

Thinking about Adopting a Rabbit

The aim of Anim-Mates is to find every rabbit a home where his or her individual physical and behavioural needs will be looked after. In order to make sure we achieve this, we have developed a series of policies, advised by the Rabbit Welfare Association, that we require to be met.

If you are thinking of adopting a rabbit(s), read through this article, in which we aim to not only set out our policies but also explain the evidence and reasoning behind them.

Caring for rabbits can be immensely rewarding and we hope that this article will help you prepare and provide the best environment for your rabbits to flourish in.



Social Creatures

The unfortunate, yet typical image of a pet rabbit is a solitary animal kept in a small hutch at the back of the garden. This dates back to when rabbits were kept for food and the welfare of the animal was not taken into consideration.

Many people who have the best of intentions, may not have the best information and therefore, may believe that all a rabbit needs is a hutch and occasional human contact; but we need to move on from this profoundly cruel ideal.

Rabbits are social creatures and even with human interaction, will require the company of another rabbit. We therefore will not rehome a rabbit to a home where they will live a life of solitude. At Anim-Mates, rabbits are rehomed as a pair/ group or singularly to become a companion to a family's existing pet rabbit.

Without a companion, a rabbit can suffer from boredom, depression and loneliness that can result in aggression, withdrawal and a decline in their health.

Bonding

Although the need for a companion is paramount to a rabbit's wellbeing, introductions do not always result in love at first sight between rabbits. Introducing two rabbits together should be implemented gradually, on neutral territory to allow them to get used to one another. If you are adopting a single rabbit to become a companion to your existing bunny, we will offer you full support and advice on how to bond them together.



Housing

In order for your rabbits to be able to exercise and move freely, we require you to have a hutch with an attached run of the following minimum dimensions and requirements:

Hutch: 180cm x 60cm (6ft x 2ft) Bolts on door

Run: 245cm x 90cm x 60cm (8ft x 4ft x 2ft) with a secure lid

The run should be covered in high quality wire mesh that should also line the ground to prevent foxes from digging in and your rabbits from digging out. Please note that chicken wire is not fox-proof, it easily warps and can be cut through making it unsuitable.

Your rabbits should have access to the run at all times – though if you live in a fox-prevalent area we would suggest that the rabbits be secured within their hutches at night.

We have often had prospective adopters state that they do not need a run as their rabbits will be let out in the garden. This is not acceptable as the rabbits' main opportunity for exercise, as it requires human supervision. It also means the rabbits are confined to their hutch for the majority of the day. Rabbits should be able to run around on their own accord and therefore a hutch with adjoining run is an essential requirement needed to pass the home check.

Hutches should be lined with newspaper and hay or a paper pulp based bedding. During cold weather, the hutch should be lined with a thicker layer of straw and in extremely cold weather we suggest placing a "snugglesafe" microwavable heat pad under the hay. Snugglesafe heat pads cannot be chewed through and provide up to 8 hours of heat.

We also recommend the Runaround connective run system (www.runaround.me) that enables you to extend your rabbits run safely and securely.

Feeding

Rabbits need a high fibre grass based diet that should be provided in the form of:
Unlimited water

Unlimited good quality hay (80% of diet)

A small amount (an eggcup full) of pellet feed per rabbit twice daily (10%)

Fresh green leafy vegetables (10%)

Rabbits are crepuscular animals, which means that they are most active during dawn and dusk and as such, are best fed during these times. Scattering fresh vegetables throughout the run encourages foraging, and is a form of enrichment.

Please note that muesli mix feed, which is most commonly bought for domestic rabbits is a poor and incomplete form of nutrition as it is high in sugar (which can cause debilitating dental disease) and also encourages selective feeding as the rabbit misses out on a complete nutritional profile by only eating their favourite bits.

If your rabbit has been fed on muesli mix, it is best to gradually wean them off and on to pellet feed (we recommend Burgess Excell).

A rabbit's high fibre diet is largely made up of indigestible plant matter. To unlock the nutrients, this plant fibre enters the cecum, a large blind-ended sac located between the small and large intestine. Bacteria, yeast and other organisms within the cecum break down the indigestible plant fibre turning it into cecotropes, nutrient rich dietary items that are then re-ingested. Your rabbit will normally take the cecotropes directly from its bottom but you may very occasionally come across them in their litter tray.



Toys

Rabbits are inquisitive and curious creatures that enjoy the physical and mental stimulation that toys provide. You can find a wide variety of rabbit toys in pet shops such as dangly mobiles, loofah and willow chews as well as balls to push around, but inexpensive household items such as empty cardboard boxes, inner toilet roll tubes and empty tissue boxes are all items rabbits can play with.

Providing tunnels, ramps and different levels for your rabbit to hide in, jump on and climb over are all forms of enrichment that your rabbit will benefit from. Some rabbits also enjoy "organising" or "flattening" a scrunched up towel (bed spread, sofa throw – depending what surface they are on!) – just make sure to supervise them in case the flattening the towel turns into eating it.

As a rabbit's personality differs from the next, some may get on with particular toys that others don't, so it is just a case of providing lots of different things to see which rabbit prefers what.

Children

Many of the rabbits we rescue at Anim-Mates were bought for children, who after the novelty wore off, no longer wanted to look after it. The Rabbit Welfare Association (RWA) has found that the average time for a child to become bored with their pet is 8 weeks.

Alongside the RWA, other rescue centres and charities we are trying to dispel the myth that rabbits are "good starter pets" for children. Aside from the fact that children often lose interest, rabbits have very fragile bones; as such, if dropped, even from a low height, the rabbit can easily break its bones. We therefore do not rehome rabbits to children, or to adults who intend the rabbit to be a present for their child. An adult must take complete responsibility for any animal adopted from Anim-Mates.

Children can interact with your rabbits, but it is best to allow this to happen on the rabbits' own terms by sitting with them on the floor. Avoid picking up your rabbit as they tend to find this distressing as in the wild they are preyed upon. By sitting with them, over time they will learn to trust you and may enjoy sitting on your lap being stroked.

We hope that this information has been useful in helping you decide whether rabbits are the right choice of pet for you. Rabbits are intelligent, affectionate and gentle creatures that can truly flourish in the right environment.

RABBIT ADOPTION CHECKLIST

- Are you over 18 years of age and prepared to take for responsibility for rabbit(s)
- Do you have a hutch that is a minimum of 180 cm x 60 cm? (6ft x 2ft)
- Are bolts fitted to each door?
- Is the hutch situated out of draughts and direct sunlight?
- Does the hutch have an adjoining run of a minimum 245cm x 90cm x 60cm? (8ft x 4ft x 2ft)
- Will the rabbits have access to the run every day?
- Does the run have weld mesh/quality wire both around the run and lining the floor? (chicken wire is inadequate)
- Does the run have a secure lid?
- Will you provide quality hay at all times?
- Will you provide fresh green vegetables and good quality food every day (we recommend Burgess Excel)
- Will you keep your rabbits vaccinations up to date? (Myxomatosis and VHD)
- Do you have provisions for someone to care for your rabbits should you become unwell or go on holiday?



References

Rabbit Welfare Association <http://www.houserabbit.co.uk>

Rabbit Bonding Guide <http://www.rabbitnetwork.org/articles/bond.shtml>

Rabbit Digestive Health <http://www.bio.miami.edu/hare/poop.html>

Importance of toys: <http://www.rabbit.org/journal/3-6/chew-stick.html>

General Information <http://www.rabbit-information.co.uk/>

Rabbit Rescue Centres <http://www.rabbitrehome.org.uk/>

Anim-Mates <http://www.anim-mates.org.uk/>

Run-A-Round <http://www.runaround.co.uk>