

## **Rabbit Care and Advice**

Rabbits can make great pets; they are friendly, sociable and very lovable animals with a lifespan of 5-10 years; this fact sheet is designed to help with the daily care of your pet rabbit.

### **COMPANIONSHIP**

Rabbits are very sociable animals and should be provided with a companion whenever possible.

- The most suitable pairing is a neutered male (buck) and a neutered female (doe).
- Litter mates can be kept together, but unless they are of the same sex should be neutered.
- Unrelated females will usually tolerate each other if enough space is provided, but they may fight.
- Entire males are likely to fight and can inflict severe injuries.
- An un-neutered male and female WILL breed and may rear a typical litter of 4-12kits every 3months!
- All introductions should be supervised and neutering can reduce the risk of conflicts.

### **HOUSING**

Rabbits can live outside or be trained to become suitable indoor pets.

All rabbits should have a secure run in the garden to ensure they get plenty of exercise and fresh air. They like to dig so bare this in mind if letting your rabbit run free around your garden as they may get under the fences!

#### **Outdoor Rabbits**

- An outdoor rabbit will need to have protection from the elements, be out of direct sunlight and sheltered from the wind and rain.
- The hutch should be raised off the ground.
- The hutch needs to be big enough for the rabbit to stretch out fully and stand up on its hind legs and be able to do at least three hops from each end.
- The hutch should be bedded out with shavings and plenty of straw for warmth especially in the winter months.
- The hutch will need good ventilation to prevent respiratory disease.

#### **House Rabbits**

- House rabbits will need a secure cage area where they can be safely left un-attended.
- Rabbits can easily be litter trained; this can be done by repeatedly placing them in the litter tray (initially placing some of their droppings in the tray before), wood or paper based litter are best.
- All electrical cables should be protected as rabbits like to chew!
- Toys can help stimulate play and exercise.

### **HANDLING**

Handle your rabbit from as early as possible, this will ensure they get used to being picked up and will make him/her much more easy to handle and friendly.

Rabbits should be picked up with two hands; one supporting the front end and the other supporting the back end making sure to support the back legs. Rabbits are very powerful and can cause injury if they feel unsafe and kicks out. Please ask our nurse for a demonstration if you are unsure.

## **DIET**

The best diet for a rabbit is grass and good quality grass hay. They should also be supplemented with a high fibre commercial pellet diet such as Supa Rabbit Excel, this will help promote a healthy digestive system. "Muesli" style diets are not recommended as they allow selection of certain feedstuffs; this is then not a balanced diet.

Rabbits can be fed small amounts of fresh vegetables and wild plants such as dandelions, bramble, carrot, broccoli, cabbage and other root vegetables, but this should be a small part of their overall diet.

Fresh drinking water should always be available.

## **TEETH**

Rabbits teeth grow quickly and continuously; the incisors at the front for nibbling grow 3mm per week, the molars at the back for chewing at 3mm per month.

The high fibre content in the diet recommended above helps to wear the teeth and stop them overgrowing. If you suspect dental problems in your rabbit these should be addressed by our vet at the earliest opportunity.

## **FLYSTRIKE**

This is a problem that can affect rabbits in the warmer months. Particular flies attracted by dirt and smell lay eggs, typically around the bum, the eggs hatch into larvae that burrow in and eat at the skin. Unless caught early this can prove fatal.

Good hygiene around the hutch, fly repellents and use of other products to prevent maggots are available in reception.

## **DISEASE PREVENTION**

You should thoroughly inspect your rabbit at least once daily including lifting and turning to inspect the genital area for excessive dirt, skin problems or maggots.

Problems in rabbits can progress very quickly so early veterinary advice is recommended.

Rabbits do not need routine flea or worm treatment like cats and dogs; if you are concerned about these parasites veterinary attention is needed.

## **VACCINATION**

Vaccination provides protection against life-threatening disease, which in the rabbit are Myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD). Unfortunately, we still see rabbits with these diseases, although they are preventable through vaccination.

### **Myxomatosis AND VHD (Viral Haemorrhagic Disease)**

Myxomatosis is spread by biting insects as is extremely common in wild rabbits and invariably fatal. VHD is a very infectious fatal disease that occurs in outbreaks. It starts with conjunctivitis, and then swelling on the head and genital areas appear. Affected rabbits get weak and eventually die. Viral haemorrhagic disease is fatal, with death occurring within 48 hours. The virus causes major internal bleeding. Some rabbits may show signs, such as bleeding from nose or back passage, but others will show no outwards signs and will die.

Vaccination for both of these diseases are now combined, and can be given from 5 weeks of age. This vaccination is given annually to protect against disease for the life of your rabbit.