



Park Veterinary Centre

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Caring for your rabbit

DIET

Hay is the MOST IMPORTANT PART of your rabbit's diet and MUST be provided at all times. The fibre in it keeps the digestive tract working normally and chewing it helps to prevent the teeth from becoming too long.

GRASS AND FRESH FOODS are the SECOND MOST IMPORTANT PART of a rabbit's diet and should be given daily. In the summer let your bunny graze as much as possible. If you have not fed greens before, introduce your bunny to hay first so that the digestive system gets used to the higher level of fibre. This will reduce the risk of diarrhoea. Introduce greens gradually, adding a new variety every few days – if one causes diarrhoea then eliminate it from the diet. Feed at least three leafy green foods daily, about ONE tightly packed cup per Kg of rabbit. Try carrot tops, dandelion leaves and flowers, kale, peppers, cabbage, broccoli, carrots, pea pods and sprouts. Handfuls of fresh long grass are also useful, but DO NOT feed lawn mower cuttings.

RABBIT MIX – THE LEAST IMPORTANT PART. These are high in calories, low in volume and fibre, and do not need much chewing. They can cause obesity, liver, dental and kidney disease, and soft faeces. Ideally, they should not be fed at all and kept only as spare. Offer only small amounts for limited periods of time so your bunny still has plenty of space to eat hay and greens, and do not keep topping up the bowl or he will only eat his favourite bits!

WATER must be available at all times, changed daily, and kept defrosted in winter.

BRANCHES of apple or other fruit trees are also useful for rabbits to gnaw on.

HOUSING

Hutches must give the bunny plenty of space to move around, be well ventilated and sheltered from rain and direct sunlight (heat stress can be rapidly fatal). Some sunlight is important to help make vitamins.

Exercise is vital. Either in a run attached to the hutch or in the house – but any wires, which the rabbit might chew, need to be rabbit-proofed with plastic tubing.

'House bunnies' are becoming very popular. They are easy to litter train (do not use clay litter as it can block the gut if the rabbit eats it). They still need their own home cage where they feel secure. This should be left open at all times.

HANDLING

Always support the hind quarters to prevent serious back injuries. It is best to grasp the scruff or under the chest and place your other hand under the back legs. Practice near the floor so if your bunny jumps he does not have far to fall.



MEDICAL PROBLEMS

DENTAL DISEASE is what we most commonly see at the surgery. The most common complaint is that the rabbit is not eating, but eye infections and abscesses are also found. Incisors (front teeth) can be trimmed or removed if they become overgrown, but the molars (back teeth) often cannot be treated successfully. Rabbit teeth are continually growing and proper diet is VITAL to keep them worn down. Many rabbits eventually have to be put to sleep because of tooth problems.

FLY STRIKE. In the summer, flies may lay eggs on the bunny especially if he is dirty around the anus. The maggots, which hatch very quickly, cause serious, sometimes fatal, wounds. Again DIET is important in reducing the risk of soft faeces sticking around his bottom. Put a net curtain in front of the hutch to keep flies out, and check your rabbit thoroughly at least twice a day. There is a product called 'Rearguard' which is a liquid containing an insect growth regulator, which prevents maggots developing to the stage that causes damage to the rabbit. A single application to the rabbit's hindquarters gives 10 weeks protection.

SPEYING/NEUTERING. FEMALES can be done from 6 months of age, the younger the better and not if they are overweight. Female rabbits are very prone to developing tumours of the uterus which can be fatal – speying eliminates this risk, as well as reducing the risk of breast cancer, uterine infections, and false pregnancies. It also reduces the aggression which can be associated with being 'in season' (which is nearly all the time), and which may get worse if a tumour develops.

MALES can be castrated from 3 months old (once the testicles have descended) and this can decrease aggression and spraying of urine. Rabbits are social animals and best kept in pairs. The ideal situation to avoid fighting is a speyed female with a castrated male. Rabbits and guinea pigs should not be housed together due to their different dietary requirements – and they can bully one another.

OTHER PROBLEMS include respiratory infections, abscesses, hair balls, urinary disease, skin disease, and digestive problems. If your bunny seems off colour, you notice something unusual, or he stops eating, then contact the surgery.

VACCINATION

MYXOMATOSIS is a common disease in wild and pet rabbits which is spread by biting insects. Vaccination is recommended (ideally in May or June) or occasionally twice a year for rabbits at high risk. This can be done from 6 weeks of age.

VHD (Viral Haemorrhagic disease) is a new disease that was first reported in Britain in 1992. It is highly contagious and can be spread by contact with infected rabbits, or indirectly by infected foodstuffs or people who have been handling infected animals. The virus is rapidly fatal. Vaccination is recommended annually.

NOTES

'Pet Plan' now offer an insurance policy for rabbits, which may be worth considering.

Please note that if your rabbit is coming in for an anaesthetic then it should NOT be starved overnight (unlike a dog or cat)

If you are worried about your bunny in any way, or would like more information, then please contact the surgery on 01923 223321, or the clinic on 01923 681261.