

CARING FOR RABBITS

How to provide a long and fulfilling life to rabbits



Rabbits are popular pets because people erroneously think that they are easy to care for and undemanding. They are frequently bought as cuddly toys for children, when in fact rabbits do not like to cuddle – their natural instinct is to take flight. They are extremely sensitive and susceptible to numerous diseases.



Unfortunately, many rabbits lead a dreary existence in a cage that is much too small, somewhere in the corner of a room.

If you want to keep rabbits in a way that is appropriate to the species, you have to know and meet their needs. This guide provides an initial overview and serves as a basis for decision-making. It is not a substitute for specialised literature or regular visits to a vet familiar with the care of rabbits.

PREPARATION

Before you get a rabbit, you should thoroughly inform yourself about its needs. Rabbits are demanding. They require plenty of space and only like limited interaction with humans. They are not cuddly animals, as their natural instinct is to take flight, so they should not be held in your arms. Rabbits may be right for you if you have sufficient space, are happy to invest a lot of time in observing them and enjoy designing an exciting habitat for them. You should be prepared to clean their enclosure every day and make a commitment for the next 6-12 years. It is also important that everyone in your household agrees to getting a bunny and that no one is allergic to rabbit hair, grass or hay.

If you decide to get rabbits, prepare their enclosure and necessary basic items such as food and water bowls (not water bottles), enclosure, bedding and hiding spots in advance.

LEGAL REGULATIONS FOR RABBIT KEEPING

Please note that keeping animals in accordance with the law is not the same as keeping them in a manner that is suitable to their species! The regulations only indicate the point at which cruelty to animals begins, but not what is considered a good life for a rabbit. Sadly, rabbits are also popular in meat production and animal experiments, which is why the minimum standards are even lower than for many other animal species. You therefore should aim go well beyond the legal requirements, as they are nowhere near to meeting the animals' needs.

NO SOLITARY CONFINEMENT!

Rabbits are very social animals. Under no circumstances should they be kept alone. A second rabbit is an absolute must; keeping a group of at least three rabbits would be even better. When socialising, it is not the breed but the character that plays a role. The most harmonious relationships tend to be between neutered male rabbits or opposite-sex rabbits, ideally of the same age. Young rabbits always need a rabbit of the same age to play with in order to ensure an age-appropriate development.

PAIRING



If you want to bring rabbits together, you should avoid doing this in summer. As maggots regularly spread through wounds, the risk of infection after a possible bite is particularly high in the warmer season. Male rabbits (called bucks) should always be castrated before they are socialised. Caution: Following castration, they will remain capable of breeding for a while! Females can also be neutered. Neutering has many advantages, but also a few risks. Discuss the procedure with a vet that is specialised in rabbits.

Tip: The pairing will work better if the enclosure is redesigned or restructured. Socialisation works even better on neutral ground, as the objects in the enclosure will still smell of the rabbits that have lived there for a long time and they may defend their enclosure despite the new layout.

ACQUISITION



Animal shelters and rescue centres always have a lot of rabbits. Please follow the principle 'Adoption before purchase'. Do not buy rabbits from pet stores, private individuals, or farms. The advantage of adopting from a rabbit sanctuary is that you know the animals and at the same time you receive advice. If you are not allowed to take any rabbits home, this is most likely because you do not meet their needs (yet), so have a think about how you can improve the environment you want to offer them.

BASIC NEEDS

Rabbits have basic needs that must be met in order for them to lead a happy and healthy life. These include, in particular, digging, periscoping (standing on their hind legs), running and zigzagging, marking, grooming themselves or each other, and much more. To do this, they need sufficient space, a suitable ambient temperature, fresh air and protection from extreme weather conditions and predators.

Rabbits are crepuscular animals, meaning they are mainly active in the early morning and late in the evening. They should therefore never be locked in a small cage at night. If the outdoor enclosure is not suitable for 24-hour housing, the night enclosure should be at least 6 m² or offer a minimum of 3 m² per rabbit.

Tip: Rabbits love digging – and this is only possible in an outdoor enclosure. Please bear this in mind before getting rabbits.

BASIC EQUIPMENT

The basic equipment includes the following:

Transport box (Not too small! Please do not use hay during transportation to avoid eye injuries. Cover the box with a sheet or towel), guide on keeping rabbits, hay rack (closed at the top to protect it from the weather), solid drinking bowls (e.g. made of ceramic), bedding, a house, cleaning supplies, first-aid kit, claw clippers, etc.

Tip: Before getting rabbits, find out the locations of your nearest vet, ideally a rabbit specialist, so you know who to contact in an emergency.



Rabbits have a strong urge to move. They love to run, stand up on their hind legs and jump up, zoom around and dig. For this reason, standard cages are not suitable for rabbits. The rabbit enclosure should offer sufficient space to allow the rabbits to enjoy themselves in line with their needs. Three square meters of space per rabbit is the absolute minimum, but bigger is definitely better!



The available space isn't the only important thing; the enclosure's design is just as important. It should provide variety and offer different levels. It can consist of an indoor or outdoor area – or you could combine both in order to offer the rabbits more variety (see the notes under the headings set-up, hiding places, feeding and drinking areas, and hygiene).

Make sure that the enclosure is also accessible to humans, as this makes it easier to clean the enclosure and provides more interaction opportunities with the pets. We have observed that interest in the pets tends to last longer if you can go actually enter the enclosure and interact with the rabbits from inside.



Keep the different seasons in mind. In summer, you should provide cool shady areas, summer feed and regular check-ups for maggot infestation. In winter, you should make sure they have insulated sleeping quarters, a dry exercise area, wood from the forest to nibble on, lukewarm water or heated drinking bowls, and winter feed.

When building the enclosure, make sure you use rabbit-compatible materials (e.g. no toxic paintwork, prioritise practicality/functionality and safety over aesthetics).



If you keep rabbits outside, please ensure that the enclosure is protected from predators and that the rabbits have adequate shelter from the weather. Full protection against predators (e.g. martens, birds of prey etc.) is only provided if the enclosure is secured on all six sides with mesh size of no more than 4cm.

It is best to use soil or sand on the enclosure's floor/ground. A lawn is always fun, but it may not last long as it will be eaten quickly. To prevent the risk of digging (making it not only escape-proof but also burglar-proof, as foxes and martens will not be deterred by a simple fence) there should be a firm surface underneath everything (e.g. concrete). For optimal species-appropriate outdoor housing, the enclosure should therefore be dug at least 0.5-1.0 meters into the ground.

OUTDOOR VS. INDOOR HOUSING

Letting the rabbits live outside all year round is the most animal-friendly way to keep them. Although it is very demanding and time-consuming, it is worthwhile if you want to offer your pets the best. They should always be acclimatised to outdoor housing in spring so that they have time to adapt.

If you want to keep rabbits indoors, you must ensure that they can satisfy their natural needs and always have enough exercise. In addition to the points already mentioned, this includes gnawing. Be aware that power cables, houseplants, full bathtubs, open windows and many other things are potential lethal threats. It is best to prepare a separate room for the rabbits, and if you give them run of the whole apartment, make sure they are supervised. Rabbits can be house-trained, but for this they need very large, low-rimmed trays into which they can easily hop. These should be placed in all corners of the room. You can find information about house-training rabbits in rabbit guidebooks or online. But don't forget that animals also use faeces and urine to mark their territory.

SETUP

The rabbit enclosure should be equipped with various features to meet the rabbits' natural needs (see heading 'Basic needs'!). Provide a variety of different levels, such as ramps or platforms, so that the rabbits can jump, run and climb. Also provide gnawing sticks or special rabbit toys to encourage their natural gnawing behaviour. Make sure you provide sufficient amounts of straw so that the rabbits can dig.

Suitable litter is made from natural fibres such as hemp, straw, corn or other plants (do not use perfumed or clumped litter for the toilet, they are not cats!)

HIDING PLACES

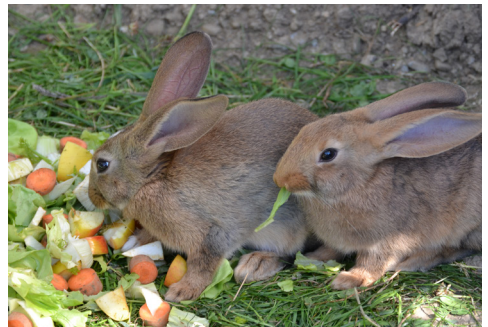


Rabbits are prey or flight animals by nature and have developed an instinct to retreat to safe hiding places. You should therefore offer rabbits various hiding opportunities in the enclosure, such as small houses, tunnels, caves or upside-down baskets.

These hiding places allow the rabbits to feel safe and to hide from potential danger. Houses should always have two entrances or exits to prevent fights when one rabbit blocks the entrance and the other rabbit has no way of escaping, which can result in nasty bites.

FEEDING AND DRINKING AREAS

Place several food and water bowls in the rabbit enclosure to give the rabbits easy access to food and water. Use heavy bowls or attach them securely to prevent them from tipping over. Make sure there's always fresh water available to your rabbits. Feeding areas should be placed in different parts of the enclosure to accommodate the rabbits' natural instincts to move and gnaw. Food bowls should be made of a suitable material that is easy to clean (e.g. clay or ceramic). Bowls made of hollowed-out birch wood for nibbling on are also suitable. Metal, glass or plastic bowls are not suitable.



HYGIENE

Keeping the rabbit enclosure clean is important in order to ensure the rabbits remain healthy. You should clean the enclosure regularly, remove droppings and replace soiled bedding. The food and water bowls should also be cleaned regularly, making sure they are clean and free of bacteria or mould. You should also make sure that the rabbit enclosure is always well ventilated to ensure good air quality.



Cleaning the enclosure is time-consuming and will need to be done daily for years.

FOOD

A rabbit's diet should consist of high-quality hay and fresh vegetables. Give the rabbits fresh water daily in suitable drinking bowls and make sure that the food intake corresponds to the animals' needs and exercise (weight control).

Commercial rabbit food alone does not usually meet the animals' needs. The preparation of species-appropriate and varied food is time-consuming but is an essential part of animal-friendly rabbit keeping!

The following list is not final.

Popular (meadow) herbs (fresh or dried)	Basil, nettles, daisies, goutweed, hibiscus flowers, chamomile, marjoram, mallow flowers, oregano, parsley, peppermint, marigold, rosemary, sorrel, yarrow, ribwort plantain, deadnettle, thyme, chickweed.
Popular wooden plants, branches, and leaves (without fruit and nuts)	Apple tree, bamboo, birch, hazelnut, blueberry, raspberry, currant, quince, plum, gooseberry, willow.
Popular vegetables	Chicory, fennel, kale, cucumber, carrots, salad, celery, turnip, corn, pepper, parsley root, rutabaga, zucchini (also flowers).

Native fruits (apple, pear, plum) should only be fed as an occasional treat.



Be careful with cabbage-like vegetables: If you feed the rabbits with grain, too much cabbage will lead to bloating and diarrhoea, which can prove fatal. There is really no need to feed grains to rabbits. Even if it is high-quality rabbit food, it will still fill the rabbits quickly, meaning they will eat and chew less, causing tooth abrasion. Long-term, this can lead to dental problems. If you don't feed your rabbits any grain, then you can give them cabbage in large quantities. This is particularly important in winter, as cabbage contains more vitamins and minerals than lettuce.

Tip: Do not feed your rabbits pellets, drops, chewy sticks or muesli bars!

DANGERS

In addition to the predators which should be prevented from entering the enclosure, there are other potential dangers for rabbits, including toxic plants, sharp objects and household chemicals. You should make sure that the rabbit enclosure is safe and will protect the animals from such dangers.

STIMULATION

Rabbits are curious and active; they need activity and mental stimulation. Provide them with toys to exercise their natural behaviour and spend time with your rabbits by interacting with them and petting them only if they want it (don't force them!).



Suitable toys include tunnels, digging possibilities, climbing, nibbling and gnawing opportunities, obstacle courses, food toys (food balls, rattle boxes, sniffing boards).



HEALTH / ILLNESS / PREVENTION

Any rabbit can become ill. In order to recognise diseases at an early stage, it is important that you observe your rabbits daily and get to know their normal behaviour. The better you know your rabbits, the quicker you will notice changes in their behaviour and be able to act immediately. Don't forget that rabbits suffer in silence. They hide their illness for as long as possible because, as favoured prey animals, they try to avoid being noticed in the wild. If you notice any abnormal behaviour, you should definitely consult a vet. To ensure that emergencies do not become a financial challenge or that your finances do not interfere with your pet's welfare, we recommend setting up a vet account from the start.



For orientation: A healthy rabbit should have clear eyes, clean ears, a clean nose, be neither emaciated nor overweight, have a well-groomed coat, clean paws, no excessively long claws, solid faecal pellets, normal urine and healthy front teeth. It should not be limping, nor should it take on a protective posture or appear listless. It should react to external stimuli, eat with a good appetite and be actively social.

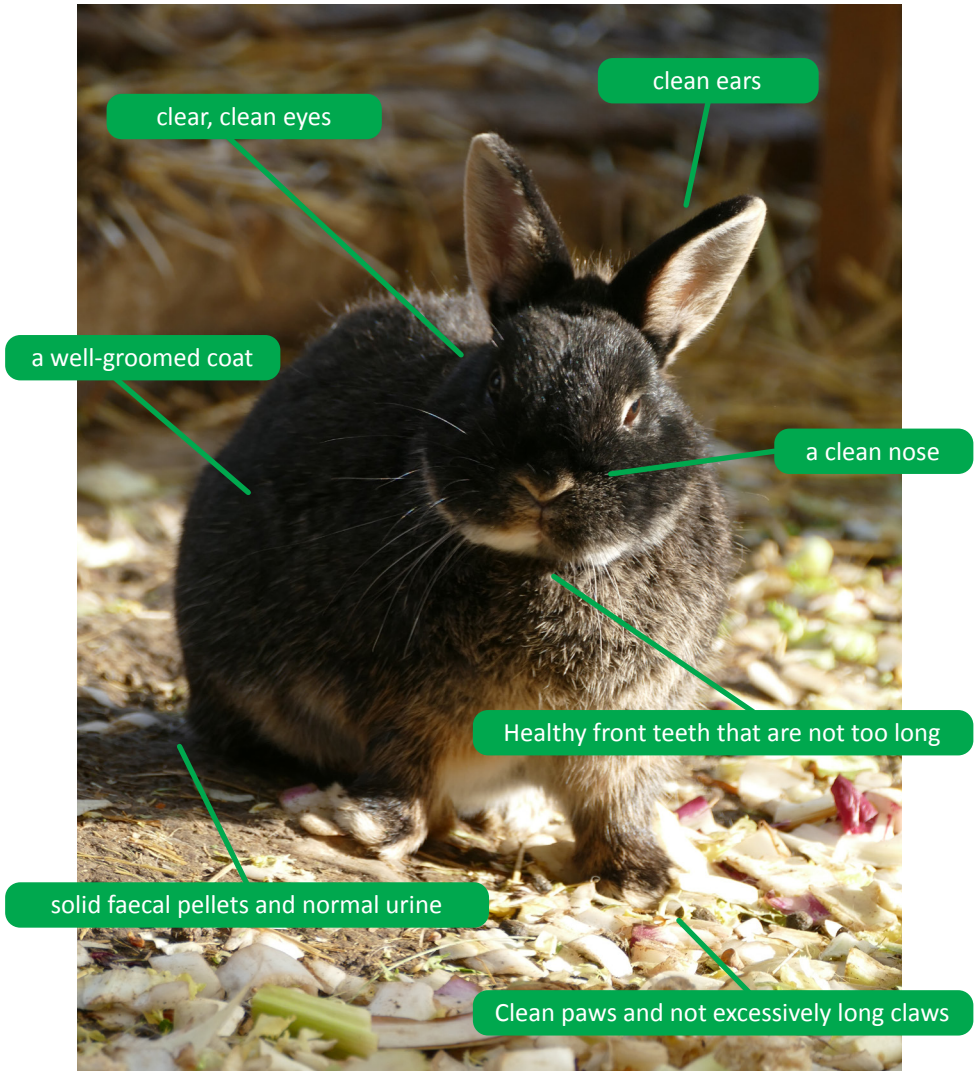
Typical signs of illness are changes from the aforementioned criteria, e.g. loss of appetite, diarrhoea, listlessness, breathing difficulties, huddling together or other visible changes in behaviour. These are all alarm signs that must be taken seriously, otherwise this can lead to the rabbit's death.



Besides checking your rabbits' health on a daily basis, you should also have them vaccinated regularly and protect them against parasites.

When well looked after, rabbits can live for ten years or more. So, before you decide to get rabbits, you should ensure that you can commit to looking after them for their entire lifetime, both in terms of care and financially.

A healthy rabbit has ...



SUMMARY

Keeping rabbits in a species-appropriate way requires knowledge, commitment, time and money. So it is crucial that you inform yourself thoroughly and make a well-considered decision if you are thinking of keeping rabbits. Expert care, a suitable environment and the right diet are essential for a happy and healthy rabbit life – and will ensure that you will be able to enjoy your rabbits for a lifetime!



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