

Treating parasites

There is a common parasite that can cause disease in rabbits called *E. cuniculi*. It is passed from rabbit to rabbit through the urine or between mothers and babies and can survive in infected areas for weeks.

It causes damage to the kidneys and nervous system so affected rabbits may have a head tilt, kidney failure, back leg weakness seizures or blindness.

A treatment is available which will treat both *E.cuniculi* and intestinal parasites. Your practice will recommend treatment based on your rabbit's individual requirements.

Neutering

We recommend neutering of both male and female rabbits. It can help reduce territorial behaviour in the female and aggressive and mating behaviour in the male. It also prevents the production of excess rabbits!

Uterine and ovarian cancer is very common in female rabbits. Up to a third will suffer from this terminal disease. Neutering will prevent this.



Summary

- Rabbits make friendly, inquisitive and intelligent pets.
- They need regular handling, the correct diet, housing and preventative healthcare to ensure they lead long healthy lives.
- Contact your practice if you are thinking of getting a rabbit and speak to a member of staff. They will make sure you have all the information you need to make sure your rabbit has the best care possible.



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RABBITS AS PETS



Rabbits are the third most popular British pet; here are some pointers that XL Vets recommend to help keep your rabbit fit and healthy!

Housing

Outdoors

Most pet rabbits are kept outside in a hutch; this is fine as long as there is plenty of space to stretch their legs. The hutch needs to be as big as possible and at least tall enough for the rabbit to stand on its hind legs and make three or four hops in any direction.

Indoors

Some rabbits are kept inside as house rabbits, this is great from a space and exercise point of view but rabbits do need some sunlight too. Rabbits can be litter trained easily like cats, but this is often easier if the rabbit has been neutered. It's important to make sure that the house is rabbit proofed however as carpets and electrical wires are easily chewed.

Rabbits love company and it's best to keep them with another rabbit, a neutered pair works well.

Nutrition

In the wild rabbits eat grass! So the best diet for a pet rabbit is good quality hay or grass. Fresh hay is best offered in a raised rack as they don't like to eat hay that is part of their bedding. This means a diet that is very high in fibre. Fibre helps the rabbit's digestive system and helps to grind down teeth, which are growing all the time.

Pet rabbits need to get the correct balance of vitamins and minerals so they need a dry food to supplement the grass. Dry food should only be a small proportion of their daily diet. The best type is one that is a complete pellet which means that the rabbit cannot select the tasty bits but leave the good bits!

It's best to avoid sugary treats too, which can upset the rabbit's digestive system and encourage obesity.

Health problems

Dental disease is a very big problem in domesticated rabbits, their teeth grow all the time so they need to be ground down by fibre. If this does not happen then spikes can form in the mouth and rub on the tongue and cheeks to cause pain. This will cause loss of appetite and weight loss which may need treatment under anaesthesia to correct.

Eye problems can also result from teeth problems as the roots of the teeth are very close to the tear ducts, these issues can often be prevented by feeding the correct diet.

Fly strike occurs when blowflies lay their eggs on the rabbit. This usually happens when the back end of the rabbit becomes soiled by faecal matter.

The eggs hatch into maggots which gradually eat away the rabbit's flesh. This is extremely painful for the rabbit who will go quickly into shock and die without emergency treatment.

Fly strike can be prevented by careful monitoring of the rabbit especially during the warm summer months. It is important to make sure that there is no evidence of dirt around their back end, this ideally should be done twice daily. There are also products available to deter flies and prevent eggs being laid.



Vaccination

There are two important diseases of rabbits which can be prevented by regular vaccination:

Myxomatosis

This disease is caused by a virus, which is spread by insects; such as fleas, midges and mosquitoes. It is nearly always fatal. The signs include swollen eyes, nose and genitals, swellings under the skin especially around the head and pus like secretions from the eyes and nose.

Viral Haemorrhagic Disease

This is another fatal disease of rabbits. It spreads rapidly between rabbits and does not need direct contact – it may be spread on hay, straw or even by handling rabbits.

As the name implies, haemorrhage (blood) may possibly be seen from the nose, bladder or vagina. However, often no symptoms are noticed other than sudden death.

There is a dual vaccine that protects against both of these diseases and can be given from 5 weeks of age.

It is vital that your rabbit is vaccinated and boosters are done every year.

