



ANIMAL ANTICS

THE RABBIT - THE NEXT MOST POPULAR PET AFTER DOGS AND CATS

Many rabbits spend their lives in misery, confined to a small hutch with little human contact and no mental stimulation. When acquiring a rabbit people often fail to take into account a lifespan of between 7-10 years. They are affectionate, bright, inquisitive creatures who require attentive keepers.

WHAT DO RABBITS NEED?

Companionship

To be with other rabbits or humans. Rabbits still retain much of their natural behaviour, which makes them unsuited to life in captivity. In the wild, rabbits live in large social groups, and it is unkind to keep just one. Male and female rabbits can be kept together as long as they have been neutered.

Housing

A large waterproof hutch off the ground, out of direct sunlight and strong winds. Move to an indoor area or porch in cold weather. The hutch should be divided into a sleeping and living/eating area, with the living/eating area having a full wire mesh front, with a door to open for feeding and cleaning with a strong latch to prevent other animals from getting in. Provide fresh straw or coarse shavings for bedding at all times and be sure to clean out thoroughly whenever bedding becomes soiled or damp. Scrub the hutch out with a recommended disinfectant regularly.

Food and Water

Rabbits are herbivores, meaning they eat only grasses, vegetables and fruit. Their daily diet should contain protein (pellets or mix specific to rabbits) and a variety of fresh foods such as celery, spinach, kale, fresh grass, carrots, green peppers, dandelion leaves, clover, plantain, parsley, apples, pears, corn, melons and beet leaves. Feed foods with a high water content sparingly. Do not feed lettuce, cabbage, beans, potatoes, rhubarb or chocolate, the latter three can be toxic. Hay is also important for your rabbit, adding daily fibre to the diet. Food and water should be changed daily and containers cleaned and disinfected at least once a week.

Digestion

Rabbits have an unusual digestive system, which means that they are susceptible to digestive upsets. This makes feeding your rabbit one of the most important aspects of its care. If you see your rabbit eating his droppings don't be concerned, this is a natural behaviour. Rabbits don't get all the nutrition they need from their food first time around so they make soft droppings, which they eat again. The next droppings are small, hard and round and will not be eaten.

Exercise

Your rabbit requires plenty of daily exercise - up to 30 hours per week! With supervision and rabbit-proofing (rabbits burrow, so ensure the enclosure is sunk into the ground) your rabbit should be given an area to hop freely. Make sure the area is cleared of hazards such as electrical cords, cats or dogs and poisonous plants. If in a run, be certain that the grass has not been recently treated with chemicals. Make sure he has sufficient toys for entertainment such as boxes, hard plastic toys, baskets etc. Provide fresh water and a box for cover.

Teeth/Nail Trimming/Grooming

Rabbits must chew to wear down their constantly growing front teeth, so you need to provide chew items such as apple, birch or willow branches, hay and/or firm vegetables such as carrots, turnips or broccoli stems. Nails need to be trimmed about every six weeks or as necessary. If hesitant, consult a vet or knowledgeable person for instructions. Care must be taken to avoid cutting the blood vessel in the centre of the nail. Long haired breeds should be brushed regularly with a soft brush.

Handling

Use two hands to pick up your rabbit, with one hand supporting the rump and the other under the chest area. Never lift a rabbit by its ears. Rabbits can be easily frightened by loud noises or sudden movement which may cause them to quickly squirm out of a person's grasp resulting in broken backs and limbs as well as internal injuries, so hold your rabbit while sitting down.

Common Medical Ailments

Young rabbits may be affected by a highly infectious disease called coccidiosis. Symptoms include a yellow look, diarrhoea, dullness and loss of appetite. All rabbits may suffer from the potentially fatal disease flystrike, caused by flies laying eggs in soiled fur. The whole process from eggs being laid to maggots emerging can take just a few hours, so it is vitally important that rabbits are checked twice daily underneath and around the bottom for faecal soiling, sore places and matted fur. You can reduce the likelihood of flystrike by using fly screens on hutches and runs. Rearguard, a liquid treatment which is applied to the rear half of the rabbit to prevent fly eggs from hatching is available from vets. It needs re-application every ten weeks, and you must still check your pet daily. If a rabbit is sneezing and has a discharge from its nose, it may have snuffles. This is highly infectious and could lead to pneumonia. **If your rabbit is showing signs of ill health, seek veterinary advice immediately.**