



## Caring For Your Pet Rabbit



PETVET clinics are well-equipped, full-service, small animal veterinary practices providing comprehensive diagnostic, medical, surgical and dental care. We aim to offer quality service, giving your pet the maximum opportunity to lead a long and happy life.

ALL THE CARE YOUR PET NEEDS!



## DID YOU KNOW?

Pet rabbits are relatives of the wild European rabbit "*Oryctolagus cuniculus*" which means "hare-like digger of underground passages". In the wild they live in large social groups in underground burrows called warrens, which are divided into small family units of 2-8 rabbits.

Rabbits can live for 8 – 12 years but some may live even longer.

By understanding wild rabbits we can learn how to take proper care of our pet rabbits by providing the following five basic welfare needs:

-  A suitable place to live
-  A healthy diet, including fresh, clean water
-  The ability to behave normally
-  Appropriate company, including any need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals
-  Protection from pain, suffering, injury and disease

## ENVIRONMENT

Providing housing that meets a rabbit's complex environmental and behavioural needs is an important part of pet ownership. A traditional small hutch as the sole and permanent housing for a rabbit will not meet their need for exercise and stimulation and could lead to health and behavioural problems. Their home should be dry, ventilated and draught-free. They require a large, escape-proof living enclosure where they can behave normally and exercise. This could be an exercise run outside, an indoor pen or a rabbit-proofed room in your house. Beware of accessible cables and wiring as rabbits love to chew! They also need a secure main shelter where your rabbits can shelter and rest together if they chose to. Rabbits like to graze, be sociable and forage for food, particularly in the early morning, overnight and in the evening.

Your rabbit will need enough bedding to keep them comfortable and warm. It should be safe enough to eat so dust-free hay would be an ideal insulating material.

Rabbits are active animals. Some can run at speeds of up to 80km/hour for short bursts and in the wild use quick, irregular movements to out-manoeuvre predators. When they are kept as pets they need to have enough space to run, jump, hop, stand fully upright on their hind limbs (a hutch height of 75cm for a medium-sized rabbit) and stretch out fully when they lie down. They need regular opportunities to exercise every day in order to stay fit and healthy and an appropriate place to toilet. If you provide litter trays for your rabbits there should be enough for each rabbit to have their own and use absorbent materials such as hay, newspaper or shredded paper. Their toilet area should be cleaned every day and their whole house weekly with non-toxic cleaning products. Environmental changes can be stressful for a rabbit so it can be helpful to place some of the used bedding into the toilet area to keep familiar smells around.

Rabbits are prey animals and have adapted to help protect themselves from predators

-  Eyes are on the sides of their head to give them a wide field of vision
-  Their large ears move independently and can make up to 12% of their body surface giving them very acute hearing
-  They have a great sense of smell to help them detect predators



 They can stand up fully on their muscular hind limbs to look for danger and can thump them on the ground to alert other rabbits to the presence of predators

Because of this pet rabbits need to be able to hide in a secure place away from the sight and smell of predators such as unfamiliar dogs, cats and birds of prey when their instincts say they must.

Rabbits are intelligent enough that they can be taught to respond to commands using positive, reward-based training and can also be house-trained. They are extremely inquisitive so their home should be safe, secure and free from hazards to prevent injury. For these reasons they should not be allowed to get bored as this is when they can cause mischief to themselves, each other and their environment.

## DIET

Rabbits are herbivores, which means they feed exclusively on plants. In the wild they eat only grass and other plants – in fact their digestive systems cannot function properly without hay and/or grass.

They have continuously growing teeth. Their front teeth (incisors) grow at a rate of 3mm/week. They also have cheek teeth (molars) further back in their mouth, which are also continuously growing. They are kept at the correct length by eating grass and hay which are both highly abrasive and help to wear down their teeth. In the wild rabbits spend approximately 70% of their time above ground feeding on grass. Rabbits feed on large quantities of low quality food. To gain as many nutrients as possible they produce special droppings called caecotrophs (these are their softer droppings), which they then re-ingest. This is how they get enough vitamin B and K.

They also produce harder, drier droppings which are generally the ones you find where they toilet. The amount a rabbit needs to eat depends on their age and lifestyle but if they are fed too much, like other animals, they will become obese which will make them more prone to disease and less able to exercise.

Each rabbit needs a “rabbit-sized” bundle of good quality, dust free hay every day. Some plants can be toxic so always check that what you are offering is safe to feed your rabbit. They should be offered a variety of washed leafy greens every day. Safe plants include cabbage, kale, broccoli, parsley and mint. Avoid lawnmower clippings as these can seriously upset their digestive systems. A rabbit’s diet doesn’t naturally include cereals, fruit or root vegetables but some apple and root vegetables such as carrots can be enjoyed as an occasional treat.

You can also feed a small, measured amount (an egg-cup full for each kg of rabbit) of good quality commercial rabbit pellets per day, but be aware that this amount may need to be adjusted to the individual rabbit’s needs i.e. lifestyle, activity levels and age of rabbit. Growing, pregnant or nursing rabbits may need a bit more. Ensure the bowl is empty before topping it up as this may encourage them not to eat enough grass or hay.

Avoid muesli-style rabbit foods as these encourage selective eating – they pick out the bits they like. This tends to lead to overweight rabbits with tooth and digestive problems due to an unbalanced diet. If you plan to transition your rabbit from a muesli-style food to a pellet diet please do this slowly over 2-3 days to avoid intestinal upsets.

Your rabbit needs fresh, clean drinking water at all times. Check their water supply twice a day and make sure it doesn’t freeze if they are outside on very cold winter days.

Watch for any changes in the amount each rabbit eats and drinks each day. Also keep an eye on their toileting habits as changes, especially reduced faeces or caking of soft stools around their hind end, can be signs your rabbit is becoming ill. If you are unsure, call the team at PETVET and they will help you decide if your rabbit needs a visit to the vet.



## BEHAVIOUR

Rabbits are highly sociable and most will prefer to be with another rabbit. A good combination is a neutered male housed with a neutered female. Neutering helps prevent fighting as well as the more obvious prevention of unwanted offspring. If they are brought up together they tend to get on well but when two adults are introduced it should be slowly and under supervision, preferably in a place that is new to both rabbits, as they may fight. Ensure they have space to get away from each other as even after they have established a “pecking order” sometimes a rabbit can be bullied if they can’t get away.

Take the time to handle your rabbit gently and regularly from a young age so that they learn to see you as a companion and friend. When picking them up it should be gently and firmly, supporting their back and hindquarters at all times as if they kick their powerful hind legs they can cause serious injury to their back. If a rabbit feels secure held close to your body they are less likely to panic and kick. It is especially important to have regular contact with rabbits housed on their own.

Rabbits and Guinea Pigs have separate needs and should not be housed together. The best company for a rabbit is another rabbit.

A rabbit’s behaviour depends on his/her age, personality and past experiences but any changes in behaviour should be noted as it may be the first sign of them becoming unwell. Chewing cage bars, over grooming, altered feeding or toileting behaviour, playing with their water, sitting hunched and repeated circling of their enclosure can be signs of stress in a rabbit.

Rabbits need an interesting environment to give them plenty of mental stimulation and exercise. They like hiding places and platforms to allow them to scan their environment and provide good exercise jumping on and off. They also like toys to allow them to chew, dig and investigate. Shredded newspaper, paper bags and cardboard boxes with holes cut in to climb in and out of can be fun too. Ensure any objects you give your rabbit are safe and inspect them regularly for injury points. Regularly rotate the objects you give as toys for variety.

## VACCINATION

In New Zealand, rabbits can be vaccinated against Viral Haemorrhagic Disease. This is a highly contagious lethal disease of rabbits. It is transmitted to pet rabbits either through direct contact with wild rabbits or can be carried on footwear and clothing. The vaccine is first administered at or after 3 months of age (or sooner in a more high-risk situation) and is repeated annually. When you bring your rabbit into PETVET for vaccination one of our vets will also give them a full annual health check.

## HEALTH AND WELFARE

Rabbits are not very good at showing you when they are in pain. Any change in their normal behaviour can be a sign that things are not quite right. They can be vulnerable to various infectious diseases and other illnesses, especially dental disease. Feeding them the correct diet of grass and hay can help prevent a lot of health problems, especially dental and gut disease.

Check that your rabbit is eating every day and passing plenty of droppings. If the number of droppings reduces or stops, talk to us straight away as they could be seriously ill.

Front teeth should be checked at least once a week as these can grow quickly. Only a vet should correct overgrown or misaligned teeth. Whenever we see your rabbit we will also check the cheek teeth as these are located further back in the rabbit’s mouth and can’t be seen without the use of special instruments. If a rabbit’s teeth are misaligned they don’t wear down evenly and they can develop tooth spurs growing into their tongue and cheeks. These can be treated but require a general anaesthetic to address properly.

In warm weather check the fur around your rabbit’s rear end every day. If they get soft stools stuck around here, flies are attracted to lay eggs, causing flystrike, which is often fatal. Stools stuck in this area can also be a sign of dental disease so have a vet check your rabbit if this occurs regularly.



Pet insurance is worth considering as it can cover for unexpected vets' bills in the future and safeguard your pet's health. Having a microchip inserted means you are likely to be more quickly reunited with your rabbit if they go missing.

Ideally rabbits should be neutered if they are not intended for breeding. Un-spayed female rabbits can be prone to cancers of the womb when they reach middle-age and un-neutered males are more prone to fighting when kept together.

Groom your rabbit's coat regularly to keep them in good condition. Rabbits can get fleas just like dogs and cats. There are products that are safe to treat your rabbit's fleas but not all cat and dog products are safe for rabbits. Please speak to us before applying flea treatment to your rabbit.

In conclusion, rabbits make wonderful pets and can live long, healthy lives when given the correct care and attention. If you have any questions about your rabbit or are wondering if a rabbit would make a good pet for you please don't hesitate to contact the team at PETVET and we will do our best to help.

## NOTES

### CLINIC LOCATIONS

**PETVET Lower Hutt**  
70 Pharazyn Street, Melling  
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**PETVET Silverstream**  
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