



AVIAN REPTILE & EXOTIC PET HOSPITAL

RABBIT - GENERAL HEALTH CARE

INTRODUCTION

Rabbits make great pets for children and adults alike. They are responsive, interactive and loving. The average life span for a cross breed rabbit is 6-8 years, with smaller breeds such as dwarf rabbits living up to 12 years.

Providing a natural high fibre diet, access to sunlight and exercise will keep your pet rabbit fit, healthy and live longer.

DIET

A high fibre diet can be achieved by feeding 80% fresh hay and grass. The type of hay you feed your rabbit is important! Rabbits need a good quality, fresh green pasture, meadow, oaten, timothy or other suitable grass hay. Straw is yellow and be used only as bedding (although your rabbit may also eat this occasionally for extra fibre). Only feed lucerne hay (which is a legume not a grass) to rabbits less than six months old and breeding females as it is high in calcium and protein and too low in fibre.

Hay is so important because it keeps rabbits constantly growing teeth nice and short and it provides roughage to keep the gastrointestinal tract working efficiently. Feed about the size of the rabbit's body in hay per day. Access to grazing is ideal. Exercise will aid you pet rabbit's digestion and prevent obesity.

The rest of the diet should consist of no more than 1/4 cup of good quality (25% fibre) rabbit pellets and 1 cup of vegetables daily. Feed leafy greens such as Asian greens, celery, spinach and herbs such as parsley. By feeding a few vegetables regularly and introducing new vegetables gradually, you will avoid problems like diarrhoea and gut upset. A whole carrot per day is too much! Avoid toxic plants such as oleander, lily of the valley and rhubarb leaves.

HOUSING

Rabbits can be successfully kept indoors and outdoors in large enclosures. The ideal is a combination of both.

Outside enclosures can be a large fenced area where they can graze, exercise and lie in the sun with a dry and draught-free sheltered area where they can hide from predators (such as cats, dog, foxes and birds of prey) and be warm in the cooler months. A covered, well ventilated area should also be available for the summer months. While rabbits can tolerate a wide range of temperatures the ideal temperature range is between 15° and 21°C. Temperatures in excess of 27°C can lead to heatstroke.

Indoor rabbits should be taken out of their enclosures regularly to allow exercise and interaction with their owners. They should be exposed to direct sunshine for 20 minutes at least 2-3 times per week. A mobile hutch with a wire bottom to allow grazing on lawn grass is great (make sure you haven't sprayed the grass with chemicals).

Hay racks can be used to provide access to clean, dry hay at all times and stimulates your rabbit to forage! If grazing is not available, fresh grass should be cut from an area which has not been sprayed with chemicals.



Domestic rabbit
(*Oryctolagus cuniculus*)

BEHAVIOUR

Rabbits are social animals and best kept in groups or pairs. Owners of single pet rabbits can fulfill their pet's social needs by spending at least 3-4 hours a day with their rabbit. Rabbits are inquisitive and interactive provided you have gained their trust. Children should be taught to handle pet rabbits gently, supporting the body when picked up otherwise they risk back injury. Supervision of young children is vital.

Rabbits can be taught to come when called for food rewards and will love to be petted and stroked on your lap. Some can be trained to walk on a harness. Groom your rabbit daily. This can be great for bonding, reduces matting and hairballs and ensures you pick up any dirty bottoms!

PURCHASING

When purchase a rabbit you should check that the rabbit is not too thin or too over weight. The coat should be well groomed with no bald patches. The ears should be pink (not red) with no discharge. The eyes and nose should be clean with no signs of discharge.

if you can check to see that the teeth are not overgrown and there are no signs of drooling. Look at the rear end for signs of soiling. Observe the animal to make sure it is walking normally and check that the enclosure is clean and contains fresh food and water. Ask the owner (preferably a recommended breeder) plenty of questions about what they feed how they care for them, if they have been vaccinated and if they know the sex.

DISEASE PREVENTION

The most common causes of disease in pet rabbits are related to poor diet. Dental disease, gastrointestinal disease and urinary stones are very common in pet rabbits that are fed on high energy, low fibre diets made up of mainly pelleted mixes, grains and carrots.

Dental disease can be devastating in rabbits as they have continuously growing teeth. Overgrown teeth and root impaction can be painful and result in nasty dental abscesses. A dental check should be performed at the annual vaccination appointment. Older rabbits or those with dental problems may need more frequent visits.

Take your rabbit to an experienced veterinarian for a health check and vaccination against rabbit calicivirus every year. In Australia, we cannot vaccinate rabbits against the viral disease myxomatosis as it is used to control the feral rabbit population. It is transmitted by biting insects so covering your rabbit's hutch with mosquito netting will reduce the risk of infection.

If you notice faecal or urine soiling on the backside of the rabbit take your pet to the vet for a checkup as this can be an indicator of disease.

Desexing both your male and female rabbit reduces aggression, fighting and urine spraying. It prevents unwanted pregnancies and uterine cancer in female rabbits. After desexing your male and female rabbits can live together in harmony.

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