

Getting started in Rabbits



Welcome to the Rabbit Hobby

Keeping rabbits is a fabulous hobby –enormously rewarding and enjoyable. There is nothing like friendly twitches of the nose to remind you that rabbits make fantastic pets. As Britain's third favourite pet you won't be alone and there are hundreds of rabbit shows throughout the country where you can see other rabbits, ask questions or even compete yourself.

This booklet has been produced by the British Rabbit Council to help you make an informed decision about whether a rabbit is right for you. We take a look at the equipment needed and how to find you the most suitable rabbit. We will also introduce you to the Fancy – as the hobby of showing rabbits is called.

The British Rabbit Council and its members are always on hand to offer good advice on keeping or showing rabbits. You will meet lots of different people once you start keeping rabbits and are sure to make new friends.

If you would like to become a member of the British Rabbit Council please contact us to find out how.



The Rabbit Commitment

We admit that we are biased but we think owning a rabbit is a hugely rewarding pastime. They are intelligent, friendly and make great companions to both young and old. However they do require a level of daily commitment so please consider the following:

Rabbits can live for between 5 and 10 years (depending on the size or breed)

Like all animals, a rabbit will make demands upon your time.

Rabbits need daily food and fresh water, grooming and company.

The hutch and pen will need regular cleaning (in all weathers).

There will be costs associated with equipment and then ongoing feed, bedding and vet bills.

Like us, they can become grumpy or irritable if they are uncomfortable or unhappy.

You will need someone to look after the rabbit when you go on holiday.



Which breed?

There are over 60 breeds of rabbit and 500 varieties recognised by the British Rabbit Council. They vary greatly in size, colour and coat and can weigh anything from 2 to 16 pounds (0.91 – 17.27 kg). An illustrated list of breeds can be viewed on the BRC's website – www.thebrc.org - or by purchasing our Breed Standards Folder.



The responsibility for a pet must always lie with the adult purchasing the pet but if the rabbit is going to live with a family of young children we recommend that you do not buy a small rabbit which children can squeeze or accidentally drop. A larger rabbit that they cannot pick up but can stroke and make a fuss of will be less stressful for the child and the rabbit.

To help you decide on the breed, we suggest that you think about who the rabbit is for and what they will expect from it. For example, long coated breeds such as the Angora, Cashmere Lop or Swiss Fox may look like 'fluffy bunnies' but they need regular grooming and may not be appropriate for children or busy people.

A great place to see the variety of breeds is at a rabbit show. These are held by clubs all over the country and are a good way of seeing breeds and meeting breeders who may be able to help you find the right rabbit for you (all British Rabbit Council shows are published in the magazine *Fur & Feather* which is the BRC's official journal, call 01473 652789 for details).



Where to get your rabbit

The British Rabbit Council has thousands of members, many of whom are breeders with healthy rabbits for sale. If you dial 01636 676042 we can give you a contact name and number or you can visit our website www.thebrc.org

If you do not specifically want a purebred or baby rabbit then remember that your local branch of the RSPCA – or other rescue shelter – often have rabbits in need of homes.

What to look for in a rabbit

Where possible, ask to see the mother of the litter as this will give you a guide to the size your rabbit will grow to when mature. Also, if the mother is healthy, happy and friendly, the babies should have a good start and stand a better chance of making a good pet.

Check that the baby rabbit's eyes and nose are clean and that its breathing is not laboured. It should have a good coat (part the hair to see if there is any scurf on the skin) and a clean bottom with no signs of diarrhoea.

A baby rabbit should feel relatively solid so run your hand along its back to make sure that you cannot feel individual bones. Watch the rabbit in the hutch - is it active or is it sitting hunched in a corner on its own?

Always bear in mind that rabbits are not normally weaned until 7-8 weeks so never buy a baby rabbit that should still be with its mother and siblings. Go and visit the rabbit before it is weaned so that you have seen and handled the rabbit on more than one occasion before you take it home.

When you collect your rabbit find out which food he was fed on and continue this for the first few days to avoid digestive upsets. If you wish to change your rabbit to a different food, do so by gradually mixing the old food with the new over a course of a week.



How to handle your rabbit

When taking a rabbit out of the hutch it should always feel safe. Approach it from the front placing one hand around its ears or shoulders and the other supporting its hindquarters – to stop it reversing – and taking most of the weight. Gently lift it and bring it forward against your body with the rump resting on one hand and the other supporting the base of the ears, so it cannot wriggle and will feel secure.

Never pick a rabbit up just by its ears or the scruff of the neck as this is stressful for the rabbit and they will not want you to pick them up next time.



Housing your rabbit

Most reputable pet shops, online stores and trade stands at rabbit shows sell good quality hutches. As rabbits can have a long life span, make sure you buy a hutch that is sturdy, secure (from animals getting in as well as the rabbit trying to escape), waterproof and big enough for the adult rabbit.



If you visit a show and see judges turning a rabbit over it may look as though they are pulling its ears but the rabbit's weight is actually supported in the hand underneath and they are not causing the rabbit any discomfort.

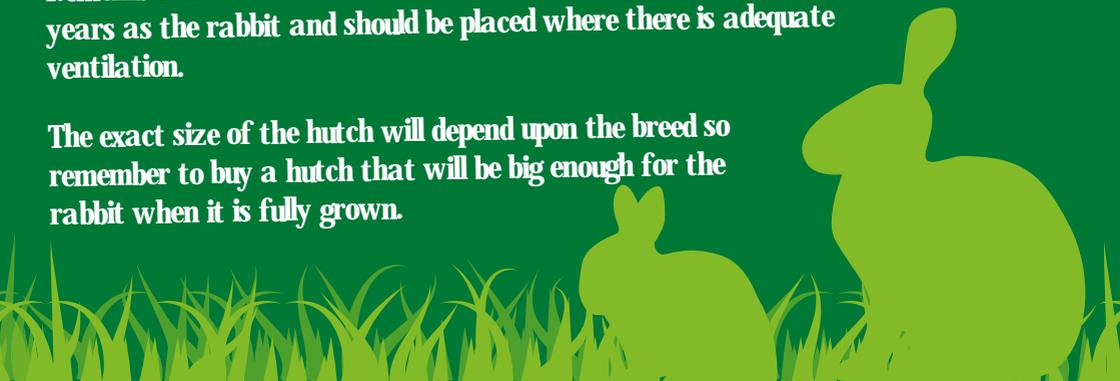
abbit

There are many different styles of hutch, the best is probably a freestanding hutch that opens at waist height and is easily accessible for getting the rabbit in and out. At this height a rabbit can watch what is going on around its home without feeling under threat from everything and anyone that might pass through the garden.

Never stand a hutch directly on the ground, as it will quickly become damp and soon rot. Hutch legs of at least 220mm (8.66 inches) are a necessity.

Remember that the hutch needs to be solid enough to last as many years as the rabbit and should be placed where there is adequate ventilation.

The exact size of the hutch will depend upon the breed so remember to buy a hutch that will be big enough for the rabbit when it is fully grown.



Ideally rabbits should be given the biggest hutch that you can afford and have space for but, as a minimum, we suggest that a hutch should be big enough for an adult rabbit to take several hops in any given direction and be able to stand up on its hind legs.

Once you have your hutch, bear in mind the following when deciding where to position it:

- Make sure it is out of any draughts but will be well ventilated
- Make sure the rain can't blow in
- Make sure it is out of direct sunlight

Protect the hutch by painting the inside with emulsion paint, and check that the door mesh and catches are securely fixed. Most hutches have a sleeping compartment so that the rabbit can get in out of the cold. However, a hutch cover or a polythene sheet suspended from the roof can be useful in really wet weather (but remember to raise it as soon as the rain has stopped to prevent the temperature inside the hutch rising). It is important that there should be air circulating freely in the hutch at all times to stop the build up of bacteria so make sure that the cover hangs rather than clings.

If you are buying a second hand hutch – be careful. Always ask why the hutch has become available. If the previous occupant passed away suddenly (rather than through old age) bacteria and viruses can still be present despite thorough cleaning.

Many people like to have a run for the rabbit as well. This is an excellent way to give your rabbit regular and secure exercise. The run may be attached to the hutch already or can be freestanding. Always look for a sturdy run of a good size that would keep the rabbit safe and has a covered area for the rabbit to seek shade or shelter.

Rabbits dig and, if left unattended, may escape from the run. We recommend that you have a permanent covered run sunk into the earth or with a mesh floor (also sunk into the earth to prevent hurting the rabbit's feet). Make sure a dog, cat or fox is unable to enter or knock over the run and only let your rabbit loose in the garden if you are 100% sure it cannot escape. Remember, rabbits can nibble and gnaw a small hole to make it bigger and you can't watch them all the time!

Your rabbit's bedding

Your rabbit's hutch will be its home so make sure it is really comfortable. For bedding wood shavings are ideal as they are clean and absorbent. Straw can be put on top of the shavings to help with insulation and freely available hay should be provided. Newspaper is absorbent and can be used under the straw or wood shavings but will stain white feet. Sawdust is not recommended as the dust can get into the eyes and nose and cause irritation. Dusty or old hay can also cause the same problem so check it before you buy (good hay should always smell sweet). When bedded with straw the rabbit will probably eat some of its food but don't worry, this is natural roughage.

Cleaning the hutch

Rabbits should have their bedding changed completely at least once a week. Rabbits like to use one or more corners as their toilet area so you will need to clean out these areas more frequently, perhaps every third day. Clean and wash the food bowls and water bottles. If the water bottle has turned green due to algae you will need to give it a thorough clean using a bottlebrush and warm soapy water.

The hutch should be scrubbed thoroughly with disinfectant once a month whilst the rabbit is either in a spare hutch or the run. When the hutch is dry, replace the bedding. Make sure that you have rinsed everything thoroughly before you replace it in the hutch.



Feeding your rabbit

Whether you feed your rabbit once or twice a day, it is important to refill your rabbit's bowl at the same time each day. Rabbits can enjoy as many as sixty to seventy "snacks" a day so should have access to quality hay at all times.

If there is a problem with your rabbit you will know very quickly if he hasn't eaten or drunk in the previous 12/24 hours. Rabbits are most likely to eat first thing in the morning or later in the day so it is sensible to make sure that they always have access to a good quality hay to nibble on.

There are two types of rabbit food – extruded pellets and a cereal mix. Both types of food are complete so the bowl must not be replenished until the rabbit has eaten every item. If you feed your rabbit a mix and he eats only the bits he fancies, and the rest is thrown away, then his diet will not be properly balanced and could result in digestive upsets.

The amount you feed your rabbit will depend on its breed and the type of feed so check with the breeder, your veterinary surgeon or the recommendations on the packaging. A solid feeding bowl is a must as most rabbits will try and move their bowls by one method or another. Glazed earthenware pots are readily available in pet shops and can't be chewed like the plastic varieties.

Vegetables and green leaves can be given to rabbits as part of their natural diet. Start with small quantities and build up slowly. Rabbits will usually enjoy carrot tops, cabbage, spring greens and broccoli. Lettuce can be fed, but only in small amounts and not varieties such as Iceberg. Sweet vegetables, such as carrots, and fruit can be given in small amounts as treats. Avoid processed treats that contain sugar and avoid feeding your rabbit any human food.

There are many herbs and plants that grow in our gardens and hedgerows that are safe for rabbits to eat but must be free of pesticides, animal urine and exhaust fumes. Some house and garden plants are poisonous to rabbits, including buttercups and bulbous plants (for help turn to the recommended reading section at the back of this booklet).

Remember that your rabbit should have clean fresh water at all times. Some rabbits, depending on their size and the season, can drink up to a pint of water a day so check bottles or bowls at least twice a day.



Vital vaccinations

All rabbits should have annual vaccinations against myxomatosis and VHD. In high-risk areas you may find that your vet recommends a myxomatosis injection every six months. Both diseases are highly contagious and do not need rabbit-to-rabbit contact to spread, they can be spread by other animals – including us. As myxomatosis is spread by biting insects (such as mosquitoes and fleas) we recommend cleaning the hutch regularly to prevent attracting flies, and in summer and autumn using fly prevention measures such as mosquito netting, fly papers and zappers.

Most breeders vaccinate their stock, so check if the rabbit has had any injections before you collect it.

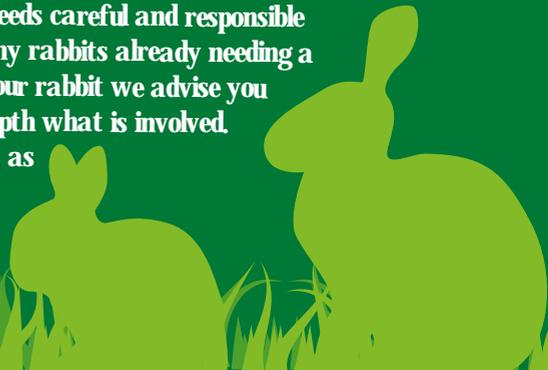


Some sensible advice about breeding

Think very carefully before you breed from your rabbit. The gestation (pregnancy) period for a rabbit is approximately 30 days and a litter can be between 2 and 9 individuals so make sure you have good homes for all the youngsters before you breed!

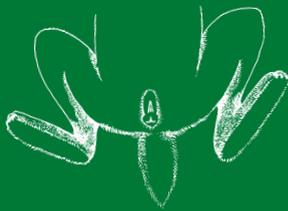
You will usually need a larger hutch and more food for the new family. You may also wish to consider the added cost of feeding the babies for 8 weeks until they can be homed. Also, during this time, an otherwise quiet rabbit may become very possessive of her babies and her hutch and may not want to be handled.

Bringing new life into the animal kingdom needs careful and responsible consideration, especially as there are so many rabbits already needing a home. If you seriously want to breed from your rabbit we advise you get in touch with a breeder and discuss in depth what is involved. Never just mate a doe and hope for the best, as complications may arise.

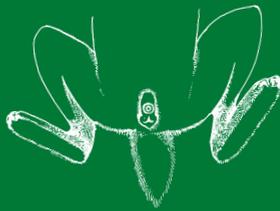


Some handy hints and tips

A male rabbit is called a 'buck', a female is called a 'doe' and babies are called 'kittens'. This illustration shows you the difference between them.



Sexing a young Buck Rabbit up to 4 months



Sexing a Doe Rabbit



- All rabbits benefit from having their hutch or run turned into an adventure playground with vegetables hanging from ropes, empty pots, cardboard boxes and lots of hay.
- Your rabbit's nails may have to be trimmed three or four times a year. Your vet will be able to do this for you, but why not ask the breeder to show you how it is done? Nail cutters are available from any good pets shop or from your veterinary surgery.
- If there is any discharge from your rabbit's nose, eyes, anus or vulva you should always seek veterinary attention.
- If your rabbit is not eating and cannot be tempted with treats, check its teeth first. Tooth problems are often associated with dribbling and wet patches on the chest and front legs. Your veterinary surgeon will be able to advise on the best course of treatment.
- Rabbits moult (change coat) twice a year so will need grooming to help remove dead fur. This can be achieved in most breeds by using a fine-toothed comb. If scurf or bald patches appear in large amounts in the coat take your rabbit to the vet as rabbits, like most animals, can catch mites and fleas.
- If you bring your rabbit into the home remember that they might still need to chew and that paper or electrical cables can be targeted.
- Rabbits can now be insured against veterinary treatment costs, like cats and dogs.
- Be aware that flies can be attracted to rabbit's bottoms if they are 'dirty' and may lay eggs that quickly turn into maggots. This leads to a condition called 'Fly Strike' and can be fatal. If your rabbit is overweight or suffering with digestive problems seek help.
- Rabbits are social animals. We do not recommend that pet rabbits are kept alone unless they are spending lots of time each day with you. A neutered male and female, or littermates (neutered before puberty) are the best option to prevent problems such as aggression later on.

