

JOONDALUP CENTRAL VETERINARY HOSPITAL



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RABBITS



Rabbits can be delightful pets: clean, lively, affectionate and curious. They usually nap during the day, when most people are at work or school, and are easy to maintain in a small flat/apartment.

HOUSING

Rabbit hutches should have the following features:

- Large enough to allow the rabbit to stand on hind legs at full height
- Be escape proof, yet comfortable
- Be sanitary (have a smooth floor, waterproof and be cleaned easily)
- Be well constructed of suitable material
- Made so that the rabbit can't injure itself or damage the hutch

Bedding for the hutch should be of a suitable material such as hay with newspaper or sawdust underneath. Hay and sawdust for this purpose can be purchased cheaply at stock feeders. Hutches must be surrounded with fly screen to prevent the entry of unwanted disease carrying mosquitoes.

It is important to protect your rabbit from the outdoor elements. Rabbit can easily become heat stressed, so housing should be kept out of the direct midday sun. On particularly hot days, a frozen bottle of water can be placed in the hutch as a source of relief. During the colder weather, make sure your rabbit doesn't feel the cold too much, an old blanket draped over the front of the hutch at night should do the trick.

If you have more than one rabbit, it is not advisable to house them together unless they have been desexed. Entire rabbits housed together will commonly become aggressive and fight with each other, no matter if male or female.

DIET

Commercially available rabbit pellets are a good staple, with other things such as hay and fresh veggies (carrot, cauliflower, cabbage stalks and parsley) added to the diet, use caution when giving lettuce as it can cause diarrhoea.

Fresh water must be made available at all times. A purpose made "Lixit" drinking bottle is the best way to give a rabbit water, as the water doesn't go stale and contaminated. These are available from pet shops/ stock feeders.

HEALTH

To prevent your rabbit from being infected with the Rabbit Calicivirus, it is advisable to have them vaccinated by your vet. Only one vaccination per year is required if your bunny is over 10 weeks of age (they require 2 vaccinations, 4 weeks apart if under 10 weeks of age).

Rabbit teeth grow constantly throughout life, they naturally wear down on each other while eating. If their top and bottom teeth do not align properly, then their teeth will not wear down and become overgrown, preventing them from eating. If your rabbit does have this problem, they will need to have their teeth regularly trimmed by your vet. Keep an eye on their nails as well, these may also need to be trimmed regularly.

TRAINING

It is possible to train a rabbit into using a cat litter tray for toileting, and is generally quite easy to do. Place a litter tray of cat litter, sand or sawdust into a small room such as the laundry (make sure the tray is shallow enough to allow bunny to easily hop into it). Put some of the rabbit's droppings into the tray, and leave the rabbit enclosed in the room for at least a week to get them use to where the tray is. Put their food and water in another corner of the room away from the tray, as they may not want to toilet near their food. When cleaning the tray, put back a few of the droppings.

The rabbit can be taken out of the laundry and played with in another room of the house for a short period, then returned to the laundry and given some food, where it will probably then use the tray. Once bunny is well litter-trained, play sessions around the house can last a lot longer, enabling it to explore the house.

Hint: at this stage, it is probably better to feed bunny before letting them around the house, as they are less likely to chew on household items when they have a full tummy.

You can train them to come when their name is called by rattling tasty treats in a plastic container when calling their name. Use treats such as sweet breakfast cereal, raisins or fresh vegetables. These treats can also be used for any other training, such as teaching them to be calm when picked up. Also give a treat when they are put back in their housing area/ hutch, so they feel at ease.

A timid rabbit can be taught to feel at ease when a person interacts with them. This is achieved by sitting quietly with them on the floor and read a book while bunny explores the room. You must be quiet and patient with him. When the rabbit approaches, offer a hand slowly to them and slowly stroke it on the head and around the eyes and cheeks.

If you wish to introduce a new rabbit to your existing one, both should already be desexed. They should have separate cages, and meet each other for short play sessions on neutral territory. Be aware that a bit of chasing and hair pulling are normal behaviours in this situation. However, you should be prepared to stop full-on fighting by stamping your feet, spraying the rabbits with water, and using towels/gloves to separate them. Several weeks/months may elapse before they can be left together unsupervised. It has however been found that a mutually stressful event such as a car-ride (especially through a car wash) whilst they are together can lead to them bonding. Male to female pairs have the best success rate (both desexed), although it really depends on the individual personalities. If they are raised together from a young age, they generally get along well.

DESEXING

Here are some advantages to desexing your rabbit :

- They make better companions. Removal of the hormone influences calms down urges to be aggressive, destructive, or territorial. They are easier to litter train. Male and female rabbits are less likely to spray urine.
- They can have their own rabbit companion if they have been desexed.
- They will not have unwanted litters. It can be extremely difficult to find good homes for the multitudes of baby rabbits that can be the result of an entire male and female rabbit being housed together.
- They will live healthier, longer lives. Diseases of the reproductive tracts are eliminated, and males don't fight other animals. Abscesses that can arise from rabbit fights are extremely difficult to treat and are often ongoing sagas.

It is best if your rabbit is desexed when they reach sexual maturity (approx. 4 months of age), before their hormones get the better of them, although they can be done at a later age.

NORMAL RABBIT BEHAVIOUR

The rabbit is a curious creature that likes to explore its environment, and just like cats and dogs they go through stages of mischief especially in their first year. Rabbits may chew on household items or dig in soft materials if given the chance. The goal is to enable your rabbit to achieve its potential as a delightful companion: clean, playful and affectionate.

- **ACTIVITY**

An adult rabbit is generally active in the early morning and in the late afternoon / early evening, followed by feeding and then a resting period. Wild rabbits often spend a lot of time resting in its warren, consequently a house rabbit adjusts well to living in a pen or cage, with times of outside activity. During these periods of activity, they will hop about, marking the area with colourless and odourless (to humans) droplets from small glands underneath the chin. A sexually entire rabbit may also mark its territory by spraying urine onto objects, and sometimes leaving droppings. Rabbits will investigate various hiding areas such as behind curtains or under chairs, and will readily jump onto furniture, in order to climb to higher perch. A lively rabbit may suddenly shake its head and then hop away quickly while twisting its rear quarters in the air, or it may jump and turn 180 degrees in the air before landing. Some rabbits will play chase games with another rabbit or a person (as long as the rabbit chases the person, and not vice versa).

When moving around the house, they will investigate objects using their nose and mouth. Picking up and throwing small objects with their mouth is common, as well as moving objects around with their nose, mouth and front feet. Some rabbits, especially entire females, like to dig extensive burrows if placed in an outside pen.

- **SOCIAL INTERACTION**

A social hierarchy is an important part of a rabbit's life. Rabbits that are kept together may bond with each other, and so will groom each other and sleep in contact with each other. This grooming behaviour can be transferred to a human, whereby the rabbit will groom their owner's hair. A house rabbit in a one-rabbit home may establish dominance over other household members, such as dogs and cats, and even people. Signals of dominance are quite different from the ones other animals show, a dominant rabbit will present its face to a subordinate rabbit or person for grooming. Licking or nudging a person's hand or foot is one way a rabbit solicits petting from the owner (because to a rabbit being petted or groomed on its head signifies its dominance).

Rabbits can get along with other household animals such as dogs and cats. If the animal does not chase the rabbit, the rabbit will approach and sniff them, nibble on their fur, or even mark the animal with its chin glands. Many dogs and cats will accept the presence of a house rabbit and learn to suppress their natural chase instinct. However, the rabbit should never be left unsupervised with carnivorous pets such as dogs and cats. Some rabbits have an innate fear of ferrets, which can make cohabitation very difficult.

- **VOCALIZATION**

Although generally silent, rabbits are capable of making a variety of sounds. A soft humming noise from a male rabbit circling around the owner may be the prelude to a mating attempt of the owner's foot. A contented rabbit may quietly chatter its teeth during a petting session. A rabbit that does not want to be disturbed may growl or hiss and rush toward an intruder with its neck extended and teeth bared. A frightened or injured rabbit can emit a high-pitched scream. Stamping of the hind feet is the rabbit's way of signalling a perceived danger. Reluctance to move, sometimes accompanied by loud teeth grinding, may indicate pain.

- **GROOMING**

Grooming behaviour is a sign of good health, the rabbit licks its forepaws to clean its ears and face, and uses its tongue to preen its coat. Moulting occurs approximately four times a year, and hairball formation (and possible fatal intestinal blockage) can be prevented by frequently combing the coat with a fine-tooth comb, oral pet laxatives may be indicated for a rabbit that has been diagnosed with hairball formation.

BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS

- **CHEWING ON INNAPPROPRIATE OBJECTS**

Wires, television remote controls, books, furniture, carpet and clothing are among many of the household objects that rabbits find appealing. Electrical wires are of special concern because of the possibility of fire and the potential of injury or electrocution of the rabbit.

A rabbit may become temporarily obsessed with some object in particular, usually lasting about a week. The owner can try thumping loudly with their foot, or spraying the offending rabbit with water or air, but only do this if they are caught in the act. The owner can try offering something better to chew, like a carrot, a piece of broccoli, or an acceptable toy (junk mail, empty paper towel rolls, cat toys, or small stuffed toys), or returning the rabbit to its pen for a rest period so as to interrupt the unwanted behaviour. The easiest way of dealing with inappropriate chewing behaviour is to close the door to certain rooms and to rabbit-proof the other rooms. Valuable items should be placed well out of reach, and it should be remembered that rabbits can be repelled by such scents as perfumes, pet repellents and menthol used in ointment for sore muscles. Blankets can cover tantalising furniture, plexiglass can be used to cover portions of walls, furniture can be arranged to cover electrical wires or they can be covered with flexible tubing. It is probably a good idea to declare a study/computer room off limits to your rabbit.

- **INAPPROPRIATE ELIMINATION**

A new rabbit should be limited by the amount of time allowed to spend outside of its pen by 30 minutes, to avoid toileting “accidents”. Inappropriate toileting behaviour in the well-adjusted rabbit usually only occurs in sexually intact rabbits. A sexually intact rabbit may spray urine on a variety of objects such as floors, walls, furniture and even other pets and people. This is usually stopped or significantly decreased by surgical desexing, although it may take longer for the change to occur in females (can take months) than in males (usually only takes days to weeks)

- **INNAPROPRIATE MATING BEHAVIOUR**

A sexually intact male rabbit may attempt to mount other animals, or even the feet of a person (especially if wearing furry slippers!). He will usually make a humming noise while circling the object of his desire. Desexing him will solve or greatly reduce this problem.

- **NESTING BEHAVIOUR**

Nesting is common in the sexually intact adult female rabbit. Nesting includes chewing of household items and protecting her territory. She may attack people and other animals that come near her area (her “area” may include one or more entire rooms of a house). Surgical desexing will eliminate or greatly reduce this behaviour.

- **FEARFUL, TIMID BEHAVIOUR**

Rabbits generally do not like being picked up, unless they have been conditioned to it from when very young. A rabbit’s fears can be eased by analysing and minimizing the situations that seem to upset the rabbit, for example a young child may induce panic via its quick movements, therefore the parent should supervise child-rabbit interactions carefully and teach the child how to be friends with the rabbit and not to frighten it. A scared rabbit will stamp its hind feet, and may freeze or run when cornered. To gain trust, the owner can place the rabbit in a towel-lined small box and pet the rabbit gently while sitting and watching TV, this will need to be repeated often to enable rabbit to become more confident.

- **AGGRESSION TOWARD PEOPLE**

The stages of a rabbit’s anger are as follows: The rabbit holds its ears back tightly to its head; the rabbit “punches” the person with its front paws; then if its anger is escalating the rabbit may give a warning by butting against the person with its mouth held stiffly open so that the front teeth make contact with the person; Ultimately the angry rabbit may bite the person.

This may manifest itself as growling, biting or scratching people, and may occur as the rabbit reaches puberty (more common in females than males), surgical desexing can decrease but not necessarily totally eliminate this aggression. A rabbit may show these aggressive signs if he/she believes they are above that person on the household dominance hierarchy. Aggressive behaviour should be taken in context of when it occurs, for example a lively rabbit that is in the middle of dashing about the house may not take kindly to being interrupted during play, however if it occurs completely spontaneously, the owner will need to discourage this behaviour by saying “eek” or “ow” or by spraying it with water.

Territorial aggression can also occur (eg: while being lifted out of a cage), if so the owner should throw a towel over it before removing the rabbit from the cage. If the rabbit is showing aggression when a person enters its room or pen, the owner can modify this behaviour by sitting down in the play area (with arms and legs covered if needed), and ignoring the rabbit while reading a book. If the rabbit approaches, some tasty treats can be offered.

Misdirected rabbit bites to a person can occur if the person is trying to separate two rabbits that are fighting. Fighting rabbits should be separated with brooms or other objects to prevent such injuries.

- **AGGRESSION TOWARD OTHER RABBITS**

Dominance behaviour is probably the cause of aggression toward other rabbits. Desexing may not help this behaviour. Even apparently well-bonded rabbits that have lived together for months or years may start to injure each other. Bite wounds require veterinary attention, as they are often very difficult to treat once infection has set in. Unfortunately, one rabbit may become a social outcast in groups of three or more rabbits, the only solution to this is to house these rabbits separately, if not the rabbit may lose condition or become excessively fearful.

- **AGGRESSION TOWARD OTHER ANIMALS**

A rabbit may dominate other household pets, including cats and even large dogs. These situations must be monitored for the rabbit's protection (a warning from a dog can be fatal to the rabbit). A rabbit can be as mischievous as a child and may provoke a dog into taking aggressive or defensive action. Even rabbits that live peacefully with other animals should not be left alone unsupervised.

BSAVA: Manual of Rabbit Medicine and Surgery

