



Support for adopters

GUIDANCE FOR NEW RABBIT OWNERS

Taking your new rabbits home

You've chosen your new rabbits and are raring to take them home, but before you take one step through the front door there are a few things you need to sort out to make sure your home is ready for your new pets.

Moving on

Make sure that you have an appropriate carrier for when you pick up your new pets from the RSPCA. It should be secure and large enough for each of your rabbits to sit, turn around and lie down naturally in. Ideally, transport companion rabbits (i.e. a bonded pair/group) together in the same carrier, provided it is large enough to allow them all to perform these normal behaviours comfortably. If you have to use separate carriers, place companion rabbits close to one another so they can see and smell each other, this will reassure them and help reduce the stress associated with travelling. Familiar smelling items, such as some used but clean hay/bedding from their home at the animal centre/branch, may also help them feel at ease while travelling to their new home. Do not mix unfamiliar animals for the purpose of travelling.

Make sure that your carrier is secure and made of an appropriate material. Cardboard or wooden carriers are not suitable as, not only do they absorb urine and become damp; your rabbits could simply chew their way out of them! Cover the carrier to keep it dark but ensure that it is still well ventilated and line it with newspaper to absorb any urine. Pop a towel or some vet bed in too to provide a non-slip surface but only if you are certain that your rabbits won't chew these items!

Make sure that your rabbits have access to water and hay during the journey. Provide water in a way that they are used to (e.g. bottle or bowl) and ensure it will not spill during the journey. Check your rabbits regularly, and give them frequent breaks, during long journeys.

It goes without saying that your rabbits won't thank you for bringing your dog along if you have one! This will really scare them. Take your new pets directly home.

Settling in

When you get your new pets home, it is best to leave them for 24 hours so they can get used to their new surroundings, though still provide food and water and check that they are behaving normally and aren't showing any signs of illness or injury. As your rabbits settle in, the best thing you can do to reassure your new pets is to be calm and patient. Make sure that they have constant access to safe hiding places within their accommodation so they can hide if feeling scared, and allow them take things at their own pace. Rabbit housing should be located in a quiet, draught-free part of your home or garden, out of direct sunlight and away from areas where children play (except when they can be supervised). Your pets should also be located away from the sight and smell of potential predators, such as foxes, birds of prey, ferrets and unfamiliar dogs and cats.

If rabbits are housed indoors, their housing should be located away from noisy household appliances (televisions and stereos can be disturbing to rabbits) and the temperature should be monitored carefully to ensure rabbits do not become too hot, as rabbits are prone to heatstroke.

Your rabbits' home and any areas they have access to (such as the garden or a room within your home) should

also be secure, escape-proof and free from hazards (e.g. poisonous plants). If you are going to give your rabbits free access to your garden to explore and exercise, this should be done under supervision.

Any areas that your rabbits have access to should also be rabbit-proofed; this involves ensuring there are no hazards, so remove any hazardous plants and, if you are keeping your rabbits inside, make sure that all electrical cables are covered or electrical items removed from these areas and cover or remove anything that you do not want chewed!

Remember that your rabbits don't know you or your lifestyle, so introduce different activities and people over a period of time, particularly supervising any interactions with children.

Home comforts

Your home will probably be very different to the animal centre/branch your pets were living in, including the accommodation itself. The animal centre/branch will provide you with information about setting up your new rabbits' accommodation before you take them home, including information about suitable bedding material.

As well as space to exercise and places to hide, your rabbits will need somewhere warm, dry and quiet to sleep - providing a few shelters is important so they don't have to rest together if they don't want to. Make sure there is at least one shelter that is large enough for them to rest in together too. The shelter should have multiple entrances/exits so no rabbit gets trapped inside by another rabbit.

Clean your rabbits' home regularly. You can provide them with litter trays, separate to where they sleep, and these, and/or any areas where they choose to toilet, will need to be cleaned at least once a day.

Providing safe toys, suitable objects to scent-mark and regular opportunities to play with people, and with each other, after the first day or so may also help your rabbits settle in. Provided your rabbits are fit enough, they may also enjoy different levels such as raised platforms within their home. However, be observant. If the behaviour of your rabbits changes or they show regular signs of stress or fear, talk to your vet.

Food and water

Changing the diet of your rabbits suddenly can cause an upset tummy so feed your new rabbits with the diet they have been used to in order to reduce any risk of this. The most important part of your rabbit's diet is hay and/or grass and this should be available at all times. They should also have been fed some suitable vegetables and herbs, and may have been fed a small amount of commercial rabbit pellets - information about their preferred foods and advice on feeding will be provided in the adoption pack you will be given when you come to collect your rabbits. If you want to change your pets' diet to something else of your choice, do so gradually over at least 14 days, mixing a little of the new food with the old to gradually wean your rabbits onto the new diet.

Suitable leafy green vegetables and herbs should be fed each day too but introduce these slowly. Make sure that any fruit and/or vegetables you feed as a treat are suitable for your pet too and only give root vegetables like carrots, or fruit, in very small amounts as an occasional treat.

As well as constant access to hay (and grass if possible) and a bottle or bowl of fresh clean water, rabbits should also be fed a daily measured ration of greens (and pellets if given), in two meals per day (unless advised otherwise by a vet). If you want to change how frequently your rabbits are fed, do this gradually and always ask a vet if you're unsure.

Keeping busy

Your rabbits need and will enjoy lots of opportunities to exercise and explore, whether they are housed inside or out, so make sure that they have constant access from their main shelter to a secure exercise area.

You can put suitable objects in the area to encourage your rabbits to explore and play. For example, they like to dig, so trays filled with child-safe sand or soil to dig in will be interesting to your pets.

Rabbits are really clever too- training using positive reward based methods can help to improve the rabbit/human bond, and will help keep them physically and mentally active.

Good company

Make sure that you keep a close eye on the behaviour of your rabbits, particularly as they settle into your home. Although rabbits are sociable, fighting can still occur. Check your rabbits each day to make sure that they are fit, behaving normally and are free from injuries. Be sure that any aggression between the rabbits is not becoming a problem, particularly in the initial time when they are settling in to your home. Make sure that they have enough space and resources (e.g. shelters, food, toys) within their accommodation to prevent competition and ensure they can avoid each other if they wish to.

If you add additional rabbits at a later date, make sure that they are neutered and compatible with your current pair or group. The process should be done gradually and under close supervision - always seek expert advice on how to introduce pets properly.

If you have more than one pair or group of rabbits, make sure that they are not housed directly next to each other and ensure they can get out of sight of unfamiliar rabbits (and ideally ensure they can't smell them either) or this can also cause stress to your pets. Don't house rabbits and guinea pigs together either; this is not recommended for a number of reasons, including the risk of disease transmission and the problem of some rabbits bullying guinea pigs.

Vet for your pet

Making sure you have someone professional to turn to if your rabbits are ill or involved in an accident is very important. Register your rabbits at a local veterinary practice before bringing them home from the centre/branch and research your choice thoroughly. You'll also need to give the vet your rabbits' medical records as soon as possible; these will be given to you in your adoption pack when you collect your rabbits.

It is worth thinking about taking out an insurance policy too. For just a few pounds a month, you'll be covered for unexpected vet bills in the future and safeguard your pets' health.

Health check

Make sure you continue your rabbits' vaccinations – ask your vet how often these are needed and what vaccination programme is best to protect your pets. If you have adopted rabbits that have not been neutered, don't forget to get this done at the recommended age too.

If your rabbits require treatment for parasites such as fleas, worms or mites, always get advice from your vet about which products are safe and suitable to use. Regular grooming is also important to keep your rabbits' coats in good condition. You may need to be patient as your rabbits may not be used to being groomed. Reward your rabbits and don't punish or shout at them if grooming is difficult at first- this will only make the experience more stressful for your pets.

Taking your rabbits for a health check with your vet at least once a year is really important, but you should also do some simple checks yourself at home. Make sure you check that your rabbits' bottoms and the fur around their tails are clean every day, particularly in warm weather; this is important in preventing flystrike.

Feeding the correct diet of mainly hay and/or grass will help to prevent a lot of common diseases such as teeth and tummy problems. Check your rabbits' front teeth once a week. Rabbits have teeth that never stop growing and if they get too long or grow at the wrong angle, this will be very painful. If you are concerned about your rabbit's teeth, speak to your vet. Check the length of their nails every week as well; if you're not sure how to trim them ask an expert (e.g. vet, veterinary nurse) for advice.

Getting help

If things aren't going smoothly and you have concerns about your rabbits, talk to your vet or contact the RSPCA centre or branch from whom you adopted your rabbits.

There is lots of useful information and helpful tips on the RSPCA website: www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits and your local RSPCA centre/branch has leaflets and guides on a range of pet ownership topics.

It takes time, effort and understanding to help your pets get used to their new life, and to help them overcome problems, but all the time and effort will be worth it when the end result is happy additions to your family!