



# Rabbit care



# Congratulations on adopting from SPCA!

Rabbits bring enormous joy into our lives and we wish you many years of happiness together. This guide will help answer some common questions about settling your new rabbits into your home, and how best to care for them.

If you have any other questions or concerns after adoption, please call your local SPCA Centre - we're happy to assist.

## The journey home

This is an exciting time for both rabbit and family! However, please don't open the carrier in the car on your way home.

Your rabbit may be scared during the journey, so it's safer to wait until you are home and can put them in a secure location that is set up ready for their arrival.

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## Rabbit shopping list:

- ✓ Large enclosure and exercise run
- ✓ Rabbit carrier
- ✓ Playpen (for indoor or outdoor use)
- ✓ Hay feeder/rack, food bowls, water bowls or sippers
- ✓ Food (including hay, grass and good quality rabbit pellets)
- ✓ Litter tray and suitable bedding (straw, hay, or shredded paper)
- ✓ Brush or comb
- ✓ Toys e.g. treat balls
- ✓ Tunnels and lookout platforms
- ✓ A hide or nest box where they can sleep.



## Your rabbit's microchip

All SPCA rabbits are microchipped and registered on the NZ Companion Animal Register (NZCAR) before you adopt them.

It is essential (and free) to keep the microchip details on NZCAR up-to-date if you move house or your contact details change, in case your rabbit gets lost.

Update your microchip details at [www.animalregister.co.nz](http://www.animalregister.co.nz)

Make a plan to keep your rabbit safe in a disaster. See here for tips: [www.mpi.govt.nz/getpetsthru](http://www.mpi.govt.nz/getpetsthru)

Don't forget, we have lots of useful information on our website. Check out: [www.sPCA.nz/rabbitadvice](http://www.sPCA.nz/rabbitadvice)



Kids can learn how to care for rabbits at: [www.sPCA.nz/kids-rabbitcare](http://www.sPCA.nz/kids-rabbitcare)

# Housing and environment

It is important to make sure you have everything ready for your rabbits before bringing them home, including their accommodation. Rabbits can live happily indoors or outdoors, or both!

## If your rabbits live inside

- > It's possible to litter train rabbits, meaning that they can easily live inside your house as part of the family. See page 7 for litter training advice.

## They will need:

- > A safe and rabbit-proof place (where they can't escape) for sleeping and unsupervised play. This space needs to include a water bowl, hay, bedding, food dish, litter tray, and toys.
- > Close supervision when loose in the house in non-rabbit proof areas.

- > Access to a large additional exercise space, indoor or outdoor, for exercise and enrichment.

## A rabbit-proof environment

- > Tape electrical and phone cords where they can't be chewed (remember your rabbits will have extra reach on their hind legs).
- > Consider getting cord protectors and covers for electrical outlets.
- > Move potted plants where they can't be eaten, as they may be poisonous to rabbits.
- > Remove children's toys, clothing, etc. that could be dangerous or you don't want to be chewed.

## Exercise

- > You can train your rabbits to use a cat flap if you would like to give them easy access to a secure and safe outside area.
- > If your rabbits do not have free access to an outside area, you should consider providing them with daily exercise in the garden. This area would need to be secure and rabbit-proof and might consist of a large exercise pen.

## Your rabbits will also need:

### Mental stimulation

- > Add ramps, tunnels, boxes, climbable objects, and toys to your rabbits' home (ensure that these are made from rabbit-safe materials).

### Plenty of bedding

- > Bedding for rabbits can consist of dust-free straw, shredded paper on a layer of newspaper, pet beds, blankets or rugs. Rabbits have their own individual bedding preferences, just make sure what they choose is warm and dry.
- > Avoid products made from treated timber or wood shavings because these can be harmful to rabbits.



### Safe spaces

- > In the wild, rabbits use higher ground to feel safe and check for danger. Provide objects or higher surfaces for your rabbits to jump up on so that they can exhibit this natural behaviour.
- > Rabbits naturally live underground, so it is great to provide them with hidey holes where they can feel safe and secure, such as cardboard boxes, untreated wicker baskets and tunnels.





### If your rabbits live outside

- > Rabbits need a roomy enclosure and an exercise run that is high enough to allow them to stand-up fully on their hind legs, as well as being big enough to allow plenty of room for them to hop around.
- > Place the enclosure in a position that faces the morning sun.
- > Make sure that your rabbits have access to shade, especially on sunny days, and that they are protected from the rain, wind, and any adverse weather conditions.

### Enclosure and run size

- > Many hutches sold in pet stores are far too small for rabbits to live in. You should buy or make an enclosure as big as you can afford, manage and/or fit!
- > For a pair of rabbits we recommend a minimum

enclosure size of 3m (unobstructed length) x 2m (width) x 1m (height) or the equivalent area with other dimensions. However, the bigger the better. This will allow your rabbits to hop, run, jump, and stand fully upright on their back legs.

- > Your rabbit enclosure should include a darkened sleeping box with appropriate bedding of at least 1m x 1m.
- > The exact amount of space the rabbits will need depends on the number of rabbits being housed, their size, and breed.

### Enclosure requirements

- > The sleeping area should be raised off the ground slightly and must be weatherproof.
- > It must be predator proof as dogs, cats, and other animals can be harmful to your rabbits.
- > There should be areas for your rabbits to hide, play and explore.
- > Include some raised areas for your rabbits to look out, sit on, and sunbathe.
- > Digging is a normal rabbit behaviour. If digging is leading to problems such as escaping, refer to our website for advice: [www.spca.nz/rabbitadvice](http://www.spca.nz/rabbitadvice)

## Litter Training

- 1 Begin litter training in a room that you will consider to be their 'base', and to which they will have access at all times. This room should have floors that can be easily cleaned, such as vinyl, wood or tiles.
- 2 Rabbit-proof the room. Hide or protect any electrical cords, pot plants, toys, furniture, etc.
- 3 Put a litter tray in the room. Line the tray with thick newspaper and fill with shredded paper, dust-free straw or paper-based and non-toxic litter. Never use clumping cat litter.
- 4 Place fresh hay at one end of the tray, as rabbits like to toilet while eating hay. It also encourages them to jump into the tray to reach it. Hanging it up so the hay doesn't get soiled is best. You can purchase a hay manger or create one.
- 5 If your rabbits choose another spot to toilet, you may wish to move the tray and hay to their favoured area. You can try slowly moving the litter tray in stages towards a spot of your choice, but it is far less frustrating to accept your rabbits' choice than to get them to go where you want. Alternatively, you can add more litter trays, especially if you have more than one rabbit.
- 6 Keep your rabbits confined to this room until they are successfully using the tray for toileting, otherwise you may have unwanted accidents.
- 7 Once your rabbits are using the tray, they can access other rabbit-proofed rooms. If your rabbits are toileting in a room you would prefer they didn't, place a second litter tray in this room for them to use.

### Keep it clean:

Litter trays must be changed once a day. Provide each rabbit with their own tray.

Do not use bleach or other strong chemicals to clean the litter tray or you will remove the smell and the rabbits will be less likely to use it.

### Remember:

Your rabbits might not be perfect with their toileting all the time, and some are better than others.

Don't take it personally when they make mistakes – just remember to praise them when they get it right.

# Handling

Rabbits are sociable animals. Some enjoy lots of attention and company from you. However, it might take them a little while to get used to you and your home.

## Settling them in at home

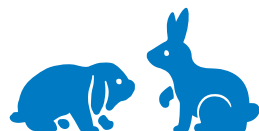
- > Rabbits are likely to be nervous when you first take them home. During the first days simply talk quietly to them and encourage them to approach you by offering healthy treats.
- > Never sneak up on your rabbits.
- > Spend some time on the floor hanging out with your rabbits so that they get used to your presence.
- > Let your rabbits come and sniff you on their own terms. Once they are more confident, you can start to gently stroke them.
- > Do not rush contact or force your rabbits to be held.
- > The more you gently handle your rabbits, and avoid forced interactions, the friendlier they will be.

## How to pick up your rabbits

Most rabbits don't like being picked up so this should be avoided, if possible. If you do need to pick up your rabbit:

- 1 Place one hand under the rabbit's chest.
- 2 Put the other hand supporting their back legs.
- 3 Hold them gently but securely against your chest.
- 4 Rabbits' spines are fragile and can fracture easily. Their hind legs need to be held securely so that they cannot kick out and damage their spine.

If there are children in the house who might interact with your rabbits, they should be supervised and seated.



**Remember:** When rabbits are in the wild, they are a prey species. This means they are naturally fearful of a sudden approach, especially from above.

# Companionship

Rabbits are a social species and have evolved to live in groups. For this reason they should not be kept alone and are happier with company of their own kind.

- > A desexed rabbit friend is essential for your rabbit from a welfare, behaviour and health perspective.
- > Rabbits form strong life-long bonds with one another – once a pair are bonded they should be kept together at all times, even at the vets.
- > Even if you spend lots of time with your rabbit, they will be happier living with another rabbit, as you can't be there all the time.

## Bonding your rabbits

You must introduce rabbits to each other carefully and slowly – this is called the 'bonding' process, and it can take anywhere from a few weeks to a few months to fully bond your rabbits. Rabbits need to be housed separately until they are fully bonded.

Find a full guide on rabbit bonding here: [www.spcan.z/bondingrabbits](http://www.spcan.z/bondingrabbits)

**Guinea pigs and rabbits:** Despite what many people believe, rabbits and guinea pigs should not be housed together. They have different nutritional requirements and rabbits may injure, stress, or pass diseases to guinea pigs.



# Food and water

## Feed your rabbits premium food

Hay and grass should form the basis (85%) of your rabbits' diet. The remainder should be fresh greens and some vegetables (10%) and a small amount of pellets (around 5%).

### Hay

- > Hay is a vital part of a rabbit's diet. Do not confuse hay with straw, as this is to be used for bedding only.
- > Provide unlimited fresh hay every day.
- > Hay provides fibre, which helps to wear down a rabbit's teeth, and is vital for digestion and helping rabbits maintain a healthy weight.
- > Purchase fresh hay from feed stores or some pet stores.
- > Make sure that the hay is not damp, dusty or mouldy as this can cause respiratory illness and other health problems.

### Grass and garden greens

- > Rabbits love grass, dandelion leaves, thistle/puha, plantain leaves and dock leaves.
- > Ensure any leaves or plants given to the rabbits have not been sprayed with poison or pesticides.

- > Rabbits love fresh herbs which provide health benefits. But make sure you check the herbs you have are suitable first.

### Fresh vegetables

- > Feeding a variety of fresh vegetables provides essential nutrients. Visit our website for rabbit safe vegetables: [www.sPCA.nz/whattofeedrabbits](http://www.sPCA.nz/whattofeedrabbits)

### Pellets

- > Avoid pellets that contain dried fruits, nuts, grains, and coloured pieces made from fat, sugar, (sometimes called 'muesli mix').
- > Choose pellets with a high fibre content (more than 18%) and less protein than fibre.
- > Refer to the feeding instructions on the bag.
- > Overfeeding of pellets is a common cause of obesity in rabbits.

### Treats and fruit

- > Fruit and some rabbit treats are high in sugar and/or salt so should be avoided or only given occasionally.

### Foods to avoid

- While many fresh vegetables, herbs, and fruits are suitable for your rabbits, there are some foods that should be fed in only very small amounts and some that must be avoided altogether.
- > Use kale, spinach and silver beet sparingly.
- > Some fruit tree branches and leaves are suitable for rabbits to eat, but not all. Stick to apple, ash-tree, birch, hawthorn, hazel, hazelnut, juniper, maple, pear, pine, poplar, rose, spruce and willow branches.
- > Give carrots only as treats because they are high in starch.
- > Celery must be cut into 1cm pieces before being given because larger pieces can get caught in rabbits' intestines.
- > Never feed your rabbits foods intended for humans, such as chocolate, cookies, crackers, cereal, yoghurt, milk, pasta, or bread.

### Water and bowls

- > Fresh water must always be available and replaced daily.
- > Rabbits prefer to drink from a bowl. Use heavy containers to avoid spillage and provide more than one source of water. Alternatively use a pet sipper bottle that clips to the cage.
- > Provide more than one source of water.

### Changing foods

- > When introducing any new food, always do so slowly over a few weeks to avoid digestive upsets. If the new food causes diarrhoea, stop feeding it immediately.



See a full list of dangerous foods for rabbits here:  
[www.sPCA.nz/whattofeedrabbits](http://www.sPCA.nz/whattofeedrabbits)

# Health advice

If your rabbits have a healthy diet, plenty of space, and a compatible rabbit companion, then they should live a happy and healthy life. However, health issues sometimes arise and if you are ever in doubt you should talk to your vet.

**Important:** Rabbits are good at hiding their symptoms, as a sick rabbit in the wild would be easy prey. Pay close attention to your rabbits' appearance and behaviour. Sometimes a rabbit who just looks a bit down is actually very unwell.

It helps to recognise rabbits' symptoms early; this is easier if you handle and check your rabbits daily. You should regularly check your rabbits':

## Weight

A healthy weight for a rabbit is slim but not bony. You should be able to feel (but not see) their ribs just under their skin without a thick layer of fat.

A monthly weigh-in is a good idea. Any sudden decrease in weight is likely to be health-related and must be taken seriously with a visit to the vet. An overweight rabbit is likely to suffer from ongoing health issues, so it is important to feed your rabbit the right foods in suitable quantities and seek advice if they are overweight.

## Eyes, ears and nose

These should be clear, clean, and bright looking with no discharge. If your rabbit is shaking their head a lot and scratching around the ears, it could be a sign of ear mites or another issue so they will need to see a vet.



## Coat

A healthy coat should be clean and in good condition. Dandruff, parasites, hair loss or excessive moulting may indicate a health problem; your vet or SPCA can advise safe treatment options. Regular grooming is important, especially for long-haired rabbits.

## Droppings

Rabbits have two sorts of droppings – hard fibrous pellets and soft green caecotropes. Rabbits will eat their caecotropes - this is a normal and important part of a rabbit's digestion and does not indicate ill-health. If you notice more caecotropes than usual, this means your rabbit is not ingesting them, and can be an indication of a low fibre diet.

Check your rabbit's bottom daily to ensure their droppings are not soiling their fur. This can be a sign of digestive problems and needs attention.

Rabbits with soiled fur around their bottom can be at risk of flystrike, where flies lay eggs and maggots cause severe injury. Flystrike is an



emergency requiring immediate veterinary care.

## Teeth

Rabbits' teeth continue to grow throughout their lives and dental problems can frequently occur. Make sure that you provide your rabbits with adequate chewing material, such as safe tree branches (see page 11). Avoid trees which have been chemically treated or are close to sources of pollution. A rabbit who is reluctant to eat or drooling may have a dental or other health problem that should be checked immediately by a vet.

**Gastrointestinal stasis or diarrhoea are both emergencies and can be fatal if left untreated. If your rabbit stops eating, produces fewer droppings, or has diarrhoea, seek veterinary care immediately.**



### Claws

Rabbit's nails are likely to need clipping regularly (about once every six to eight weeks). Ask your vet to show you how to do this properly, as it is easy to do it incorrectly and cut through the blood vessel and sensitive tissue in the claw, causing bleeding and a lot of pain to your rabbits. Paving stones or other rough surfaces that are placed in an area that your rabbits regularly travel over may help reduce the need to trim their nails as often.

### Vaccinations

Rabbits need vaccinations to protect against both strains of the Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease Virus. This virus causes intense suffering to rabbits and can often be fatal. Talk to your vet about having your rabbits vaccinated.

Rabbits need regular booster vaccinations.



**Remember: Never give a rabbit human medicine** (e.g. Panadol), as medications meant for humans can be harmful or even fatal to rabbits. If you are concerned about their health, head straight to your vet.

## Exercise and Enrichment

Rabbits need lots of exercise and enrichment to avoid boredom and to promote positive physical and mental health. Use your imagination when enriching your rabbits' environment but ensure that everything you use is safe, non-toxic, and will not cause injury.

### Toys

Toys are a fantastic way for you to interact with your rabbits. Rabbits love to investigate, push, pull, and play with toys. Ensure you change toys regularly to keep them interested.

#### Here are some toy ideas:

- > Fill cardboard toilet paper rolls with hay and healthy treats.
- > Hide a slice of fruit or vegetable in a treat ball.
- > Untreated wicker baskets, wooden 'fiddlesticks', cartons, and untreated fruit tree branches make great shredding fun and are also important for wearing down teeth.
- > Plain cardboard, boxes, cat tunnels, and blocks of untreated wood are excellent for stretching, climbing, or sitting.
- > Remember to let your rabbits destroy their toys if they want to. That is part of the fun for them!

### Outside Enrichment

Rabbits love the chance to kick up their heels in their own exercise area.

- > Invest in an exercise pen or buy several and link them together with tubes/tunnels to make a mega play area.
- > Add a variety of rabbit-safe toys to the pen.
- > Allow your rabbits the space and opportunity to eat fresh grass.
- > Rabbits love sandpits filled with soil or sand. Pushing sand and digging encourages their natural behaviours.
- > Find more information on rabbit enrichment on our website, [www.sPCA.nz/rabbitadvice](http://www.sPCA.nz/rabbitadvice)



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