



The **5** animal welfare needs

# Your rabbits' needs...



**pdsa**  
for pets in need of vets



***Do you know the five key things rabbits need to lead a healthy and happy life? They are called the five welfare needs and the law requires owners to provide these. PDSA's Animal Wellbeing Report has found that fewer than half of owners know what these five needs are.***

## **The five welfare needs**



**Environment**

**The need for a suitable environment  
(place to live)**



**Diet**

**The need for a suitable diet**



**Behaviour**

**The need to express normal behaviour**



**Companionship**

**The need to live with, or apart from,  
other animals**



**Health**

**The need to be protected from pain,  
suffering, injury and disease**

# Environment



## What rabbits need

If rabbits are kept in a hutch it should be big enough to allow them to lie down and stretch out comfortably in all directions, tall enough for them to stand up on their back legs without their ears touching the top, and long enough to allow for at least three hops from one end to the other.

Rabbits need plenty of secure safe space in which to exercise.

To get enough exercise, pet rabbits should have an exercise run on a grassy area. Ideally this should be attached to the hutch so that the rabbits can run, not just hop, whenever they want to.

## PDSA says

A spacious hutch and an area for daily exercise are key to providing a healthy environment for rabbits. Owners need to ask themselves whether the hutch and run are giving their rabbits enough space. Even if rabbits have a large hutch to sleep in, they still need plenty of secure space in which to exercise.

## The reality

Over 150,000 rabbits live in hutches that are too small.



100,000 rabbits may be confined to a hutch with no regular access to space outside it.

Just 21% of rabbits have constant access to an exercise area.

## checklist

A large hutch that is long enough to allow at least three hops and high enough for rabbits to stand up on their back legs. ✓

The hutch should be comfortable, dry, safe and draught-free. ✓

Access to a large, secure run. ✓

The hutch and run should be secure from predators, provide shelter from extremes of weather and have an area where the rabbits can hide. ✓

# Diet



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## What rabbits need

Rabbits should eat at least their own body size in good quality hay each day. Owners should allow constant access to clean, good quality hay that is not part of their bedding.

A handful of suitable fresh greens morning and evening; owners should vary the greens they feed their rabbits.

A tablespoon of commercial rabbit nuggets once daily (or twice daily if the rabbit weighs over 3.5kg). Rabbit muesli (a mix of seeds and flakes) should NOT be fed as it can cause painful dental disease.

## The reality

42% of rabbits eat less than their body size in hay or grass each day, with a further 3% not eating any hay at all.

88% of owners give their rabbits carrots, but these should only be fed occasionally as they are high in sugar. The leafy tops however are high in calcium, which is beneficial.

49% of owners report muesli is one of the main types of food their rabbit gets – that equates to over 800,000 rabbits.

## PDSA says

Hay and grass are the key elements of a rabbit's diet as they ensure good dental and digestive health. Two of the main issues vets commonly see in rabbits: dental disease and obesity, are directly linked to inappropriate diets such as rabbit muesli and not having enough hay or grass. Muesli does not wear a rabbit's teeth down sufficiently.

## checklist

Provide constant access to grass or clean, good quality hay that is not part of the bedding. ✓

Provide suitable fresh greens and a tablespoon of commercial rabbit nuggets daily. ✓

If you feed your rabbits muesli at the moment, gradually reduce the amount you give each day, over at least a week, and increase the amount of hay. ✓

# Behaviour



**Rabbits should be handled regularly, especially between one and four weeks of age.**

## What rabbits need

**Within their living space rabbits should have opportunities to dig, run and play every day to prevent boredom.**

**Rabbits should be handled regularly, especially between one and four weeks of age, so they are not scared of being handled when adult.**

## The reality

Only 38% of rabbits are reported to play with toys on a daily basis, while just 24% dig in the garden, which is important natural behaviour.

28% of rabbits were not handled daily when young.

## PDSA says

*Rabbits, like any other pet, need mental stimulation. The companionship of another rabbit, as well as regular handling and interaction with their owner, are all important, as is a selection of suitable toys and other objects to play with and hide in. Rabbits are more intelligent than people think and can be trained to understand basic commands and to use a litter tray.*

## checklist

- Give your rabbit opportunities to dig, run and play every day. ✓
- Handle young rabbits every day so they will not be scared when they are older. ✓
- Consider getting your rabbit a suitable companion, but follow advice on introducing them safely. ✓
- Seek professional advice for any behavioural problems that your rabbit may display. ✓

# Companionship



**Companionship for rabbits is one of the most neglected of all pet welfare needs.**



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## What rabbits need

**Rabbits are highly social animals and need the company of other rabbits. The best combination is usually a neutered male with a neutered female.**

**Adequate care and provision should be given to rabbits when the owner goes on holiday. Rabbits should be left with a trusted carer or in a suitable boarding establishment.**

## The reality

Over 1.1 million rabbits live alone when they should have a suitable companion.

61% of owners simply leave their rabbits at home with someone calling in to feed them. This is of particular concern for a rabbit that lives alone, because during the holiday period, as well as the absence of a suitable companion, the rabbit will also miss out on any human interaction.

## PDSA says

*Companionship for rabbits is one of the most neglected of all pet welfare needs. Rabbits, like other social animals, can suffer chronic loneliness and boredom if they live alone. Ensuring rabbits have company from another compatible rabbit is a key area for improvement. If you are thinking of getting a companion for your rabbit, make sure you find out how to introduce them safely to prevent fighting, and ensure they are neutered to prevent unwanted litters.*

## checklist

- Consider getting a companion for your rabbit; the best combination is a neutered male with a neutered female. ✓
- Make sure you find out how to introduce a second rabbit safely to prevent fighting. ✓
- Don't keep rabbits with guinea pigs because rabbits can bully and injure them. ✓
- Ensure your rabbits get the care and attention they need when you are on holiday. ✓

# Health



## What rabbits need

All rabbits should be registered with a vet, neutered and kept up to date with their vaccinations.

Rabbits should be checked daily for maggots during the warm summer months. If maggots are not detected they can lead to flystrike – a potentially fatal condition.

Rabbits should be checked for signs of dental disease every day. Reduced appetite, dribbling, weight loss, runny eyes or having a dirty bottom can indicate a dental problem.

## The reality

Only 37% of rabbits are neutered.

Just 38% are up to date with their boosters. This means many more are unprotected from potentially fatal diseases.

A majority of owners don't check their rabbits for maggots regularly enough.

Only 28% of owners check their rabbits' teeth at least weekly.

## PDSA says

Compared to the other species, rabbits fare the worst in terms of their health needs not being properly catered for. The low uptake of vaccination means that, as well as not being protected from potentially fatal diseases, many rabbits also miss out on a regular health check from a vet, meaning health problems could go undetected.

## checklist

- Check for signs of ill health every day. ✓
- Get your rabbits neutered and vaccinated. ✓
- Ensure your rabbits are registered with a vet. ✓
- Take your rabbits to your vet for a general health check if you have any concerns. ✓
- Check for maggots daily in summer months. ✓
- Check for signs of dental disease regularly. ✓
- Ensure your rabbits can exercise every day. ✓

# How can you help?

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