



THE BARRACKS  
VET SURGERY  
MOSMAN

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## RABBIT CARE

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Here are a few notes to help you care for your rabbit friends:

### Feeding

The best thing to feed rabbits is good quality hay. Hay is rich in the vitamins and minerals they need. It also contains essential fibres needed by the intestine to make caecotrophs, the oval green “droppings” rabbits must eat directly from their bottoms. (If you see many of these uneaten, call your vet for advice.) Hay purchased from pet shops is low in nutrients, and can be dirty or smell musty so many rabbits won't eat it. Buy horse hay which is always good quality. It should smell sweet, and can be slightly green. (Store it open to the air not in plastic bags.) Rabbits often pass stools while eating so placing hay in the litter tray as well as the feeder can help with toilet training. Because hay takes a long time to eat, rabbits stay happily occupied, feel “full”, and won't be as likely to develop behavioural problems.

Long fresh grass is great for rabbits too as it is high in fibre, low in fat carbohydrates and sugar, and abrasive for their teeth. Let your lawn grow long where rabbits exercise (at least four hours a day)

A variety of green vegetables and any herbs that are fresh enough to put on your own table is the third important food source. Vegetables on the turn can make a rabbit quite sick. If you feed celery, chop it so that the long strings don't cause a problem and avoid iceberg lettuce which causes diarrhoea. Avoid bananas and grapes, which can be addictive to rabbits, and never feed beans or peas as they are too high in carbohydrates. Be sure to wash all vegetables well to remove pesticide sprays and traces of fertiliser. Serve the vegetables wet as this will help digestion and water intake, as well as keeping the vegies fresh and delicious. Occasionally a particular vegetable will cause soft droppings for a rabbit, so determine and withhold that vegetable.

Plenty of fresh clean water is essential as rabbits are prone to a drying out of their gut. This in turn dries out their digesting food and slows its progress, which can cause a life threatening condition called ileus. Water bottles with droppers stay cleaner than bowls which must be washed daily with hot water and detergent to remove bacteria. However rabbits often prefer shallow ceramic bowls so do provide both types of water containers.

In short, feed half hay, half fresh greens, and occasionally fruit pieces as a treat or when reward training your rabbit. Supply plenty of fresh water. Avoid dry packaged pellets or mixes. Nuts, seeds, chocolate, corn and grains are a big no-no as they cause imbalances in the gut flora of the caecum. Do not give probiotics, mineral licks or supplements which can cause urinary stones. (Please see next page)

## Health

Female rabbits should be desexed, as 80% of them will develop uterine tumours otherwise, not to mention the many offspring who may be difficult to rehome or may escape into the wild damaging the Australian ecology. As social animals, they will want companionship, in fact some rabbits will pair for life and become inseparable. Desexed rabbits will be happier as they can mix non-aggressively with rabbit playmates instead of living in solitary confinement.

We suggest desexing at 4 – 5 months old, as they reach their sexual maturity at 4 – 7 months. Puberty starts at 12 weeks of age, so separate sexes at ten weeks old.

Rabbits must breathe through their noses, so teach children not to cuddle them too tightly. Also explain that when frightened, your normally docile bunny may bite or scratch an unsuspecting child. When carrying a rabbit, make sure to hold the back legs tightly against you, so that their powerful hind legs cannot kick out. This could cause spinal injuries to your pet.

Once a year, take your rabbit to the vet for a health check and a calicivirus vaccination. As much as possible, avoid exposure to mosquitoes as they carry myxomatosis. If rabbits are off their food or otherwise unwell, call the vet as soon as possible, as they do need to eat every day. Dental health is an issue, and the best prevention is the diet described overleaf. Occasionally a rabbit will need its teeth cleaned, or its front teeth (pegs) shortened if they grow into the bottom jaw. Your vet will advise you if this is required.

Temperature can be a problem for rabbits, who easily become heat stressed as they cannot sweat. On hot days, offer them a frozen water bottle to lie against.

## Housing

Rabbits need a secure home, but the typical hutches sold in stores can cause foot problems. Buy or make a hutch that:

- does not have a wire floor
- can easily be cleaned daily
- provides shelter from temperature, wind and rain
- has a hidden sleeping compartment
- has mosquito netting but adequate air flow
- has a large run which receives natural light
- has a flooring of hay or straw which is changed daily
- has a litter tray in a corner, which is also cleaned daily
- has plenty of water which can't be tipped over
- has a variety of toys and objects for interest which are changed often.

Whilst a hutch should give them a sense of safety, it should not be a jail! Plenty of stimulation and exercise is essential for strength, happiness and a well behaved family member. However, make sure neighbourhood cats and dogs cannot get near your rabbit during their playtime. As naturally inquisitive animals who love to nibble, watch out for power cords or treasures if your rabbit is allowed inside your home.

Vitamin D is usually gained from direct sunlight, and is needed for calcium utilisation. But even "indoor only" bunnies, following the diet we have described will receive enough Vitamin D for good health.

Rabbits can live up to nine years old so we hope you have a long and happy time together. If you have any concerns or questions, please call us at The Barracks Vet on 9969 1100.