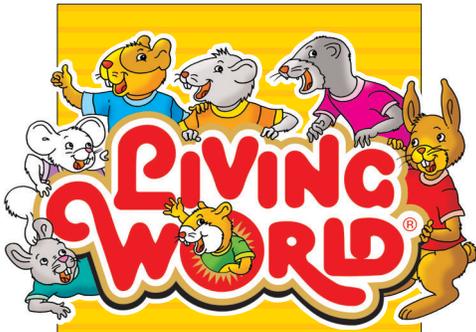




# RABBIT CARE GUIDE



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Pet ownership has many benefits for children, from teaching them responsibility, to developing language skills and providing support in times of stress. There are also advantages for the family as a whole: it has been found that families with pets have fewer and less serious relationship problems, as animal care helps children to develop empathy and be more selfless in their human relationships.

Dealing with animals encourages children to have respect for others, but it also helps them to build a positive self-image, children who interact with animals tending to have much higher self-esteem than those who don't.

As animals communicate through body language, children who live and play with them learn to interpret this, which in turn helps them to read human body language and so have stronger social skills. Playing with and caring for animals helps to build spoken language skills too, as well as developing concentration. This aspect is particularly beneficial for children with special needs such as Down's Syndrome or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Animal interaction captures their attention and so develops their ability to concentrate.

Perhaps most importantly, animals can support children in times of stress or change, or when human relationships are strained.

## CHOOSING YOUR RABBIT

### Notes to parents

Rabbits are fairly easy and inexpensive to keep but do need lots of time and attention. Rabbits live for around eight to ten years so it's important that you want a rabbit for a pet as well as your children, who may lose interest as they grow older. Either sex makes a good pet, but males are usually more playful and less aggressive.

### Which one is for you?

There are over 50 breeds of rabbit and they come in lots of different colours and coats. Satin rabbits have smooth, shiny coats, Rex rabbits have short, thick coats and long-haired rabbits have big, fluffy coats. Long coats need lots of grooming every day though, so it's best for your first rabbit to have a short coat.

Rabbit sizes vary too - giant rabbits can be bigger than a cat and miniatures will fit onto an adult's hand. Different breeds also have different personalities. Giant breeds tend to be laid back and friendly, but will need a big hutch and their size will make them difficult for you to handle. Miniature rabbits are very cute, but some can be nervous and nip you.

### Notes to parents

All rabbits have very powerful back legs and can kick when alarmed or frightened, so it is advisable to supervise young children when they are handling their rabbit.

Some of the most common breeds are Dwarf Lops, Dutch, English and Netherland Dwarf. Dwarf lop-eared rabbits are very gentle and intelligent and make good pets; however even though they are called Dwarf Lops they can grow to the size of a cat. They are considered to be dwarf when compared to the other breeds such as French Lop, English Lop and German Lop.





## Where from?

Rabbits are sold at most pet shops, or you could try a local breeder. Make sure that the pets at the place where you buy your rabbit from are kept in large, clean hutches and that the staff or breeders are knowledgeable.

Your rabbit should be at least six weeks old when you buy him. He will be old enough to leave his mum then and should already have become used to being handled.

## A healthy rabbit

Although rabbits may be a little shy around new people, you should pick one that is alert and inquisitive.

A healthy rabbit should have:

- bright, clear eyes that are wide open and not runny
- clean ears
- clean nostrils and easy breathing
- a clean bottom and tail
- soft, shiny fur
- level teeth
- short nails
- a body that is not too flabby or too thin (you shouldn't be able to see his ribs)
- plenty of fur on his hocks (the heel of the back foot)

## RABBIT HOME AND EQUIPMENT

### Starter kit

Before you buy a rabbit there are some important things that you should have ready at home.

These are:

- a hutch or indoor cage. (Living World's Rabbit Resort starter kit, is perfect as it has a deep, plastic tray so the bedding will not spill.)
- some bedding
- a food bowl and some food
- some hay
- a water bottle
- an exercise area (known as a run)

You will also need a cage to carry him in. You should never carry a rabbit in your arms on journeys, no matter how tame he is. If something frightens him he is likely to break free and go astray. Your carry cage will be useful for future trips to the vet and also for when you are cleaning out your rabbit's hutch. You might even want to keep him in this cage for a while until he gets a bit older and bigger.

### Rabbits need company

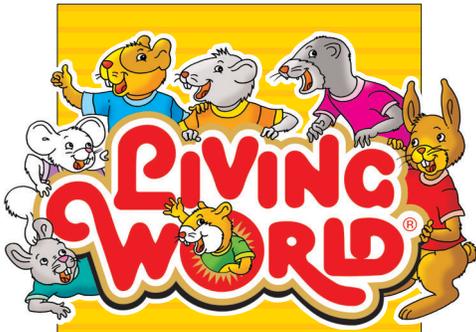
In the wild rabbits would live in groups, but having two rabbits in one hutch or cage can be difficult. You could keep a guinea pig as a companion for your rabbit, but you must buy them together when they are both young and watch them carefully as the rabbit may bully the guinea pig. In addition rabbit food can not be fed to guinea pigs as it does not contain enough vitamin C which is an essential vitamin for guinea pigs.

The easiest way is to keep one rabbit but give it lots of human company.

### Notes to parents

Two male rabbits that haven't been neutered may fight until the death if housed together, while a male and female rabbit will breed non-stop unless they are neutered. Two females, especially if they are bought at the same time, may live together happily but one might bully the other. If you decide to buy two rabbits, the best option is to have them neutered. Ensure they are both neutered though - if you only have one done the other rabbit may attack it.





## **Buying the right home for your rabbit**

Pet rabbits live in hutches or indoor cages. Rabbits like to play and move around a lot so you should buy as big a hutch or cage as you can. At the very least it should be tall enough for him to sit up and long enough for him to stretch out comfortably.

One end should be partitioned off so that your rabbit has a dark, private bedroom area. If your hutch or cage doesn't have separate sleeping quarters, you could buy a Living World Log Cabin.

The hutch's wire mesh should be good quality to protect your rabbit. It must have small enough holes to keep out mice and be strong and securely attached to keep out predators who might try to attack your rabbit. Your hutch should not have a wire-mesh floor. This will not be comfortable for your rabbit and his claws might get caught.

## **Soft bedding**

Put a layer of newspaper on the hutch floor first. This will help to stop the floor getting rotten and will make cleaning out easier.

Next, add a deep layer of bedding - Rabbits can get sore feet if they don't have enough bedding. You can choose from many different types of bedding, for example Living World's Shavings, Alpine Hay, Wheat Straw and Corn Cobs.

Finally, give your rabbit plenty of hay to sleep on and nibble throughout the day.

## **Where should the cage go?**

Rabbits can live indoors or outdoors. Wherever it is, the hutch should be in a sheltered place, away from draughts and not in direct sunlight.

If your rabbit's hutch is outside, it will need weather proofing and should have a sloping roof so that rain can drain off. It will also need a canopy to stop rain getting into the hutch in wet weather. Never put the hutch directly on the ground. It should be on legs so that it doesn't get damp. A damp hutch will make your rabbit uncomfortable and ill. In winter, outdoor hutches should be put in a shed or garage. Make sure that it is well-ventilated though so that your rabbit can breathe properly.

Alternatively if you have a house rabbit or want to bring your rabbit indoors in the winter time the indoor cages like Living World Resort cages provide an ideal home. These modern style cages are made from strong plastic which makes them lightweight and easy to clean. The cage should be situated in a safe and quiet area of the house that does not get too hot or too cold.

## **Toilet training your rabbit**

Most rabbits will go to the toilet in the same corner of their hutch or your home every time, so you can use a cat-litter tray to make cleaning out easier. Fill the tray with Living World Shavings or Corn Cobs (not cat-litter as this may be poisonous for your rabbit) and add some dirty bedding and droppings so that your rabbit knows what the tray is for. Put the tray in the same corner where your rabbit normally goes to the toilet.

## **A water bottle for fresh water**

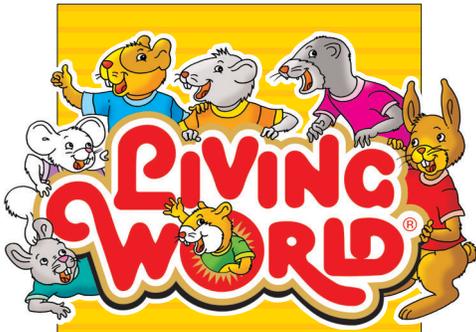
Rabbits need clean, fresh water at all times. You can buy easy to clean, leak-proof water bottles and water bottle holders from Living World. These are better than a bowl as they keep the water clean and prevent it dripping onto food or bedding. You can also easily check that your rabbit is drinking. If he's not, this could be a sign that something is wrong.

You should change the water and clean the bottle every day. When you do this, squeeze the bottle to check that the valve isn't blocked and the water comes out easily. Make sure that you put the bottle where your rabbit can reach it easily.

## **A sturdy food bowl**

You will need a food bowl that your rabbit can't tip over easily. Plastic or stainless steel bowls are too light. Ceramic or earthenware bowls like Living World's Rabbit Ceramic Dish are best. These are easy to clean and unlikely to tip up.





## KEEPING YOUR RABBIT'S HOME CLEAN

Your rabbit is territorial - he likes his home to be just for him. He probably won't like you moving his bedding around and removing his droppings and urine, as these are smell markers that tell other animals that this is his home.

### Daily cleaning tasks

Every day you should:

- Remove wet bedding and clean the toilet area.
- Add fresh bedding.
- Make sure there's enough hay in the bedroom for your rabbit to be comfortable.
- Remove uneaten food.
- Empty and wash the food bowl in hot, soapy water, then rinse and dry it thoroughly before refilling with food.
- Empty, rinse and refill the water bottle, checking it for leaks and blockages.

### A thorough clean

You should give your rabbit's hutch a through clean once a week. Every week you should:

- Remove everything and brush the hutch out.
- In summer, scrub the hutch with hot, soapy water, paying special attention to the corners. Rinse the hutch well and let it dry out thoroughly before laying new bedding.
- Outdoor hutches won't dry properly if you scrub them in winter, so wipe it lightly with mild, pet-safe disinfectant instead. Don't use household disinfectant as this is too strong and could burn your rabbit's skin or cause eye problems.

This is another reason why it may be easier to have an indoor cage like Living World Resort as they can be scrubbed with a pet-safe disinfectant before being rinsed and dried thoroughly.

### Hutch safety check

Every time you clean the hutch, check for damage and danger areas. Your rabbit might have started to chew the timber, or the wood in the toilet area may have started to rot. Wire mesh can sometimes loosen to leave sharp edges, which could cut your rabbit.

## FEEDING YOUR RABBIT

When you first bring your rabbit home, make sure that you feed him exactly the same food as the previous owner. If you change your rabbit's diet suddenly, it could make him ill. Start giving him new foods slowly and take at least a week to swap over to the food that you plan to give him.

### A balanced diet

Rabbits are herbivores, which is similar to a human vegetarian. The main food in your rabbit's diet should be a high quality dry food like Living World's Extrusion or Classic food for rabbits, which will give him all the nutrients that he needs.

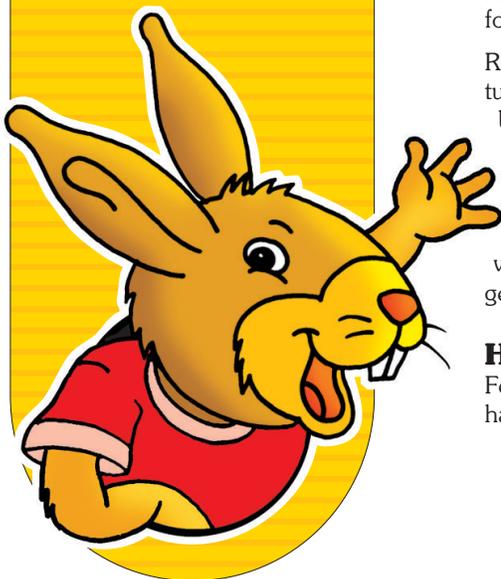
Rabbits also need to have a constant source of hay, which will help to keep his teeth and tummy healthy. Nibbling hay will also help to stop your rabbit getting bored and so behaving badly.

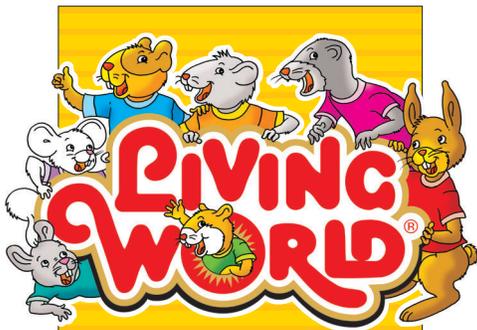
You must feed your rabbit good quality hay that isn't dusty or musty-smelling. Always store it where air can circulate - not in sealed plastic bags.

As well as putting some hay in your rabbit's bedroom, put some in a hay clip on the wall of the hutch. He can then pull down what he wants and the rest of the hay won't get trampled on or dirty.

### Have a regular feeding timetable

Feed your rabbit twice daily - once in the morning and once at night. This means that he has at least two visits to look forward to and you can check him regularly.





## **Overweight**

Rabbits over six months old can often become overweight. You can avoid your rabbit getting fat by reducing the amount of treats, giving him the right amount of healthy food and plenty of exercise. If your rabbit does get overweight, feed him Living World's Extrusion food, which is full of healthy ingredients and is designed especially to prevent rabbits from only eating the bits of food that they like most.

## **Fresh water**

Make sure that you give your rabbit fresh water every day, not just when the bottle is empty. In winter, if your rabbit is outside, the water might freeze so keep checking his bottle if it is very cold.

## **Eating droppings**

Don't worry if you see your rabbit eating his droppings. Rabbit food takes lots of digesting so they eat their food twice. After eating, rabbits do soft droppings, which they eat, before doing hard droppings, which are normal toilet waste.

## **Supplements**

If you feed your rabbit a sensible diet, he shouldn't need supplements. However, if your rabbit is a fussy eater, has teeth problems or is kept inside permanently, it may be best to give him supplements. Check with your vet to see what your rabbit needs.

## **TREATS AND TITBITS FOR YOUR RABBIT**

You can feed your rabbit treats and titbits by hand to help him get used to you and win his trust. He will begin to associate you and your hand with nice things and will appreciate the variety in his diet.

Many rabbits like sweet things, but you should never give him sweet or salty treats designed for humans. Instead, give him treats made especially for rabbits such as Living World Rabbit Drops, Living World Puffs, Donuts, Vegies and Triangles, or cereal sticks like Living World's Rabbit Sticks, which are good for his teeth.

You could also try giving your rabbit small pieces of fresh fruit and vegetables. Don't give him too much though or it will give him diarrhea and make him really ill. Make sure that you always wash fresh fruit and vegetables and dry them before you give them to your rabbit.

You can give him slices of apple, pineapple, banana, melon, peach and pear, as well as strawberries and raspberries, carrot chunks, broccoli florets and turnip peelings.

## **TAMING AND HANDLING YOUR RABBIT**

### **Notes to parents**

Children will need to be supervised at all times when handling your rabbit. Small children, in particular, are not strong enough to hold a rabbit securely - both rabbit and child may get hurt as the frightened animal struggles to free himself.

### **The early days**

Let your rabbit settle in and don't try to pick him up during the first few days after you bring him home. Once his cage is familiar and smells of his scent he will feel more comfortable about getting to know you.

Rabbits can't see very well close up as their eyesight is designed to see predators approaching from a distance. A rabbit's big ears give him very sensitive hearing, so don't shout near him. He also has a strong sense of smell so wash your hands before feeding or handling him so that you get rid of unfamiliar smells and let him get used to your own smell.





### **Taming your rabbit**

Once your rabbit has been home for a few days, sit near his cage and talk to him so that he gets used to your voice and let him smell your fingers. Once your rabbit is confident, he will begin to come to you. You can offer titbits and nibbles so that he learns to see your hand as a friendly provider of treats. Make sure that you move slowly and gently though or you will scare him.

### **Picking up your rabbit**

Rabbits live on the ground and don't climb so can feel very unsafe if they are above ground level. He may look very cuddly but you must remember that your rabbit is not a toy and can be easily frightened. When they are scared, rabbits run away, freeze or lash out. They have very powerful legs and sharp claws, so if they lash out it can really hurt you. It's important that you don't rush into picking up your rabbit until he's ready and that you do it the right way. Until he is comfortable with being picked up, don't do it with bare arms.

Never, ever pick up a rabbit by the ears. This is really painful for him and can damage his ears.

When your rabbit is used to you and doesn't run away when you put your hand in his hutch, put one hand around his chest behind his front legs and, as you lift him, scoop up his behind with the other hand. Put him close to your body and support him so that he feels secure.

If he's nervous, keep his back against you with his legs facing out so that he can't kick you. When your rabbit's more confident, you can hold him sideways to your body and let him snuggle into your arms.

### **What does a nip mean?**

Your rabbit might nip you if he's scared or cross, but he might also be trying to tell you something. A small nip might mean that he's had enough of being picked up or played with, or that he wants a titbit or to investigate something.

### **Rabbit sounds**

Wild rabbits warn each other of danger by stamping loudly on the ground. Your rabbit will also stamp on the ground if he senses some sort of danger,

### **Note to parents**

A nervous rabbit's regular stamping can be very noisy and make you unpopular with the neighbours. It's best to move him to a quieter place where he is less likely to be frightened and where the noise is not as audible.

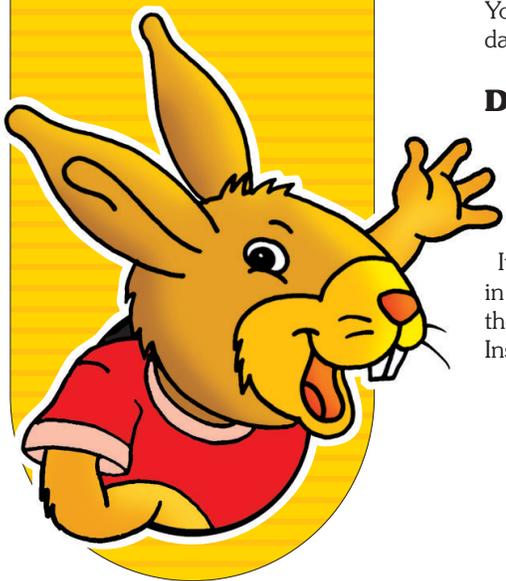
## **EXERCISE AND PLAY**

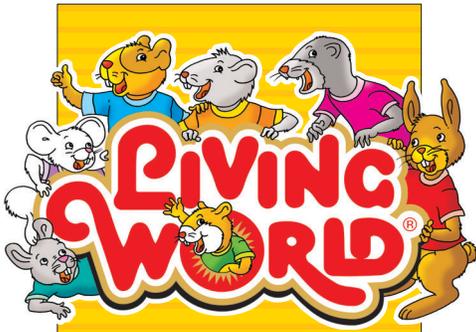
You will need to give your rabbit lots of attention and spend time playing with him every day or he may become bored, unfriendly and start behaving badly.

### **Daily exercise**

Rabbits need to have plenty of daily exercise. He can play and exercise inside your house, particularly if the weather is bad, but you must make sure that the room is safe and he can't escape. Move electrical wires and poisonous plants out of reach so that he can't chew them and cover up electrical sockets.

It is also good for your rabbit to exercise outside because he needs to spend some time in the sunshine to be healthy. Don't let your rabbit run around the whole of your garden though. He might escape, eat a poisonous plant or even be attacked by a predator. Instead, you should build a secure run that you can easily move around your garden.





### **Heatstroke & Chills**

When your rabbit is in his run, make sure that he has shelter from the sun. If he gets too hot he could get heatstroke and this could kill him. Don't forget that the sun moves, so an area of his run that is shady in the morning, probably won't be in the afternoon. If your rabbit does get heatstroke, wrap him in a thick towel that has been soaked in cold water and then wrung out.

Your rabbit will also need protection from the rain when he is in his run. His fur will get soaked quickly and he is likely to get a chill, which could make him ill. If your rabbit does get wet, gently dry his fur with a towel and then keep him indoors in a box full of hay until he has dried out.

### **Playtime**

Rabbits, especially male rabbits, tend to be very playful. Your rabbit will love having the chance to jump and race around in his run. You could make playtime more fun by putting boxes or tunnels in his run so that he can explore and jump on and off them. You might find he also likes pushing a ball around with his nose.

Some rabbits like to chase one another around, but don't join in, as he won't like this. If you chase him it will be too much like being hunted and you will scare him.

### **Harness**

If you plan to let your rabbit potter around your garden, you could buy a light, nylon rabbit harness to stop him escaping. Don't take him for a walk like a dog though - he won't enjoy going outside of your garden. You also shouldn't pull him on the harness. Always let your rabbit lead you and then pick him up and carry him back to his hutch when playtime is over.

### **Notes to parents**

Ensure that all of your rabbit's play items are made from non-toxic substances. Check them regularly for sharp edges, weak points where pieces can be nibbled off and gaps where feet might get trapped.

Although children will enjoy playing with your rabbit, they should not get overexcited and be rough with him, or frighten him with fast movements or by chasing him.

## **CARING FOR YOUR RABBIT'S HEALTH**

You should check your rabbit's health daily so that you can spot any signs of illness before they get serious. A sick rabbit usually seems tired and loses his appetite. He will stay at the back of his hutch and won't want to come and greet you.

### **Eyes and nose**

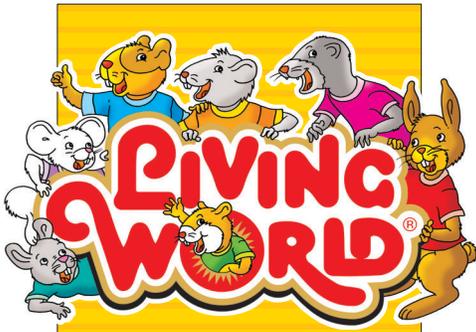
Check your rabbit's eyes and nose every day. Make sure that his eyes are bright and clear. If they are watering he might have an injury or infection, or it might even be a sign of problems with his teeth.

Your rabbit's nose should be clean and not runny. If he has snuffles and sneezes he might have a disease that could kill him so you should take him to a vet straight away.

### **Bottom**

Check your rabbit's bottom daily. If he has a dirty bottom it is a sign that he is not well or is too overweight to clean himself or that the hutch needs cleaning more regular. A dirty bottom attracts flies, which will lay eggs on the dirty area, these eggs develop into maggots. These maggots eat under the skin of the rabbit and could eventually cause the rabbit to die if not treated.





### **Droppings & diarrhoea**

Your rabbit's waste droppings should be neat, hard balls. Don't worry if you see a few leftover soft droppings that he passes to eat. However, if there are lots of soft droppings it means he has diarrhoea. You might be able to treat this by stopping serving him fruit and vegetables and only feeding him dry food. If it is bad though, you will need to take him to the vet.

If your rabbit has a bloated tummy, doesn't do many droppings and the ones that he does do are drier than usual, he may have a blocked gut. You must take him to the vet straight away.

### **Grooming**

Your rabbit will clean himself every day with his teeth and claws. You can help by combing him gently every week with a cat comb (a long-haired rabbit will need combing every day). This will also help you to build your relationship with your rabbit and gives you a chance to check his skin for fleas, fur mites and wounds.

You may not be able to see fleas in his fur, but look out for gritty black specks, which are flea droppings. You need to get rid of fleas straight away as they spread disease. You should use a flea spray that's safe for rabbits. Check for scabby patches on his skin as these are likely to be caused by fur mites.

### **Constantly growing teeth**

Your rabbit's teeth grow constantly - up to 13 cm a year! If your rabbit doesn't have anything to chew on, his teeth will quickly become overgrown. Wooden chews, Living World Sticks and other items for him to gnaw on don't just give your rabbit a treat, but are necessary to keep his teeth healthy.

If your rabbit is dribbling or having eating problems, it's likely that he has problems with his teeth or they have become overgrown. Once a rabbit's teeth have become overgrown or grown incorrectly, they will need regular attention from a vet.

### **Ear maintenance**

Rabbits tend to get ear mites so check his ears weekly. They should be clean and almost wax-free. If you find his ears are hot or they contain dirty, dark-coloured and smelly wax he is likely to have an ear-mite infection and you should take him to the vet.

### **Claws**

If you leave your rabbit's claws to grow too long they will curve round and start to grow into his skin. You must check his claws weekly and take him to a vet if they need clipping.

### **Vaccinations**

Rabbits can suffer from two serious diseases - myxomatosis and viral haemorrhagic disease, known as VHD. Both are fatal to your rabbit so it is important that you take him to the vet to be vaccinated against these diseases.

