THE NARRE WARREN VET

Rabbit Handbook



the narre warren vet™

RABBIT HANDBOOK

Housing

Setting up your enclosure

Your rabbit's enclosure should be large enough for them to move comfortably and express natural behaviours. As a guide, the enclosure should be at least 2 metres long and tall enough for your rabbit to stand fully upright on their hind legs. Larger rabbits will require more space.
If your rabbit's enclosure is smaller than recommended, they should have at least 4 hours of supervised exercise each day in a larger, safe area.

Flooring

Wire flooring is not recommended, as it can cause painful sores on rabbits' feet. Enclosures should have a solid, flat floor or be well-covered with soft padding or mats for comfort and support.

Temperature & Protection

Rabbits are sensitive to extreme temperatures and should always have shelter from heat, cold, wind, and rain. Extra care is needed when temperatures fall below 4°C or rise above 28°C.



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Diet

Diets

The ideal rabbit diet is made to ensure minimal gastrointestinal disruption and to maximise dental health. A large percentage of health problems in rabbits can be due to an incorrect diet.

The correct diet for a rabbit should consist of:

- 80% fresh hay
  - Approximately one kitty litter tray full
- 15-20% green leafy vegetables
  - Approximately one 3L container loosely packed per 2 kg bodyweight
- 1-5% treats (including pellets, fruit and treat vegetables)
  - Carrots, apple, banana



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Diet

Hay

Hay should be the mainstay of every rabbit's diet. This helps to maintain the ideal digestive flora and also helps to prevent dental disease.

The ideal hay for rabbits:

- Up to 6 months of age
  - Lucerne (alfalfa) and Clover Hay:
    - This is highly palatable and also high in protein and calcium
    - Excess consumption of this type of hay in non-juvenile rabbits can cause obesity and bladder sludge
- Adult rabbits over 6 months of age
  - Oaten Hay
    - Young oaten hay is the ideal hay for consumption

Reasons for poor hay consumption

- Preferentially eating other foods such as pellets or rabbit mixes
- Poor quality hay offered
- Hay not changed daily



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Diet

Vegetables, Greens & Treats for Rabbits

Fresh greens are an important part of a rabbit's diet and should be offered daily. Variety is encouraged, as different rabbits may have different preferences and tolerances.

Daily Greens & Vegetables

Suitable options include:

- Carrot tops
- Dandelion and chicory leaves
- Milk thistle
- Asian greens
- Grass
- Celery
- Coriander
- Mint and other herbs
- Parsley

Feed in Moderation

Some vegetables can cause digestive upset or gas if fed in large amounts:

- Cucumber
- Cauliflower leaves
- Cabbage leaves
- Broccoli

Fruit Treats

Fruit should only be offered occasionally as a treat due to the high sugar content:

- Apples
- Oranges
- Grapes
- Bananas
- Strawberries
- Watermelon and melon

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Diet

Foods to Avoid for Rabbits

Some foods can cause digestive upset, toxicity, or serious health problems in rabbits and should be avoided completely.

Unsafe Vegetables & Plants

- Iceberg lettuce
- Potatoes
- Rhubarb
- Tomato plants
- Onion and garlic plants
- Peppers

Human Foods & Treats

Rabbits should not eat:

- Bread or biscuits
- Sugary foods
- Spicy foods
- Chocolate
- Caffeine-containing products
- Alcohol

Animal Products

Rabbits are herbivores and should never be fed:

- Meat
- Fish
- Dairy products

Other Dangerous Items

Also avoid:

- Corn kernels and popcorn
- Medications prescribed for other species

If you are unsure whether a food is safe for your rabbit, please contact the clinic before offering it.

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Vaccinations

Haemorrhagic Disease Virus (RHDV/Calicivirus)

Rabbits in Australia are vaccinated against Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease Virus (RHDV/Calicivirus), a highly contagious and often fatal virus spread through bodily secretions, contaminated objects, and insects. The virus can survive in the environment for up to a month.

Vaccination Schedule

- Young rabbits: Vaccination at 4, 8, and 12 weeks
- Adult rabbitss: booster annually
- Unvaccinated rabbits over 10 weeks or Overdue by more than 12 month: vaccine + booster 4 weeks later

Side Effects

We use a deactivated vaccine, which means that the particles within the vaccination allow the immune system to recognise the virus. Although generally safe, there is a small chance that your rabbit will develop clinical disease. Possible side effects include lethargy, reduced appetite, skin lesions, and rarely, lameness.



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Vaccinations

Myxomatosis

Myxomatosis is a severe viral disease caused by the myxoma virus, a poxvirus spread mainly by mosquitoes, fleas, and close contact between rabbits. It was introduced into Australia to control wild rabbit populations.

Common signs include:

- Swelling around the eyes, nose, and genital area
- Discharge from the eyes and nose

Most infected rabbits die within 10–14 days.

Prevention

There are vaccines for myxomatosis overseas, but they are not available in Australia. Pet rabbits have little natural resistance, and mortality rates are extremely high (96–100%).

Protection relies on preventing insect bites:

- Control fleas and mosquitoes
- Keep rabbits indoors when possible
- Avoid outdoor exposure during early morning and late afternoon, when mosquitoes are most active.



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Parasites

Many rabbits naturally carry low levels of mites or lice without showing signs of illness, but stress or changes to the immune system can allow these parasites to cause clinical disease.

Common Parasites in Rabbits

- Rabbit Fur Mite (“Walking Dandruff”)
  - Caused by the Cheyletiella mite, this parasite can lead to dandruff, flaky skin, itchiness, and skin irritation. More severe infestations may cause hair loss, self-trauma from scratching, and in rare cases, seizures.
- Ear Mites
  - Psoroptes cuniculi affects the ear canals and commonly causes crusting and thickening of the ears. In some cases, it can spread to other areas of the body. The mite can survive in the environment for up to 3 weeks.
- Fleas
  - Fleas can spread between rabbits, cats, dogs, guinea pigs, birds, and even humans.

Treatment

If parasites are diagnosed, treatment usually involves appropriate parasite control medication and environmental management to prevent reinfection.



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Neutering

Neutering is important for both female and male rabbits as well as for their owners.

Reasons to neuter your rabbit:

- Prevention of unwanted pregnancy
- Prevention and/or reduction of aggressive behaviour, especially aggression in a female rabbit towards humans and companions
- Prevention and/or reduction of undesirable sexual behaviours and territorial marking
- Male rabbits can start urine spraying and territorial marking as young as 5 to 6 months of age.
- Prevention and treatment of reproductive diseases
- Female rabbits not neutered have a high chance of getting uterine cancers. (80% of rabbits over the age of 5 will have uterine cancer)
- Male rabbits are at risk of getting testicular cancer



When should I neuter my rabbit?

Sometimes it can be very difficult to determine the age of young rabbits. We advised neutering rabbits after 6 months of age, so that we can correctly identify their gender as well as wait for them to finish their vaccination course.

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Socialisation

Rabbits are social animals and benefit from regular interaction with their owners.

Aim to spend at least 2–3 hours each day interacting with your rabbit to help build trust and confidence.

Where possible, keeping rabbits in a bonded pair is ideal for their welfare and emotional wellbeing. Introductions should be done carefully, as rabbits can become territorial and may fight if not properly introduced.

Some rabbits may also live peacefully alongside cats or dogs with appropriate supervision. However, rabbits and guinea pigs should not be housed together, as rabbits can carry Bordetella bacteria, which can be fatal to guinea pigs.



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Toilet training

Rabbits can be trained to urinate and defecate in a litter tray. Providing hay (both for consumption and toileting) in a tray will make it easier to train.

Toileting will be less centralised if hay is spread over the entire enclosure.



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Illness in Rabbits

Rabbits are very good at hiding signs of illness, so even subtle changes in behaviour can be important.

Common signs that your rabbit may be unwell include:

- Eating less or eating more slowly
- Sitting quietly or hiding more than usual
- Lethargy or reduced activity
- A hunched posture
- Reluctance to move
- Open-mouth breathing
- Smaller or fewer droppings

If you notice any of these signs, please contact the clinic promptly, as rabbits can become seriously unwell very quickly.

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