



# RABBIT ADOPTION HANDBOOK

## ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

### YOUR NEW FUR-EVER FRIEND

#### DESEXING

Your rabbit has been desexed prior to adoption. As part of your adoption paperwork, you will have received a desexing certificate signed and dated by the AAPS veterinarian.

Desexing is essential to prevent breeding and health issues.

Rabbits have an 85% risk of developing reproductive cancer if not desexed, and the risk continues to increase once they exceed 2 years of age. Both male and female rabbits are sexually frustrated when left undesexed and may display aggressive or unpleasant behaviours.

#### VACCINATION

Your rabbit/s have received their required vaccinations. You will receive a vaccination certificate with details of when the next vaccination is due. Rabbits require booster vaccinations every 6 months.

#### MICROCHIPPING

Your rabbit has been microchipped. It is crucial that your details are kept up to date. AAPS will register the microchip in your name. This may take several weeks. You will receive confirmation from the microchip registry when this has been done. Please contact AAPS if confirmation is not received after 4 weeks.

You are responsible for registering your pet with your local council. AAPS will notify your local council that you have recently adopted an animal, however you must follow through with the registration.

# RABBIT SUPPLY CHECKLIST



## WHAT DO I NEED?

Refer to the list below to ensure you have all the supplies and equipment you need to settle in your newly adopted rabbit.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Age specific food (Oxbow recommended) | <input type="checkbox"/> Warm bedding                                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hay                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Hiding Spaces                                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Food Bowl                             | <input type="checkbox"/> Puppy pens or baby gates- for indoor free roaming |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Water Bowl                            | <input type="checkbox"/> Carrier   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Large play pen (indoor/outdoor)       | <input type="checkbox"/> Fresh Vegetable                                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Litter tray and scooper               |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Toys                                  |  |

## FEEDING

The recommended diet for a rabbit includes 80-90% oaten hay and 20% greens/vegetables. Your rabbits will need a cat litter tray full of oaten hay per day, as well as a filled 3L container full of greens. Any fruits or vegetables given to your rabbits must be fresh, washed thoroughly and 'human-quality'.

### VEGETABLES

Safe Vegetables include:

Endive, chicory, bok choy, pak choy, choy sum, parsley, gai choy, silver beet, kale, Dutch carrot tops, radish tops, beet greens, celery tops, rocket, any lettuce except iceberg lettuce, snow peas, basil, coriander, watercress, sage, thyme, spinach (small amounts), broccoli (small amounts).

### HAY

It is very important that the oaten hay your rabbits eat is of the highest quality. Low quality hays are unlikely to be eaten by rabbits and this can seriously affect their health. Always check that it smells fresh, looks green, NO prickles, NO excessive dust, not too dry and crackly and NOT in a plastic bag (humidity is created and hay generally then loses its taste).

### NO MIXES OR PELLETS

Most of the muesli, pellets and mixes available from supermarkets, pet shops and pet supply places are very high in protein, fat and sugar. Rabbits fed a diet high in pellets and mixes are at high risk of developing urinary problems, intestinal problems, and nail and feet problems. Oxbow pellets, however, are a good quality and high fibre pellet. A tablespoon each day will be enough to supplement a balanced diet.

### TREATS

Treats can include Apple, banana, blueberries, grapes, mango, pear, strawberries, carrots and raspberry. Only feed ONE small piece per day.

### TOXIC OR INAPPROPRIATE FOOD

Bread, corn, chocolate, onions, potatoes, rhubarb and its leaves, pennyroyal mint, human treats like biscuits and cakes etc., grains, seeds or nuts.

### DIET CHANGE

Any diet changes need to be done very slowly over 2-4 weeks. You should only include new vegetables one at a time for a few days to monitor for diarrhoea. Even a new bale of hay can cause an upset stomach as rabbits have a delicate gut.

# SETTLING IN

## ARRIVING HOME

*Rabbits can be very flighty creatures, so entering a new environment can be very scary for them. This can make introductions difficult at times. Rabbits are prey animals, so all their instincts are geared toward running away and staying safe from anything that might want to eat them. The result is a pet that needs a lot of patience and a quiet introduction to your home.*

## ENCLOSURES

Rabbits make great house pets, but the introduction must be slow. When you first bring the rabbits into your home, set their enclosure down in a quiet corner. Ideally, you'll have a comfortable enclosure that either has solid sides, or have it set in a room with very little activity. Even if you plan to have free-roaming house rabbits, you still need to provide a secure enclosure. This provides the rabbits a safe place, and the place which they should go whenever you can't directly supervise their movements.

## FOOD

Food can be set out for them on a plate within the enclosure if desired, but don't be surprised if they don't eat right away. When a rabbit is eating is when it's at its most vulnerable, so they'll have to feel safe before they'll really settle down to eat. On the flip side, if they find that nothing attacks them when they do eat something, it can go a long way to calming them down quickly.

## FREE ROAMING

Depending on their previous experiences and individual personality, the rabbits may have to stay in their enclosure for anywhere from a few hours to a few days. Wait until the rabbits are calm and relaxed, meaning that they're eating well and showing curiosity about their surroundings. When this happens, you can open the cage door and let them venture out on their own.

## IMPORTANT NOTES:

- Don't force them and keep exploration to a room at a time.
- In your rabbits' first introductions to an area outside the enclosure, make sure it's quiet and your rabbits have plenty of space to move and hide.
- Keep the TV and radio off or turned down low and try to avoid sudden loud noises.
- If you have any other pets, make sure they're separated from the rabbits' area of exploration.

## BE PATIENT

Don't feel discouraged if it takes your rabbits several days to feel at home in their new environment. Give them time, space, and a relaxed atmosphere and they will come around. Some well-socialized rabbits may be settled in within a day, while others may take weeks to be perfectly at home. Sooner or later, they're bound to accept the new digs and assimilate themselves into their new families.

## OTHER PETS

If you have other pets, great care must be taken in introducing them to the rabbits. Many types of dogs are hard-wired for hunting small animals. Very close supervision with all other pets is essential. This is not just for the safety of the rabbits, as rabbits are powerful fighters if they feel threatened. Cats and small dogs could be injured if the rabbit gets too nervous.

Introduce the animals through a divider first, then together with extremely close supervision and some form of restraint (especially for larger dogs) is advisable. Remember that cats and dogs are predators, and rabbits are hard-wired to fear them. That doesn't mean that they can never make good housemates, but don't be surprised if it takes a while.

# BUNNY BUDDIES.



## BONDING YOUR CURRENT RABBIT WITH A NEW BUNNY BUDDY

*A rabbit's best companion is another friendly rabbit, and we believe they should always be homed with another rabbit. Rabbits are very social creatures and need companionship from their own species.*

### SEPARATE

You will need to have two enclosures set up for your rabbits. One enclosure can house your rabbit/s that were living with you already, the other enclosure should house the new rabbit you have adopted.

Ensure that they are close enough together so that the rabbits can interact, see and smell each other through the barrier. Allow time for the new rabbit to adjust and familiarise themselves with the smells of your home. Your current rabbit/s will also need time to get used to having another friend. When they are ready, prepare a neutral space for the introduction, such as a bathroom. It is a good idea to provide a cardboard box with a hole that a stressed rabbit can retreat into or jump on.

### POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR

Positive signs that both rabbits are adapting include lying down adjacent to one another on either side of the barrier - this shows that they are relaxed with one another. It will also help to feed them both on either side of the barrier so that they get used to eating together. You may have to wait anywhere between a couple of days to a few weeks - it all depends on the personalities of your rabbits.

### NEGATIVE BEHAVIOUR

If either rabbit is displaying aggressive behaviour such as growling and biting, wait a while longer before you attempt introduction without a barrier. One of the rabbits may take the lead and approach the other, sniffing and circling them and trying to mount them. This is not so much for courtship as for dominance and is the rabbit's way of figuring out who is going to be "boss". A submissive rabbit will let this happen, putting their head on the ground, while a less submissive rabbit may nip or run away. Always stay with the rabbits and intervene if you feel one or both rabbits are becoming too stressed.

### CONTINUE SOCIAL SESSIONS

Continue with daily meetings, increasing from 10 mins to 30 or 40 mins at a time. All being well, the rabbits will eventually stop taking notice of each other and become curious about their surroundings instead. This is the turning point when it is usually safe to let the rabbits roam free together in the house, however, continue to separate them when you are not there to supervise.

### BONDED

When the rabbits start to lie down together or groom each other, the bond is made and will continue to deepen with time. It is now safe to leave the rabbits together at all times.

# HOUSING

## HOUSING ESSENTIALS

*No longer should anyone be thinking a rabbit hutch is enough, it's not! All rabbits need housing that will allow them room to jump and run about in, room to stretch out and relax, somewhere to feel safe and somewhere snug to sleep.*

Housing essentials include:

- Rabbits need 24/7 access to a safe environment that allows them to run, dig/burrow, jump, hide, forage, stretch and lie fully stretched out.
- Rabbits need to be safe and protected from predators and extremes of weather and temperature.
- Make sure your rabbits can access all the things they need (space, food, water, safe hiding places, companion rabbit, toilet area and toys) at all times.
- Appropriate, safe absorbent substrates and bedding materials should be provided in the shelter and toilet areas to keep the rabbits comfortable and warm.
- Toilet area(s) should be cleaned every day. The whole home should be thoroughly cleaned regularly, approximately once a week.

## SPACE REQUIREMENTS

Your rabbits will need as much space as you can allow them. The tiny hutches sold in pet shops/Bunnings and other retail places are far too small. The absolute minimum requirement is five full body stretches per rabbit (approximately 2.5m x 2m x 1m). The height needs to be a minimum of 1m so that they can stand on their hind legs without hindrance.

## PREDATOR PROOF

Enclosures and runs need to be predator proof and mosquito proof to reduce the risk of rabbits contracting myxomatosis (spread by biting insects/mosquitos), which has no vaccine. If you have foxes in your area, your rabbits will need to be inside at night-time, or at least in a room where the foxes cannot scare them or get in and attack/kill them. Foxes are very clever and can gain entry through virtually all hutches/enclosures.

## WEATHERPROOF

Rabbits do not tolerate extreme weather temperatures, so you need to make sure their housing stays warm and comfortable and protects them from the elements. If you have just got a rabbit and he's been kept indoors or is a baby, don't put him outside until the weather gets warmer, as the sharp change in weather can kill.

Rabbits can die from heat stress, so if the temperature is over 25 degrees Celsius, your rabbits will need to either be indoors with the air conditioning or have a frozen water bottle covered with a thin towel next to them. Tiles that are put into the freezer or flat ice packs are also good for rabbits to lie on and cool down. Heat stress symptoms include Reddening of the ears, panting, lethargy, salivating, weakness/slow movement, acting confused and convulsing.

## DAILY EXERCISE

Apart from space, rabbits need to exercise. If your rabbits can't have at least 4-5 hours exercise time inside the house or in a rabbit-proofed yard, then the exercise run should be no smaller than 4m x 4m. If you have a rabbit-proofed yard, ensure any gaps are filled properly and that you always supervise your rabbits.

## HOUSING IDEAS

### PUPPY PENS

To make a pop-up exercise area quickly for your rabbit you can use metal puppy pens as they are reasonably priced and great as they fold away when they are not being used and you can set them up anywhere. You can also buy more than one

and make the pen even bigger. Please note: Make sure you always supervise your rabbit whilst they are exercising in these as they are in no way predator proof. Never leave them unattended. They can be adjusted in shape and size, to fit your space and they can be moved around easily. The best height to get is 35 inch as this will prevent any escapes.

### HUTCHES

If you are using a hutch only, then a fantastic decent size would be at least 6, 7 or 8ft in length and 3ft high and 3ft wide. They will need an additional area for their exercise time, nothing smaller than 8ft by 4ft by 3ft. If you cannot attach a run direct to the hutch you could attach a run-around tunnel to link them from afar. Always place runs on concrete slabs to stop your rabbit digging out and to stop a predator digging in!

### BUILD YOUR OWN

Remember the bigger the better for your rabbits and for you too, as it will be easier to clean out and you will get so much more entertainment watching your rabbits binky and run at great speeds around an enclosure that is big enough to allow them to do this.



## HOUSING ENRICHMENT

### ACCESSORIES

**TOYS:** Willow balls and other toys can be placed around the enclosure for your rabbits to play with. Anything that keeps your rabbits safely stimulated and active is great for their wellbeing. Switch toys regularly so your buns don't get bored!

**TUNNELS & HIDE-OUTS:** Tunnels will encourage your rabbits to be much more active and provide a substitute burrow. These can be bought from pet shops or can be as cheap and easy as a cardboard box with a hole cut at each end.

### FORAGING

Rabbits love to snuffle around for titbits so rather than put their food in a bowl, put it around the enclosure, in their tunnels or under some hay, this will encourage their natural urge to go foraging. Hiding food to encourage foraging or providing it in a way which stimulates the rabbits mentally and physically are a good form of enrichment.

### SOCIAL HOUSING

Rabbits are social animals and normally prefer to be with another friendly rabbit AAPS recommends that rabbits are kept with at least one other friendly rabbit in compatible pairs or groups. Whilst there are exceptions where an individual rabbit must be housed alone this should only be for a good welfare reason, as advised by an expert, such as a vet or qualified animal behaviourist. The more rabbits kept, the larger their housing will need to be as they will need space both to interact with one another and be alone for a while if they choose.

# ENRICHMENT



## ENRICHMENT

Enrichment is a fantastic way of providing your rabbits with mental stimulation. This not only helps keep them entertained, but also helps to tire them out. View the following different types of enrichment to get you started.



**Cardboard boxes:** Rabbits like it when they have 2 doorways cut out for easy entry and exit. Tape several boxes together to make a castle!.

**Toilet rolls, tissue boxes or egg cartons:** Fill these with hay, shredded paper or yummy treats. These require your rabbits to use their brains to figure out how to reach an item or food. They're great for cognitive stimulation and your cat's mental health.



**Wooden Pegs:** Clip these to the bars of the enclosure so that they can be flipped up and down.

**Forage Trays:** Boxes or plastic trays filled with shredded paper with scattered treats mixed throughout for foraging



**String or Twine 'Wash line':** String or twine tied across the top of the enclosure like a washing line with green leafy vegetables pegged to it for your bunny to pull down and eat.

**Plastic cat balls or baby toys:** These are great if they have bells inside for pushing and throwing around. Rabbits enjoy the rattling sound and are very curious when playing with them.

**Rabbit Toys:** Bunny Boppers, Wooden Chew Treats, Wooden Castles etc.



**Plastic cat balls or baby toys:** These are great if they have bells inside for pushing and throwing around. Rabbits enjoy the rattling sound and are very curious when playing with them.


**Plastic or Wooden Bird Toys:** These can be clipped to the bars of the cage. Ones with bells are lots of fun but make sure that the bells aren't chewed. No rope toys.



**Seagrass Doormats:** These are great for chewing up. Several mats together can be made into tunnels or different shapes

**Run and play time:** Rabbits should have at least 4-5 hours exercise time inside the house or in a rabbit-proofed yard. An exercise run is also a good idea.

# RABBIT HEALTH ADVICE

 Your newly adopted rabbit comes with a two-week veterinary health cover. If you notice any signs of illness or unusual behaviour, please call the AAPS veterinary clinic.

The friendly AAPS vet staff are committed to providing services of the highest standard and the best of care for all animals. Rest assured, your beloved pet will be in good hands with our friendly and professional staff. If you have any concerns or questions about the health and wellbeing of your rabbit, please contact the AAPS Veterinarians immediately.

## COMMON SIGNS OF ILLNESS

- Lethargy
- Blood in urine, stools, or vomit
- Eyes weeping/redness
- Respiratory problems
- Vomiting, Diarrhoea or constipation
- Drooling
- Teeth grinding
- Unexpected weight loss/gain
- Changes in appetite or drinking habits
- Behavioural changes
- Moderate to profuse bleeding
- Skin irritation or hair loss
- Sores on the feet
- Overgrown front teeth

## POSSIBLE HEALTH ISSUES

### EAR DISEASE

Ear disease in rabbits is unfortunately a very common problem. Ear infections are classified by which part of the ear is affected.

The rabbits that are most vulnerable to these infections are the rabbits that have anatomically small or closed-off ear canals, which are the lop-eared breeds. These rabbits have been selected for their endearing droopy ears but unfortunately have developed very narrow and occasionally completely closed ear canals. This means that everyday cleaning of their ears is difficult, and bacteria and wax often build up in this dark, warm environment.

#### Prevention:

Make sure that your rabbit is cleaning their ears: Most rabbits will naturally clean their ears but as they get older, disease such as arthritis can prevent them from cleaning their ears well. There are several treatments older rabbits can be placed on to make them more comfortable performing these everyday tasks

Regular veterinary health checks: regular ear checks can help pick up any underlying disease your rabbit may be hiding.

#### Symptoms:

- Scratching ears more frequently
- Appearing quieter or less interested in food
- Repeated episodes of gastrointestinal stasis
- Head tilts or facial asymmetry (drooping of one side of their face)

#### Treatment:

Fortunately, ear infections can be managed in several ways. If you believe your rabbit is suffering from ear disease, contact your vet immediately. Treatment can vary from daily ear cleaners, antibiotics, surgical ear flushing and advanced imaging and surgery.



### ENCEPHALITOOZON CUNICULI (EC)

EC is a parasite belonging to the protozoa family that generally affects the central nervous system, eyes and/or kidneys. Some rabbits can live normally with EC dormant in their system without any obvious signs, others can be affected severely over several body systems. It can be transferred from a mother rabbit to her babies in utero and can also spread between rabbits as infected rabbits can shed the organism through their urine.

Symptoms:

- Head tilting to one side
- Neurological problems,
- Loss of balance and coordination
- Cataracts or blindness
- Chronic gastrointestinal issues
- Urinary tract problems
- Kidney disease.

### DENTAL DISEASE

Correct dental alignment and wear is so important in rabbits. Their teeth are constantly growing throughout their lives. Rabbits have 28 teeth in total (4 incisors, 2 peg teeth and 22 back premolars and molars) all which grow continually.

The pattern in which they chew their food is what helps to wear their teeth. Rabbits chew in a lateral side to side motion which causes tooth on tooth grinding and helps to wear down their teeth. Diet plays a huge role in this chewing pattern as the types of food and how much chewing is needed for that food item is what helps the teeth wear and tear on each other.

Genetics or trauma to the mouth can also contribute towards dental disease, however an inappropriate diet is the most common cause.

A rabbit's diet should consist of 80% fresh hay and grass, 10% leafy green vegetables, 5% pellets or chaff and 5% healthy treats.

In some cases, dietary change alone isn't enough to correct the teeth and a dental procedure is needed. This involves a day procedure with the vets where their teeth would be ground down to a more normal alignment.

Rabbits should have dental checks with a 'rabbit-savvy' vet every 3-6 months. By regularly having a rabbit's teeth checked, you help to resolve or prevent any issues early on before dental procedures are required.

Symptoms:

- Refusal to eat
- Selective eating (only soft foods)
- Excess salivation
- Weepy or watery eyes
- Formation of facial abscesses
- Loose faeces

### PODODERMMATITIS

Pododermatitis it is the development of pressure sores on the feet of rabbits. Early signs of pododermatitis are the thinning or hair loss on the feet of rabbits. As the condition worsens, signs may include lameness, swelling, ulcers, bleeding and infection being present.

This may be caused by husbandry problems (small cage, hard floor surface, dirty/damp bedding or inactivity). Conformation (short haired breeds, obesity, pregnancy, malnutrition) or physical factors (trauma, inactivity, poor grooming).

Prevention is best maintained with a correct diet to ensure general good health and optimal bodyweight. Good hygiene practices and bedding can go a long way in preventing the occurrence of pododermatitis and regular checks of the feet of at-risk breeds and animals can pick up early signs of the condition.

## **COCCIDIA**

Coccidiosis is a disease that can be contracted from the environment and usually is present in multi rabbit situations. Coccidiosis (infection with coccidia) is a disease of rabbits caused by a class of single-celled organism known as protozoa. These are parasites of epithelial cells invading the mucosa of the intestine, colon and epithelium of various tissues. There are around 12 species of coccidian associated with rabbits and a single rabbit can have two or more species at a time.

Infected Oocytes (eggs) passed in the faeces require two or more days to become infective and in damp conditions can often remain in the environment for long periods of time. Prevention of this disease relies on good hygiene and keeping the bedding dry, foods from uncontaminated bowls and hay/salad racks, rather than allowing the rabbit to feed off the hutch floor. If rabbits are allowed access to an outdoor run, moving the run around the garden reduces the number of oocysts they are exposed to.

## **MYXOMATOSI**

Myxomatosis (infection with the myxoma virus) is a highly contagious disease seen in rabbits. The seasonal prevalence for myxomatosis is generally over October to May but can occur at other times as well. Transmission by direct contact, aerosolisation of the virus particles and biting insects (mosquitoes, fleas, mites and biting flies).

Prevention in Australia is by housing inside/under mosquito netting and controlling insect vectors. There is no vaccine to date in Australia. Confirmation of infection can be clinically confirmed with the presence of thickened ears, swollen eyes and swollen genital region. If you believe your rabbit has become infected, seek veterinary advice immediately.