be secure enough to prevent access by rats, or predators such as dogs, cats, foxes and birds of prey. There must be sufficient shelter for all the rabbits to be protected from the sun, wind and rain.

### **Indoors and outdoors: hiding places**

Rabbits should be given hiding places where they can run to if they feel afraid, stressed, unwell, or simply want to be on their own for a while. Suitable hiding places include cardboard or wooden boxes, sections of wide-bore drain pipes and shelves that your rabbits can get under.

It is useful if there are a range of options for hiding places, but there should always be at least the same number of hiding places, of an appropriate size, as there are rabbits. If you have different sized rabbits, it is good idea to provide a hiding place that only the smaller rabbit can enter. Likewise, it is vital to make sure that there are two access points in each hiding place, to prevent one rabbit trapping another in there, or barring their entry. It is also a good idea to provide one hiding place large enough for all the rabbits to use together, if they want to.

To ensure rabbits feel safe in their hiding place, it is important that they are never trapped in them or removed from them.

### **Ventilation and temperature**

It is important to protect your rabbits from bad weather, draughts, extremes of temperature and direct sunlight. In addition to the advice given below, particular care may need to be taken if your rabbit is sick or elderly, as they may have trouble controlling their body temperature. Your vet will be able to advise you about this.

When housed outdoors, extra bedding material should be provided for added warmth on cold nights, and a cover, blanket or piece of old carpet could offer added insulation to the shelter. However, poor ventilation is a common cause of respiratory disease. If a hutch cover or blanket is used then it is essential that

ventilation is maintained by an air inlet at a level above the rabbits' ears and air outlet just under the eaves of the hutch roof in both compartments. Specialist pet heat discs can also provide a good source of heat in very cold weather but make sure they are securely covered in a material that is thick enough to prevent your rabbits coming into direct contact and suffering from any burns. Specialist heat lamps can also be fixed to the outside of the shelter in very cold conditions, but extreme care must be taken when using heat sources in close proximity to hay and straw. Hot water bottles are not a good idea, as rabbits can chew through them and get burnt.

It is also important to ensure that your rabbits do not get over-heated. Sheds can become very hot if they are in direct sunlight, even in winter, so it is important to consider this when deciding where to put your rabbits' shelter. The position of the shelter and exercise area should take into account the movement of the sun and ensure that there is no time at which rabbits are left without the ability to escape the heat of the sun.

When housed indoors, the rabbits' living area should be placed in a cool room, away from radiators, out of direct sunlight and draughts.

If your rabbits' environment becomes very warm and it is not possible to move them into a cooler place, cool pads or frozen water bottles can be used to prevent overheating, or you can put ceramic tiles on the base of the shelter as a cool surface for your rabbits to lie on. If they do become overheated, you can dampen down your rabbits' ears with a cold wet flannel.

Sudden changes in temperature are not good for rabbits. It is therefore not a good idea for your house rabbits to go out into an uninsulated outdoor run on the coldest winter days, having spent the night in a centrally-heated house. Likewise, it is not a good idea to bring your outdoor rabbits in to a centrally-heated house on cold winter nights, and put them back outside during the day. If you get your rabbits in winter, and they have previously been kept in a warm, indoor environment, it is important not to put them into an outdoor living area unless you are sure that it is properly insulated and that you have provided heat sources.

## **Hygiene**

The rabbits' environment must be kept safe, clean and hygienic. A toilet area should be provided, filled with shredded paper, or dust-free, non-toxic, wood shavings or hay. Alternatively, you can put some of these materials, or other non-clumping, not-toxic and non-expanding paper-based litter, into a litter tray. Rabbits tend to choose one area to use as a toilet, which makes them fairly easy to litter train.

Every day you should remove and replace any wet or dirty litter or bedding, clean toilet areas, remove any uneaten fresh foods and thoroughly clean water and food containers. The entire shelter should be cleaned and disinfected at least once a week, renewing all bedding and shavings. It is important that a non-toxic, rabbit-friendly disinfectant is used, and that the accommodation is completely dry before the rabbits are returned to it. As cleaning can be stressful for rabbits, it is recommended that after cleaning, a small amount of used, but unsoiled, bedding and nesting materials be returned to the shelter. This will smell familiar to the rabbits and can help reduce the stress that has been caused by the cleaning process.

Exercise areas should be regularly cleaned. The run can also be moved onto a new area, but each area should be cleaned after use.

### **Protection from hazards**

Your rabbits' environment should be safe, secure and free from hazards. Their shelter and exercise area should be checked regularly for damage, and repaired or replaced when necessary. All areas to which your rabbits have access should be 'rabbit-proofed', and it is important to contact your vet promptly if you think your rabbits have come into contact with anything which could harm them.

If your rabbits have access to your garden, it is important that they are kept away from any areas where you have been using herbicides, pesticides, or other poisons such as slug pellets. Likewise, you should not allow your rabbits access to flower beds or other areas that are likely to contain poisonous plants. Further information about plants which might be poisonous to your rabbits can be found on the RWF website:

<http://rabbitwelfare.co.uk/rabbit-diet/poisonous-plants-rabbits/>

Indoors, you should ensure that any houseplants which might be poisonous to rabbits are kept out of reach, and that their petals are not able to drop into an area to which your rabbits have access. Wires and cables should be covered or kept out of reach, and you should ensure that your rabbit has no access to any potentially dangerous areas (e.g. oven).

### **Travel**

If you need to transport your rabbits anywhere, they should travel in a secure pet carrier of adequate size with good ventilation. The carrier should be secured firmly in place with a seat belt, or wedged in the footwell of the car, making sure there is adequate ventilation. You should also ensure that the carrier is not placed where your rabbits will become too hot, such as in direct sunlight or next to the car's heating vents. Do not put the carrier in the enclosed boot of a car.

The pet carrier should be cleaned after each use, and disinfected if necessary, especially if it is used for more than one pet.

Rabbits which live together should be transported together in order to maintain their bond, and to avoid any problems associated with reintroduction.

Rabbits need to eat continuously due to the way their digestive system works, so it is recommended that rabbits are provided with enough hay in their carrier to last the journey and should have constant access to fresh, clean water. Water should be provided in a way the rabbits are used to (eg bottle or bowl), and the water supply should be checked regularly. It is also important to ensure that the rabbits are continuing to eat normally after a journey.

Rabbits should never be left unattended in a car or other vehicle. The temperature in a parked vehicle can become very high extremely quickly and cause heat stroke or even death.

### **When you are away**

You have a responsibility to make sure that your rabbits are cared for while you are away. As many rabbits prefer to stay in a familiar environment, you may wish to make suitable arrangements with a neighbour or pet sitter, but you should make sure that they can meet all of your rabbits' needs and any special requirements they may have.

Alternatively, you may wish to consider whether a good boarding facility would be better, where your rabbits can be monitored and cared for by someone knowledgeable on how to look after rabbits. It is important that you ensure you are aware of, and comply with, any health or disease control requirements stipulated by the boarding facility.



#### Section 4: The need for a suitable diet



## Food

It is your responsibility to ensure that your rabbits are fed an appropriate diet. Rabbits are herbivores, which means that they eat plants. They need a diet that is high in fibre to wear down their continuously growing teeth, keep their digestive tract functioning properly and help prevent them from becoming bored. The way their digestive system works means that they need to eat continuously, so appropriate food should be available to them 24 hours a day.

Your rabbits' daily diet should consist mainly of large quantities of good quality, dust-free feeding hay and/or dried/fresh grass that will provide the necessary fibre for the rabbits. This should make up at least 80% of each rabbit's daily food intake and they should have access to this throughout the day and night. As a guide, an amount equivalent to each rabbit's body size should be provided each day. However, the amount required will also be dependent on the amount of exercise each individual rabbit gets, so it will be important to keep an eye on your rabbits over time to make sure they are fit and healthy and do not become over- or under-weight (see below).

A small amount of high quality specialist rabbit food such as extruded nuggets or pellets should also be given to ensure that the rabbits receive beneficial nutrients and minerals that may not always be achieved in the domestic setting via the feeding of hay. However, this should make up no more than 5-10% of their daily food intake. (Current recommended maximum is 25g of nuggets / pellets per kg of rabbit per day.)

Muesli-type food has been linked to digestive and dental problems in rabbits so should not be used. If your rabbits are currently fed a muesli diet, it is recommended that they be transitioned slowly (over 14-28 days) onto nuggets or pellets.

Washed leafy green vegetables, herbs and weeds should also be offered. Suitable green plants include broccoli, parsley, watercress, celery leaves and kale. Safe wild plants include chickweed, bramble, raspberry, blackberry and strawberry leaves, and dandelions. Twigs from non-toxic trees that have not been treated with pesticides can be provided for environmental enrichment, to allow your rabbits to remove the bark as they would in the wild.

You should always make sure you know the identity of any plant, and that it is suitable for rabbits, before providing it as food. (Again, the RWAf webpage about poisonous plants is useful here – see page 12.) When foraging for plants, it is important to avoid those growing on the sides of roads, as they could be contaminated with exhaust fumes, and to ensure that they are free from herbicides and pesticides. Lawnmower clippings should never be given to rabbits, as these can upset their stomachs and make them very ill, even causing death if they are not treated immediately by a vet.

Rabbits can suffer from obesity, and teeth and gut problems, caused by inappropriate diets and overfeeding. Although we often think of rabbits eating carrots, these are not suitable as part of their daily diet. Root vegetables and fruit can be provided to your rabbits, but they should only be given occasionally and in small quantities as they can be high in sugar. Don't give your rabbits too many special rabbit treats, and sticky, sugary treats should be avoided as they can harm a rabbit's teeth and also lead to obesity. Foods and treat items which contain ingredients such as seeds, nuts and corn can pose a choking hazard and risk of gut impaction so should be avoided.



This looks cute, but you should always make sure you have enough feeding points for all your rabbits so they don't have to crowd around one.

Rabbits are very sensitive to any change in their diet so any alterations must be introduced gradually. When introducing new foods, it is a good idea to introduce them one at a time and provide only small quantities, so you can monitor your rabbits for any ill-effects. This is especially important when weaning rabbits and introducing them to green plants.

Place all food and fresh water well away from your rabbits' toilet area. Any food that has gone mouldy should be removed as soon as it is discovered.

## **Water**

Your rabbits must always have access to fresh, clean water. This can be provided in either a metal-tipped feeding bottle, a water bowl, or both. Some rabbits have a strong preference for one or the other, so when you first bring your rabbits home, it is a good idea to offer water in both a bowl and a feeding bottle to find out which they prefer. (Research suggests most rabbits prefer bowls and will drink more if a bowl is provided.) If water is presented in a new, unfamiliar way, your rabbits might refuse to drink and become dehydrated.

Both bowls and bottles should be checked at least twice daily to ensure that sufficient fresh, clean water is always available. In cold weather, make sure that the water has not frozen. In warmer weather, make sure that algae has not built up. Both bottles and bowls should be cleaned and refilled daily. Bottles should be checked for leaks and air blocks, and to make sure that the water is coming out of them properly. If bowls are your rabbits' preferred option, it is a good idea to have more than one available, and to use heavy, ceramic bowls, so they are less likely to be knocked over.

Rabbits on a largely dry diet should drink around 50-100ml of water per kilogram of rabbit per day. You should keep an eye on your rabbits' water consumption, as any increase can be a sign of ill health requiring veterinary attention.

## **Droppings**

Rabbits maximise the nutrition they get from their food by passing partially digested food out of their bodies as soft pellets (called caecotrophs), which they then eat and re-digest. The caecotrophs contain lots of essential vitamins and protein and rabbits should not be discouraged from eating them. If these caecotrophs become very runny, there's a change in their appearance, you start seeing lots of them (suggesting that your rabbit is not eating them) or your rabbit stops producing them, veterinary advice should be sought. Rabbits also produce hard brown round droppings that they do not usually eat. Again, if fewer hard brown round droppings than normal are being produced, this may indicate ill health, and veterinary advice should be sought.

## **Healthy weight**

Your rabbits should not be too fat or too thin. Ideally you should easily be able to feel their ribs. Female rabbits will often have large dewlaps under their chin even if they are not overweight, and this is normal. Adjust how much you feed your rabbits to make sure that they do not become over or underweight. Obese rabbits can find it difficult to groom themselves or eat their caecotrophs, which can lead to flystrike (See section 7). Ensuring that they have enough space to exercise in will also contribute to their maintaining an appropriate bodyweight.

The pictures on the following page provide a useful reference guide.

## **Other Dietary Needs**

Sometimes rabbits have different dietary needs, such as when they are very young or old, or recovering from an illness or if they are pregnant. Your vet will be able to advise you about this.

# Body condition score

1

## Very thin

- Muscle loss
- Rump area curves in
- Ribs and other bones sharp to the touch



3

## Ideal

- No abdominal bulge
- Rump area flat
- Ribs and other bones felt but not seen



5

## Obese

- Pronounced fat layers
- Rump area bulges
- Ribs and other bones no longer felt



## Section 5: The need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns



Rabbits have several specific behavioural needs which relate to their natural environment and their status as prey animals.

### **Early experiences**

Some rabbits are naturally more confident than others. However, the way each rabbit behaves is largely influenced by experiences during the first few weeks of life. Rabbits which have not had early experiences with humans or other pets may find it difficult to cope with being in a normal home environment. They may be very nervous, hiding away a great deal of the time. Sometimes this may lead to fear-related aggression towards their owners.

Once your new rabbits are home, you should gradually introduce them to the different people they will come into contact with, normal sights and sounds, and to being handled, but always ensuring they have a safe place to which they can freely retreat. They should never be forced to interact, or chased if they try to retreat.

Rabbits should be lifted, where necessary, by holding their chest and supporting their hind legs firmly, keeping them upright or in a horizontal position. They should not be held or laid on their back to produce a “trance” as although rabbits may appear to be relaxed in this position, they are likely to be stressed and may struggle when recovering. They should never be lifted by their ears.

Young children should not try to lift rabbits as rabbits can easily be injured when struggling to escape. A better idea is for young children to sit on the ground and wait for the rabbits to hop over to them. If older children are handling the rabbits, they should be carefully supervised.

Generally, rabbits that are well “socialised” at an early age will be better able to cope confidently with most new situations and people. If your rabbits are likely to come into contact with cats, dogs or other animals it is important to introduce them gradually and in a positive way at an early age. Never leave your rabbits alone with a cat or dog, even if they are familiar with each other.

You should supervise the introduction of any new toy, object or person to make sure that your rabbits are not frightened or stressed by its presence and provide them with the opportunity to escape to a safe hiding place. Forcing your rabbits to interact with this new object or person may lead to behavioural problems.

Rabbits which are roughly handled at any age may subsequently find all human contact distressing. Never shout at or punish your rabbits. They will not understand and can become more nervous and scared. If your rabbits’ behaviour becomes an on-going problem, seek expert advice.

### **Getting away from danger**

It is natural for rabbits to hide from a real or perceived danger as well as from stressful circumstances, such as noise, the presence of other animals or small children. Therefore, your rabbits should each have easy access to a secure hiding place (such as a wide tube, cardboard box or secluded part of the living area). To ensure these remain safe and secure, rabbits should never be trapped in or forcibly removed from their hiding places.

## **Signs of stress**

Rabbits that are feeling content will appear calm and relaxed. They will nibble food, sit or lie stretched out and will be happy to approach and interact with their companion rabbits, people and objects.

Rabbits respond to stress in different ways. In most cases, when rabbits are feeling scared they prefer to run away to a quiet and hidden location. This is normal behaviour, but is reason for concern if it happens more than just once in a while. It is very important that rabbits have somewhere to hide. A rabbit which is scared but cannot get away to a safe place, or which is trapped or grabbed, may resort to biting. More general signs of stress may include: aggressiveness, restlessness, nervousness, lack of interest in food, excessive grooming, and maladaptive repetitive behaviour (repeated movements without purpose). It is important that you are able to recognise signs of stress or illness in your rabbits. If you are ever concerned, you should always contact your vet.

Typical things that can make your rabbits stressed include: boredom, lack of space, too many animals in the same space, loss of a companion, sudden noises, the presence of predators or unfamiliar people, or inability to perform normal behavioural patterns, such as running or digging.

## **Boredom and Frustration**

Rabbits rely on you to provide everything for them, including entertainment. You should ensure that your rabbits have enough mental and physical stimulation from you and from their environment to avoid boredom and frustration. A rabbit with nothing to do will quickly become unhealthy, unhappy and possibly aggressive.

You should provide your rabbits with the opportunity to be mentally and physically stimulated. Suggestions include:

- foraging for food and having suitable objects to play with. Rabbits are inquisitive animals and should be given the opportunity to investigate and spend time with unfamiliar items that are safe for them to chew.
- the company of another rabbit or rabbits (See section 6).
- providing your rabbits with suitable materials that allow digging behaviour and areas to mark their territory with chin secretions, urine and droppings.

### **Crepuscular activity**

Rabbits are naturally most active in the early morning and evening, around dawn and dusk as well as overnight. These may be times when owners are not available to let their rabbits out into their run or activity area. In this case, it is important that the rabbits' living area should be attached to a run, so that the rabbits can access their run whenever they want to.

## Section 6: The need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals



Rabbits are social animals and should be kept with an appropriate companion. If a rabbit is left on its own for long periods of time, it may feel frustrated and its behaviour may change to reflect this stress. Bonded pet rabbits spend more time grazing, resting and playing than solitary pet rabbits, which spend the majority of their time on watch for predators.

### **Appropriate Companions**

An appropriate companion is a compatible neutered rabbit of a similar size. Ideally, rabbits will be kept together in groups familiar from birth. Litter mates of either sex are usually ideal companions, as long as they are neutered. Otherwise, a good combination is often a neutered male and a neutered female, as bonding neutered rabbits of the opposite sex is usually easiest. However, two females can live happily together if bonded at a young age and neutered at puberty.

Rabbits and guinea pigs should not be kept together. They have different dietary requirements and ways of communicating, and, more importantly, living with rabbits can be dangerous for guinea pigs. The powerful hind legs of even a small rabbit could cause serious internal injury to a guinea pig. Rabbits also carry the

bacteria, Bordetella, which can be passed on via respiratory secretions and is the most common cause of respiratory disease in guinea pigs.

However, this is relatively new advice as rabbits and guinea pigs have historically been kept together. In cases where existing rabbit / guinea pig relationships are in place, it is not recommended that they be separated. However, their living environment should allow all those living in the shelter / hutch to easily escape the other(s) to allow for some time alone. In particular, it is important that the guinea pig has access to a hiding place that the rabbit cannot enter. They should also be closely monitored when eating, or fed separately, to ensure that the guinea pig gets the correct nutrition. It is a good idea to get the rabbit neutered as this can reduce unwanted behaviours, eg bullying, mounting etc.

Rabbits instinctively fear other animals such as dogs, cats, birds of prey and even people. Through careful training and very sensitive handling, pet rabbits can learn to enjoy the companionship of people.

### **Introducing and keeping rabbits together**

Ideally, your rabbits will have known each other since birth. However, sometimes it is necessary to bring together rabbits who are unfamiliar to each other. A successful relationship between two or more rabbits will depend on a number of important factors. The following need to be considered when pairing rabbits together as potential companions:

- how, where and when they are introduced
- their gender (male or female)
- whether they are neutered or not
- the age that they are introduced
- their individual personalities
- their relative size – a smaller or younger one could be injured or bullied by a larger or older companion
- their relative temperaments – one might be more temperamentally inclined to bully the other.

Introductions between unfamiliar rabbits can be very stressful and are not always successful. It is usually best to take a gradual approach, over a period of a few weeks. It is a good idea to consult your vet for further advice before introducing a new rabbit into your home.

### **Suitable Accommodation**

When kept in pairs or groups, the size of the accommodation will need to be large enough to allow all the rabbits to perform all their natural behaviours. This includes having multiple resources so they are able to perform the same behaviours simultaneously. For example, make sure your rabbits all have places

they can go to get away from their companions if they want to. However, it is important that these resources don't take up so much space that they prevent the rabbits from moving around comfortably.

### **Separating Bonded Companions**

It is always preferable not to separate a bonded pair of rabbits. However, if your rabbits do have to be separated for any reason, such as being hospitalised, you should take care when re-introducing them to each other to minimise the risk of fighting and other welfare problems. Ideally, your vet should allow for your rabbit's companion to accompany them during any vet visit / stay to avoid their bond being broken. This offers comfort and security to both animals, and a quicker recovery for the ailing rabbit through the support of its companion.

## Section 7: The need to be protected from suffering, injury and disease



### Health care

As the person responsible for your rabbits' welfare you should consider:

- Prevention of disease: there are annual vaccines that are designed to protect rabbits from diseases such as Myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (including the new strain VHD2). Both of these diseases are usually fatal and your rabbits should be vaccinated. Your veterinary surgeon can provide information on the prevention of other diseases, depending on whether your rabbits are indoor or outdoor rabbits.
- Provision of a healthy balanced diet (see Section 4)
- Provision of the right environment that minimises the risk of injury and disease, and allows your rabbits to perform all their natural behaviours (see Sections 3 and 5)
- Prompt action if a rabbit becomes ill, is injured or in pain, or shows a change in its behaviour

- Observation and handling your rabbits daily
- Regular check-ups with your vet.

Your vet is best placed to advise you about routine health care for your rabbits, such as neutering, vaccination, internal and external parasite control as well as any health problems your rabbits may have. You may wish to consider taking out pet insurance, to cover any unexpected vet bills.

The Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund (RWF) produces a list of veterinary practices which demonstrate a good knowledge of rabbit care. You can find the nearest one to you by visiting the RWF website and entering your postcode: <http://rabbitwelfare.co.uk/rabbit-care-advice/rabbit-friendly-vets/rabbit-friendly-vet-list/>. In addition to those on the RWF list, a number of unlisted Scottish veterinary surgeries also provide care for rabbits, and can be found through an internet search.

## **Suffering**

You should be aware of the signs that indicate your rabbits are not well, and consult a vet if your rabbits show any signs of illness, injury, pain or a change in their behaviour.

Rabbits are prey animals and, to avoid attracting attention from predators, they often do not look ill until they are very unwell. It is important that you get to know your rabbits and familiarise yourself with their normal behaviour, so you can spot any subtle changes. They can become worse very quickly, so you need to act promptly. If your rabbit is not eating or not passing faeces, this should be treated as an emergency requiring immediate veterinary attention.

Indications of suffering may include:

- a change in behaviour, such as:
  - sitting still in hunched posture;
  - becoming apprehensive, anxious or aggressive;
  - increases in activity (ie restlessness) or decreases in activity (ie apathy);
  - increases in struggling when handled;
  - increases in abnormal behaviour (eg fur pulling, chewing parts of shelter etc);
  - scratching, licking or tooth grinding;
  - changes in respiratory rate (ie laboured or hyperventilation);
  - excessive scratching, licking or biting of areas of the body;

- over-reaction to people (ie increased attempts to hide, attempts to escape etc);
- a change in appearance, such as:
  - pale eyes;
  - generally dull appearance;
  - unkempt due to lack of grooming / fur standing on end;
  - excessive grooming leading to baldness and sore patches;
  - dilated pupils;
  - flattened ears;
- potential signs of abdominal pain, such as:
  - increased guarding of body areas to prevent them being touched;
  - flinching or full body flexing (jerking upwards for no apparent reason);
  - squealing / crying;
  - twitching (rapid movement of fur on back);
  - belly pressing (pressing stomach into the floor);
  - writhing (contraction of sides of the abdomen / flanks);
  - abnormal locomotion (eg staggering, shuffling or abnormal walking or hopping);
  - falling over unexpectedly when moving;
  - wincing / drawing back (rapid backwards movement in rocking motion);
  - back arching (arching upwards and contracting stomach);
  - tucked abdomen;
  - reluctance to rear up on hind legs;
- a change in eating and drinking habits, such as increased or decreased appetite or thirst;
- a change in droppings: smaller, darker, fewer, runny or none;
- uneaten caecotrophs;
- signs of injury such as a swollen limb, guarding or limping;
- signs of disease such as a discharge from the eye, ear or nose, difficulty in going to the toilet or diarrhoea;
- drooling or staining on the chin or chest;

- difficulties in breathing, especially if your rabbit is trying to breathe through its mouth rather than its nose;
- redness of skin around belly, bottom or on underside of feet;
- difficulty in feeding and / or drinking.

The sources of these indicators can be found in Appendix 3.

The pictures below show some of the ways your rabbits might behave if they are in pain.



Arching



Hunching



Pressing

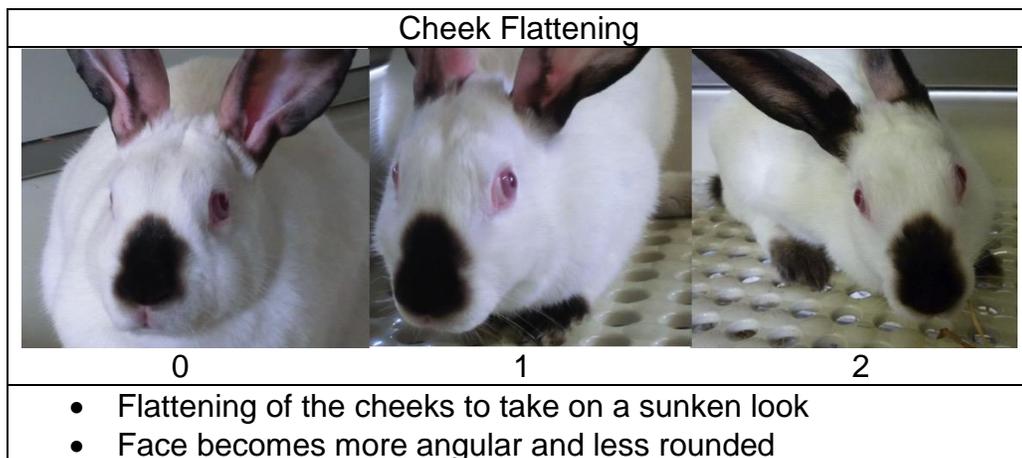
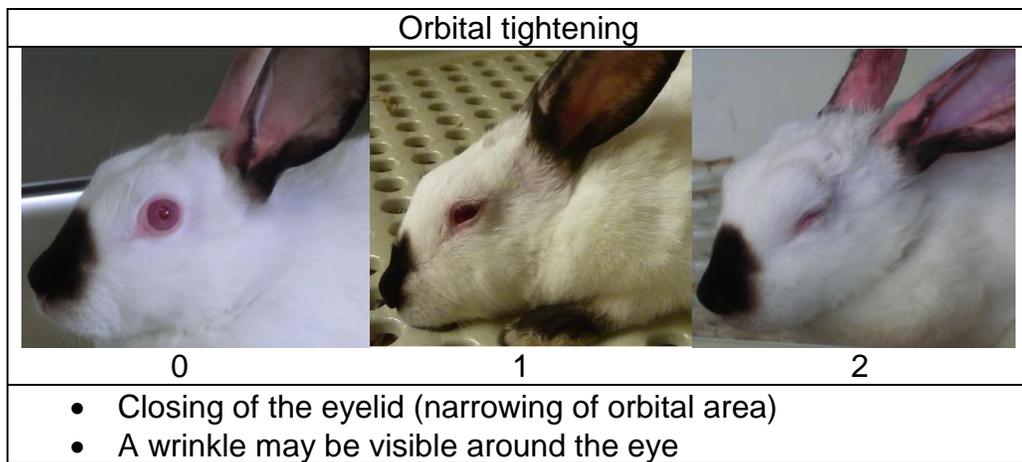


Writhing

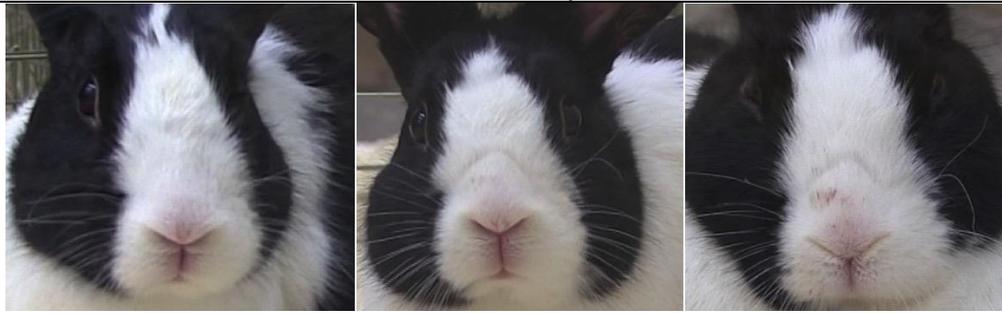
Changes in your rabbit's facial expression may also be a sign that it may be in pain. The following pictures (known as a 'Grimace Scale') show some signs to look out for. As this scale is still under development, we advise that it should be used alongside the other indicators set out above, rather than in isolation. It should also only be used when your rabbit is fully awake.

This scale was developed by the Pain & Animal Welfare Sciences (PAWS) group at Newcastle University. Further information on this grimace scale can be found in Appendix 3.

**You should consult your vet if your rabbit is showing any signs that it is in pain.**



### Nostril Shape



- Drawn vertically forming a 'V' rather than 'U' shape
- Nose tip is moved down towards the chin

### Ear shape/position



- Become tightly folded/curled (more cylindrical) in shape
- Rotate from facing sound to facing hindquarters
- May be held closer to the back or sides of the body

### Whisker change



- Pushed away from face to 'stand on end'
- Stiffen and lose their natural downward curve
- Increasingly point in the same direction

## **Routine Health Check**

You should check your rabbits regularly for signs of ill health, and consult your vet if you find any. Listed below are the main health checks you should undertake. It is important that anyone caring for your rabbits understands the importance of these checks, and that daily care is about more than simply feeding, watering and cleaning.

### Daily Checks

**Behaviour** – watch your rabbits at least once a day to ensure they are behaving normally as well as eating and drinking their usual amount.

**Feet** – check for bald patches and sores.

**Fur** – check for parasites, dandruff, patches of baldness, itchy sores, scaly patches, damp or weeping patches and wounds.

**Eyes** – ensure they are clear and not weeping. Runny eyes are often signs of respiratory infection which can easily turn into pneumonia.

**Nose** – ensure it is not runny. A runny nose is often a sign of respiratory infection which can easily turn into pneumonia.

**Mouth** – rabbits are obligatory nose breathers, so any sign that they are attempting to breathe through their mouth is a sign that they are having trouble breathing through their nose and should be treated as an emergency. Also check for a wet chin or drooling. As rabbits are very clean animals it may not be easily spotted. However, the fur on their chest and front paws may be stained with drool which can be a sign of a painful mouth, and should be checked by your vet.

**Ears** – check for crusty wax, lumps around the ears, excessive scratching, scratch marks, scabs or flaky skin, head shaking or odours.

**Droppings** – check they have not changed in appearance or reduced in number

**Bottom and tail** – check your rabbits' bottoms, and around the tail area, as well as the floor of its living area, for signs of diarrhoea or maggots. A rabbit with diarrhoea or maggots should be seen by a vet immediately.

**Body** – check for any lumps

## Weekly checks

**Nails** – check that they are an appropriate length and not damaged.

**Teeth** – ensure that incisors are an appropriate length and shape.

## **Fly Strike**

During warm weather, rabbits should be checked at least twice daily underneath and around the bottom and tail area for droppings stuck in their fur. Having a dirty bottom can increase the risk of a condition known as “fly strike” which can kill a rabbit in a matter of hours. Fly strike occurs when flies lay their eggs in the rabbit’s dirty fur. The hatched maggots eat into the rabbit’s flesh, causing severe damage and releasing toxins. This may produce shock, severe illness and even death.

You should contact your vet immediately if you find maggots on your rabbits.

If one of your rabbits is having problems with soiling itself you should:

- ensure its fur is clean
- ensure the floor of its living area is clean
- ensure there is plenty of fibre (such as hay or fresh grass, but not lawnmower clippings) in your rabbits’ diet
- reduce the amount of vegetables and fruit in the diet
- seek veterinary advice immediately

## **Weight**

It is a good idea to check and record your rabbits’ weight at least once a month. Loss of weight may indicate a dental or other health problem. Being overweight or obese will cause your rabbits to suffer. Potential problems may include:

- painful stress on their joints
- sore feet
- a decreased ability to exercise
- heat stress
- inadequate diet as they are unable to reach to catch the soft pellets from their bottom that they need to eat in order to get all the goodness from their food
- fly strike as the rabbit cannot clean itself properly

## **Grooming**

Rabbits naturally moult at the end of the winter and summer but our varying temperatures, as well as central heating, means that many rabbits are constantly moulting (shedding fur). Regular grooming is needed to keep your rabbits comfortable and prevent them swallowing lots of fur when they clean themselves as this can cause a blockage of the gut. Rabbits with a short coat should be groomed weekly but longhaired rabbits should be groomed at least once a day to avoid matting and tangles. Longhaired rabbits can also be clipped by a vet or pet care specialist.

## **Nails**

Your rabbits' nails should be kept at an appropriate length, and should not protrude much further than the fur on the feet. Rabbits' nails wear down naturally when they exercise on harder surfaces or when digging. How often your rabbits' nails need to be trimmed depends on where your rabbit is kept. If you are concerned about your rabbits' nails, you should consult your vet.

## **Dental Care**

Your rabbits' teeth will grow continuously throughout their life. Dental health relies on a diet high in hay and grass which will wear down their teeth as they chew.

Check your rabbits' front teeth to make sure that they are not misaligned or overgrown. Some breeds of rabbit are more prone than others to having dental problems because of the way their skulls are formed. Only a vet should correct misaligned or overgrown teeth. It is sensible to ask your vet to check teeth at your annual check-up, but if you spot anything unusual in between check-ups, you should consult your vet straight away

Back teeth can be misaligned and grow sharp spurs which can cause severe pain to your rabbits when they eat. They cannot be seen easily and should be checked by your vet by otoscope exam, ideally every 6 months. If a more in-depth examination requiring sedation or anaesthesia is needed your vet should be able to advise you.

Dental problems can cause a poor appetite, a wet chin or drooling. Your rabbit might be in a lot of pain and might stop eating completely. If your rabbits are showing any of these symptoms you should take them to see your vet immediately.

## Neutering

One particularly important consideration is getting your rabbits neutered. This will not only prevent any unwanted baby rabbits but provides other advantages. Rabbits that are not neutered may develop problematic behaviour and may also suffer health problems.

If a female rabbit is not neutered she can:

- be aggressive to other rabbits
- try to make a nest by excessive digging, which can damage her nails
- have a risk of developing a life-threatening womb infection or, more commonly, cancer
- have phantom pregnancies, which can be emotionally frustrating and cause the rabbit to pluck her fur to make a nest. Nests should not be disturbed or removed until the phase has passed as the rabbit will continue to pluck fur from her chest area to build another.

If a male rabbit is not neutered he can:

- be aggressive to other rabbits
- spray urine
- mount other rabbits and animals
- (more rarely) develop testicular infections or cancer.

(Points 1-3 above can also be part of normal rabbit behaviour. However, some rabbits may exhibit excessive troublesome behaviours, and neutering may reduce these activities.)

Rabbits are very sociable animals, and should be provided with a companion (see Section 6). Animals that have not been neutered might not be able to be kept with other rabbits. The age when rabbits can be neutered varies with the rabbit's gender and breed. Females are usually neutered when they reach sexual maturity at the age of 4 months and males at the age of 3 months.

Allowing your rabbits to breed is not recommended, given the numbers of domestic rabbits that are already in need of homes. However, if you are considering breeding from your rabbits, you need to make sure that the welfare needs of the parents and their potential offspring are met. Consult your vet as necessary. You should ensure you have found suitable homes for the baby rabbits and you should avoid unplanned pregnancies.

From the age of 4 months, a female rabbit can produce between 2 to 12 babies per litter (an average of 5-8), and can become pregnant again soon after she has given birth. If kept with an un-neutered male, the female may have 6 litters a year, potentially 72 babies.

The pros and cons of whether to neuter your rabbits, as well as timing, should be discussed with your vet.

### **Wild Rabbits**

Your rabbits should not have contact with wild rabbits or areas where wild rabbits have been because of the risk of disease spread.

### **Medication**

Some medicines used for humans and other animals can be very dangerous to rabbits. Only use medicines that have been specifically prescribed or recommended for your rabbits by a vet.

### **Identification**

You should not allow your rabbits to escape. However, it is a good idea to permanently identify your rabbits with a microchip just in case they do get out. Microchipping should only be done by a suitably qualified person, eg a veterinary surgeon. It is important that your contact details are kept up to date on the microchip database.

### **What to do if one of your rabbits is missing**

You should contact local authority animal wardens, vets and local animal rescue centres. You can also put notices in local shops or newspapers, and use social media to ask people to look out for your rabbit. Once your rabbit has been found any notices that you have put up should be removed.



## Appendix 1: The Law

### The Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006

The following sections of the Act are referred to in the guidance and are set out here for ease of reference.

The boxes below contain extracts from the relevant sections of the Act.

The box shaded grey summarises the relevant offences and penalties in the Act.

The information quoted is the law as it stands on the date that this guidance is published. You should be aware that the legislation may be amended and any legal requirements quoted here could change. You should therefore check that this is an accurate statement of the law as it currently stands.

Section 18 of the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 provides:

#### **Responsibility for animals**

- (1) In this Part [the animal welfare part of the Act], references to being responsible for an animal mean being responsible for it on a permanent or temporary basis.
- (2) In this Part, references to being responsible for an animal include being in charge of it.
- (3) For the purposes of this Part, a person who owns an animal is always to be regarded as being a person who is responsible for it.
- (4) For the purposes of this Part, a person (“person A”) is to be regarded as responsible for any animal for which a person who is under 16 years of age, of whom person A has the actual care and control, is responsible.
- (5) For the purposes of this Part, a person does not relinquish responsibility for an animal by reason only of abandoning it.

Section 19 of the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 provides:

#### **Unnecessary suffering**

- (1) A person commits an offence if –
  - (a) the person causes a protected animal unnecessary suffering by an act, and
  - (b) the person knew, or ought reasonably to have known, that the act

would have caused the suffering or be likely to do so.

- (2) A person who is responsible for an animal commits an offence if-
- (a) the person causes the animal unnecessary suffering by an act or omission, and
  - (b) the person knew, or ought reasonably to have known, that the act or omission would have caused the suffering or be likely to do so.
- (3) A person (“person A”) who is responsible for an animal commits an offence if-
- (a) another person causes the animal unnecessary suffering by an act or omission, and
  - (b) person A-
    - (i) permits that to happen, or
    - (ii) fails to take steps (whether by way of supervising the other person or otherwise) as are reasonable in the circumstances to prevent that happening.
- (4) The considerations to which regard is to be had in determining, for the purposes of subsections (1) to (3), whether suffering is unnecessary include –
- (a) whether the suffering could reasonably have been avoided or reduced,
  - (b) whether the conduct concerned was in compliance with any relevant enactment or any relevant provisions of a licence or code of practice issued under an enactment,
  - (c) whether the conduct concerned was for a legitimate purpose, for example –
    - (i) the purpose of benefiting the animal, or
    - (ii) the purpose of protecting a person, property or another animal,
  - (d) whether the suffering was proportionate to the purpose of the conduct concerned,
  - (e) whether the conduct concerned was in the circumstances that of a reasonably competent and humane person.
- (5) This section does not apply to the destruction of an animal in an appropriate and humane manner.

Section 24 of the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 provides:

**Ensuring welfare of animals**

- (1) A person commits an offence if the person does not take such steps as are reasonable in the circumstances to ensure that the needs of an animal for which the person is responsible are met to the extent required by good practice.
- (2) The circumstances to which, for the purposes of subsection (1), regard is to be had include-
  - (a) any lawful purpose for which the animal is kept,
  - (b) any lawful activity undertaken in relation to the animal.
- (3) For the purposes of subsection (1), an animal's needs include-
  - (a) its need for a suitable environment,
  - (b) its need for a suitable diet,
  - (c) its need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns,
  - (d) any need it has to be housed with, or apart from, other animals,
  - (e) its need to be protected from suffering, injury and disease.
- (4) This section does not apply to the destruction of an animal in an appropriate and humane manner.

**Offences and Penalties**

A person who is convicted of an offence under section 19 (Unnecessary suffering) of the Act may be imprisoned for a maximum period of 12 months and/or fined up to £20,000. If they are convicted of an offence under section 24 (Ensuring welfare of animals) or section 29 (Abandonment) they can be imprisoned for a maximum period of 6 months and fined up to level 5 on the standard scale – the maximum is currently £5,000.

## Appendix 2: Sources of Information

- Your vet.
  - The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, Belgravia House, 62-64 Horseferry Road, London SW1P 2AF (Telephone number 020 7222 2001 or [www.rcvs.org.uk](http://www.rcvs.org.uk)). The website has a “find a vet” facility.
- Local libraries and bookshops for up to date books on rabbit care.
- Websites such as:
  - Advocates for Rabbit Welfare: [www.rabbitsrequirerights.com](http://www.rabbitsrequirerights.com)
  - Animal Behaviour and Training Council: [www.abtcouncil.org.uk](http://www.abtcouncil.org.uk)
  - Animal Welfare Foundation: [www.bva-awf.org.uk](http://www.bva-awf.org.uk)
  - Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors: [www.apbc.org.uk](http://www.apbc.org.uk)
  - Blue Cross: [www.bluecross.org.uk](http://www.bluecross.org.uk)
  - British Rabbit Council: [www.thebrc.org](http://www.thebrc.org)
  - British Veterinary Association: [www.bva.co.uk](http://www.bva.co.uk)
  - PDSA: [www.pdsa.org.uk](http://www.pdsa.org.uk)
  - Pet Advisory Committee: [www.petadvisory.org.uk](http://www.petadvisory.org.uk)
  - Pet Industry Federation: [www.petfederation.co.uk](http://www.petfederation.co.uk)
  - Rabbit Behaviour Advisory Group: [www.rabbitbehaviour.co.uk](http://www.rabbitbehaviour.co.uk)
  - Rabbit training: [www.clickerbunny.com](http://www.clickerbunny.com)
  - Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund: [www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk](http://www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk)
  - Scottish SPCA (Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) [www.scottishspca.org](http://www.scottishspca.org)

### Appendix 3: References

Indicators of suffering in section 7 derived from:

- National Research Council (2009) Recognition & alleviation of pain in laboratory animals, National Research Council of the National Academies.
- Carstens & Moberg (2000) Institute for Laboratory Animal Research Journal, 41 62-71
- Kohn et al. (2007) Journal of the American Association for Laboratory Animal Science, 46: 97-108
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- Gunn & Morton (1995) Applied Animal Behaviour Science, 45: 277-292
- Held et al. (1995) Applied Animal Behaviour Science, 46: 81-91
- Hawkins et al. (2008) Refining rabbit care. RSPCA and UFAW

Potential signs of abdominal pain taken from:

- Leach et al. (2009) Research in Veterinary Science, 87: 336-347
- Farnworth et al. (2011) Animal Welfare, 20: 225-237

Rabbit Grimace Scale original paper:

- Keating SCJ, Thomas AA, Flecknell PA, Leach MC (2012) Evaluation of EMLA cream for preventing pain during tattooing of rabbits: changes in physiological, behavioural and facial expression responses. PLoS ONE 7:e44437. Doi:10.1371/journal.pone0044437

For guidance on how to use the Rabbit Grimace Scale, additional images of each action unit, research papers that underpin or validate this technique, please contact Dr Matt Leach ([matthew.leach@newcastle.ac.uk](mailto:matthew.leach@newcastle.ac.uk)).

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Section 1: Diane Bain

Section 3: RWAF

Section 4: RWAF (eating greens); Diane Bain (group)

Section 5: RWAF

Section 6: Diane Bain

Section 7: RWAF (vet); Pain and Animal Welfare Sciences (PAWS) group at Newcastle University (pain-related postures and rearing rabbit).

## **Appendix 4: Contributors**

This guidance was prepared with contributions from:

Advocates for Rabbit Welfare

Diane Bain

Blue Cross

British Rabbit Council

British Small Animal Veterinary Association

BVA Animal Welfare Foundation

BVA Scotland

Dr Matt Leach, Newcastle University

OneKind

PDSA

Pet Industry Federation

Pets At Home

RSPCA

RWAF

SSPCA

University of Edinburgh Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies



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