

## Fact Sheet for Getting A New Rabbit

### You will need:

- Hutch or indoor crate and hiding boxes- if possible take some old bedding from the breeder to help them feel safe and recognise their new area as 'home'. Leave them in this space for 12-24 hours to allow them to build a sense of security here. Keep noise to a minimum.
- Bowl- select a heavy, ceramic bowl, easy to clean. The bowl should only be used for feeding when it is necessary to monitor the rabbit's intake. On other occasions, other methods of feeding, that closer resemble their natural foraging behaviour, should be used.
- Food balls & puzzles feeders- these are a better method to provide the rabbits food in as it allows mental stimulation and physical exercise whilst they are feeding. Continue their previous diet and change onto a new one slowly if required, over a few weeks. Provide plenty of good quality hay and grass.
- Water- this should be provided in a bottle or a bowl. Most rabbits actually prefer drinking from a bowl, however a bottle reduces faecal and urine contamination, and allows water intake to be monitored if required. Water should be changed daily and the bowl or bottle cleaned out, along with the food dispenser, at least once a week. The water supply should be checked frequently in the summer for algae build up, and in the winter for freezing.
- In the wild, rabbits spend up to 70% of their waking time foraging. This should be replicated as much as possible for pet rabbits. See below for ideas on environmental enrichment. Rotation of toys helps prevent boredom. You can create fun games for rabbits, such as stuffing inner cardboard tubes with hay and healthy snacks, as well as wrapping food items in brown paper.
- Rabbits are herbivorous- meaning they only eat plants. Therefore their digestive system has adapted to be able to digest this fibrous diet. See below for feeding advice.
- They have continually erupting and growing teeth; incisors at the front for nibbling off vegetation, and premolars and molars for grinding down the food. These will need to be regularly checked by a Vet or Vet Nurse to ensure they remain healthy.

- A litter tray may be required if you are to house your rabbit indoors. This can be set up with absorbent pellets beneath a hay top layer. In order to train your rabbit to use the tray, keep it restricted to a small area to begin with and place the tray where the rabbit is naturally selecting to toilet. Place some droppings in the tray to show your rabbit where to go. If your rabbit prefers to go in a different site, relocate the tray there. Reward with a healthy snack each time they successfully use the tray and slowly increase the area the rabbit is confined to as the litter tray training progresses.
- Short-haired breeds should only need grooming occasionally; long haired breeds will need grooming daily. This is a good opportunity for bonding with your rabbit and performing a quick check of their physical condition- checking teeth, ears and for external parasites. Coat- specific brushes should be purchased.
- Rabbits should be handled by placing a hand under their chest and the other hand supporting its hind quarters. Hold them into your body. Release the rabbit if they begin to struggle and stroke calmly on the floor until they relax. Handle regularly from a young age to get them used to it. This should be done by a competent adult rather than child to ensure it is done correctly.
- Rabbits should be introduced to each member of the family sensitively. Most adults are good at being patient and allowing contact on the rabbit's terms, however children often find this difficult and constant supervision is required. Get the child to sit calmly on the floor and allow the rabbit to make the initial approach before stroking gently. Keep the situation calm, and, if you have bonded pairs of rabbits, do the introductions together so they can provide reassurance for each other.
- If you own other animals, these introductions also require time and patience. All animals should be fully vaccinated. They should be separated at first and introduced through a wire fence, with constant supervision, to allow them to get acquainted with each others scents. Do not rush introductions.
- Rabbits do not routinely require regular flea and worming treatment, however if you have other pets, these should be kept up to date with flea treatment as the cat/dog flea can jump onto and bite rabbits.
- It is vital to vaccinate your pet rabbit against Myxomatosis and Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease (strain 1&2) to prevent contraction of these deadly diseases.

## **Housing**

In the wild, rabbits roam over areas of up to 30 football pitches.

The minimum recommendation for a hutch size 6ft x 2ft x 2ft. But a hutch alone is not enough, it should be attached to a secure run of at least 8ft x 6ft. This is the minimum recommendation for a pair of rabbits, as they are social animals which prefer to be kept in groups as opposed to in isolation.

## **Pairing**

Rabbits are social creatures and live in large groups in the wild. They can communicate well together through mutual grooming, playing, relaxing and eating together, as well as looking out for each other. Studies show they seek company even above food. The ideal pairing for pet rabbits is a castrated male and spayed female, although any pairing can work if neutered and brought up together from birth. Rabbits housed alone can become bored, lonely or depressed, which can lead to other behavioural problems. However, a pair of rabbits will need the opportunity to have space away from each other, so separate bedding areas and hiding boxes are recommended for each rabbit.



New introductions should be slow and careful as existing rabbits can become territorial when a new rabbit is introduced. Bonding methods include placing the rabbits in adjacent runs, where they can see and smell each other but retain their own space initially. They can then be both placed in neutral territory, however they will need constant supervision at first whilst the bond is created.

## **Environmental Enrichment**

Their environment not only needs to be the correct size, it also needs to provide the rabbits with enough environmental stimulation to prevent boredom or frustration. Rabbits should be encouraged to express their natural behaviours, including digging, jumping, playing, chin rubbing and chewing.

Some ideas for environmental enrichment include;

- Provide a safe area for your rabbits to dig in- for example a plastic dog bed, with holes drilled in the base for drainage and filled with soil.
- Shredded paper, paper bags to pull apart
- Cardboard boxes with holes cut in to provide hiding spaces
- Commercial toys- such as tunnels and mirrors and games for your rabbits to interact with

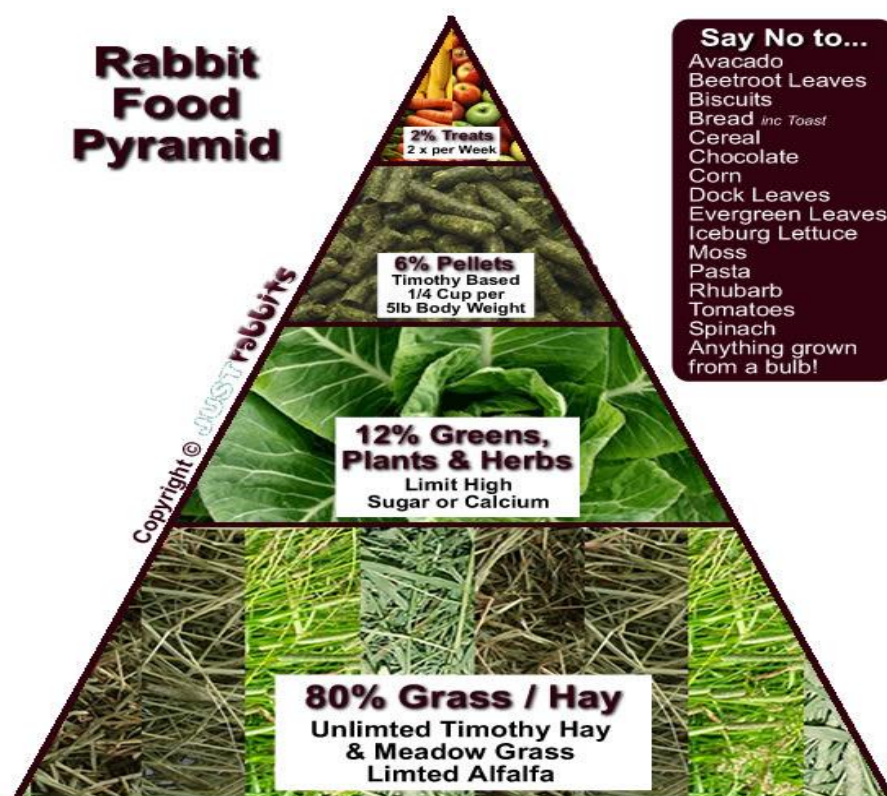
Rabbits are **BIG** chewers! This is natural behaviour for rabbits and should be encouraged to prevent boredom and encourage good dental health. This can be achieved by;

- providing a constant supply of good quality hay
- providing chew sticks made for rabbits
- providing non-chemically treated fruit tree branches

## Diet

Rabbits require a **constant supply of good quality hay** because:

- It provides the vital fibre required by rabbits for **good digestive health**
- It wears down their continuously growing teeth, **reducing dental problems** which would otherwise require veterinary treatment
- It ensures **emotional wellbeing**, allowing rabbits to express normal behaviours such as foraging



Muesli diet can lead to selective feeding, meaning the rabbit consumes the parts high in starch but leaves the high fibre pellets which are essential for a balanced diet.

### **Muesli diet vs Pellet diet**



Selective feeding can lead to many health problems, including obesity, poor dentistry, reduced hay intake, reduced water intake and reduced eating of caecotrophs (the soft faeces rabbits should eat naturally).

A pellet diet provides all the rabbit's nutrients in one form, meaning the rabbit will consume a healthy balanced diet every meal.

If your rabbit is being fed a muesli diet, please speak to a Vet or Vet Nurse for advice on how to change your rabbit onto a pellet food. This change should be introduced very gradually (over 28 days) to prevent tummy sets which can be fatal in rabbits.

It is important to monitor this to ensure your rabbit remains in good health. Speak to your Vet or Vet Nurse if you have concerns over your rabbits weight. We provide a Free Weight Clinic at Astonlee where we can discuss all of your rabbits dietary requirements and how to achieve an ideal weight.

### **Feeding Enrichment**

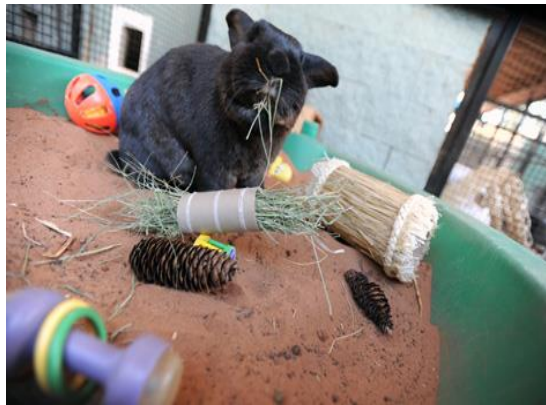
In the wild, rabbits spend 70% of their time foraging and eating. We should try our best to replicate this behaviour for our pet rabbits to provide stimulation and prevent boredom and frustration which may lead to other negative behaviours. This can be achieved through commercial toys and inventive methods of feeding your rabbit, such as;

- Scatter feeding- so the rabbit spends time foraging for their food as they would in the wild

- Hanging up their greens and hiding food- to encourage the rabbit to work mentally and physically for their food



- Wrapping food in brown paper parcels or stuffing food and hay into the middle of toilet rolls- again to provide mental stimulation as the rabbit works out how to get to the food



## Flystrike

As the weather gets warmer, rabbit owners should be aware of the risk of **Flystrike** in their rabbits. Flies are attracted to moist, warm, strong odour areas, and a rabbit with a dirty backend is the perfect environment for flies to lay their eggs. Once the eggs hatch, the maggots eat away at the rabbits flesh and this is an **emergency situation** which requires **immediate veterinary attention**.

Rabbits can have a dirty backend due to;

- obesity or arthritis preventing them eating their caecotrophs/ cleaning themselves
- poor diet reducing caecotroph ingestion
- older or sick rabbits unable to clean themselves

You should check your rabbit twice daily to ensure they remain clean and dry. If you find your rabbit is regularly dirty, you should consult a Vet or Vet Nurse for advice as to the cause of this.

Rearguard can be applied to protect your rabbit from the risks of Flystrike. The recommended use is between May and October; application once every 10 weeks.



## Neutering

Females can be spayed as soon as they sexually mature, usually around 4 months of age, but many veterinarians prefer to wait until they are 6 months old, as surgery is riskier on a younger rabbit. Males can be neutered as soon as the testicles descend, usually around 3-1/2 months of age.

Neutering is always advised for the following reasons;

- Controlling unwanted behaviour such as aggression- towards other rabbits and humans
- Preventing unwanted pregnancies
- Preventing uterine and mammary tumours in females

It is important to note than a male rabbit can still impregnate an unneutered female for up to 8 weeks following castration, so they should not be placed back together until after this period to reduce the chance of unwanted pregnancies.

## **Insurance**

It is vital to consider insurance if you are thinking about getting a rabbit. This will give you peace of mind that should your rabbit require veterinary treatment, it might be covered financially. A pet rabbit will become a member of the family. However, like all pets, they are susceptible to illness and injury which could require a trip to the vets. Treatments and surgeries for rabbits can run into hundreds of pounds. Taking out an insurance plan allows you to plan ahead for these times. It is advised to take out a Lifetime Cover plan, to ensure your rabbit has the best insurance plan. Speak to your Vet for more details on this.