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# Guide to Rabbits

Burgess Pet Care's guide to  
caring for your rabbit



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## How to keep your rabbit happy and healthy

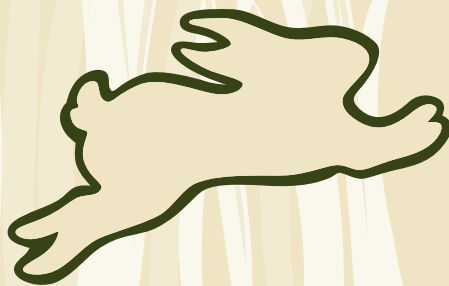
Rabbits deserve their reputation as great pets – they are friendly, inquisitive, content to play with their owners and can happily be held and stroked. With the correct diet, care and handling you and your rabbit will have a long and happy time together. This can be for around twelve years or more.

This Care Guide will introduce all the important things you need to know in order to enjoy the experience of being a rabbit owner to the full.

# Housing



Whether your rabbits live indoors or outside, a hutch is the perfect home. But there are many designs, shapes and sizes, so choosing the right one is essential.



## Size

The hutch should be high enough for your rabbits to stand on their back legs, and with enough floor area to allow a minimum of three to four hops in any direction. You'll need to get a bigger hutch the more rabbits you have.

## Layout

There should be separate eating and toilet areas. If you have more than one rabbit, there should also be somewhere for them to be alone.

## Lining

Line the floor with newspaper.

## Bedding

Cover the lining with bedding material of hay, barley straw or dust-free wood chippings. This helps to absorb urine and keep the hutch comfortable.

## Toilet

Rabbits are clean animals by nature, so make a separate litter area, deep-sided and lined with newspaper and hay, which you should change regularly.

## Location

The hutch should always be dry, well-ventilated and kept cool – heat can be fatal to rabbits. Indoors, avoid sites next to radiators. Outside, avoid south-facing walls and direct sunlight. In the colder winter months, add extra bedding to an outdoor hutch and potentially move it indoors.

## Cleaning

Rabbits leave scent markings which extreme cleaning can remove.

This may cause them stress, but hygiene is important. Spot clean soiled areas when needed, but change all bedding and clean thoroughly every two or three days – always leaving a small corner untouched so it smells familiar.

It's also important to consider the surroundings when your rabbit is out of the hutch.

## House rabbits

Rabbits love to chew and gnaw, so when they're living indoors, the house needs to be rabbit-proofed. Wires are an easy target, so metal ducting may be useful to cover them up. Also, be aware of wooden and laminate floors which can easily cause your rabbits to slip, injuring the lower back.

## Outdoor rabbits

For outdoor rabbits, it's important to rat-proof the area where they're living. Fear of predators – like dogs, foxes and birds of prey – can cause stress, so try to minimise it. If a neighbour has a noisy dog, for example, house your rabbit as far away as possible. Ideally cover the hutch at night so that the rabbit cannot see outside should any predators enter the garden.

All rabbits, whether house or outdoor should have access to an outdoor run in a garden. The run should be free of plants that are poisonous to rabbits. You'll find some listed on page 12.



# Companionship



Rabbits are social animals, and it's better to have more than one. Ideally, they should be of similar sizes, to stop bullying.

Rabbits from the same litter get on well, but should always be neutered. Unrelated females generally tolerate each other given enough space, but may still fight. Unrelated males will almost certainly fight and can inflict nasty injuries. In both cases, neutering is recommended by vets to improve the situation.

Never keep rabbits with guinea pigs or chinchillas. They have different food and housing needs and may fight.



# Exercise and play



Rabbits like to play, so make sure they have plenty of toys. Play is very good for them because it helps to keep them physically active and healthy and helps to prevent behavioural problems like fur plucking that can arise if they get bored.

You can provide a variety of toys from pet shops or use household objects. Small boxes to stand on, large pieces of plastic pipe (ensuring your pets can't get stuck) as activity tunnels (these can be also be bought from pet shops), toilet roll tubes stuffed with Excel Herbage and willow balls with treats stuck in them are all good.

In the garden a large, secure, covered run makes an ideal play and exercise area, and it's simple to make an indoor version if required.

Foraging is natural behaviour for rabbits, so let them go searching for food hidden in plenty of hay – Excel Nature Snacks are perfect for them to find.





# Handling



Rabbits need time to get used to their surroundings, so don't try to pick yours up for the first few days. Instead, talk to your pets softly and try gently stroking them so you get to know each other.

After a while, your rabbits should feel confident and comfortable enough in your company to let themselves be handled.

It takes two hands to pick your rabbits up properly, one taking the majority of the weight under the bottom. Rabbits are happy to be held, but can get jumpy if they don't feel secure, so keep them close to your body and, especially for the first few times, not too far off the floor, in case they try to jump. It's good to have a non-slip surface to handle them on, a towel or carpet for example.

**Never pick a rabbit up by the ears or the scruff of the neck – it is extremely stressful.**



# Grooming



Some breeds of rabbit, particularly the long-haired varieties, need you to groom them daily to remove loose and matted hair. It keeps your rabbits in good condition, and helps to improve the relationship between you.

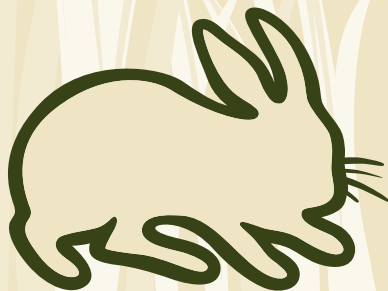
There are many different combs and brushes available – always ask which ones are suitable for your rabbits.



# Neutering

Vets and rabbit experts recommend neutering for all pet rabbits. In females, it prevents unwanted pregnancy and eliminates cancer of the uterus, but it makes both sexes calmer and less aggressive.

Ideally, neutering should take place before the age of six months. Females (does) can be neutered from 14 weeks, males (bucks) as soon as the testicles have descended. Bucks can remain fertile for four weeks after the procedure, so they should be kept separate from un-neutered does during that time.



# Feeding



What is often not understood is that rabbits need high levels of a mix of two types of fibre in their digestive system – digestible and indigestible fibre. Burgess Excel call the correct ratio of these two types of fibre '**Beneficial Fibre**'. This need for high levels of fibre in their diet is also why Burgess Excel refer to these pets as '**Fibrevores**'.

To ensure that they extract as much of the nutritional value from their food as they can, 'fibrevores' re-ingest it, this means that it goes through their digestive system twice. To understand how this works it helps to know a little about two different types of fibre.

**Indigestible fibre** is moved through their digestive system and excreted as separate, round, hard droppings. This acts to keep the digestive system moving and stimulate appetite.

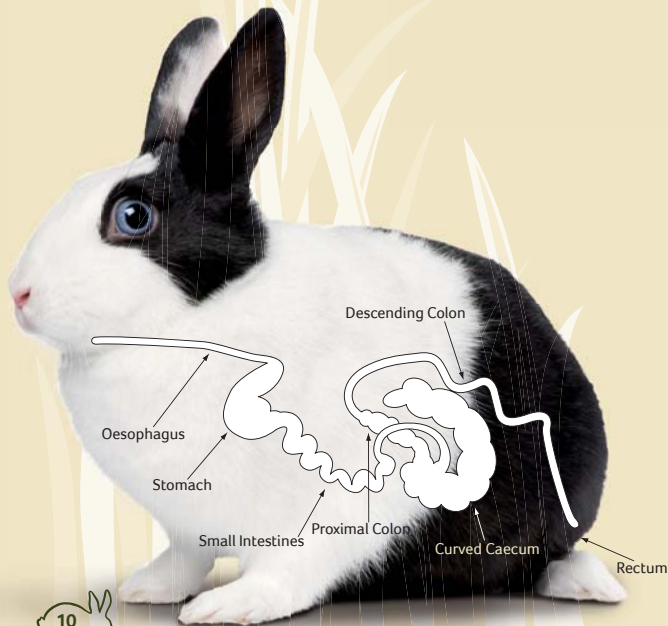


**Digestible fibre** is moved up into an organ called the caecum – this is like a giant appendix. Good bacteria in the caecum ferment the fibre (part of the digestion process) which then emerges in the form of clumps of sticky droppings – called caecotrophs. Rabbits then re-eat the caecotrophs and their systems extract essential nutrition as the digestible fibre passes through for the second time.

Failing to provide adequate portions of the right kind of fibre can rapidly lead to illness or death. At Burgess Excel, we call the correct ratio of these two types of fibre '**Beneficial Fibre**'.

That's why muesli-style foods are such a problem. Rabbits can become fussy eaters, and will eat sweet foods as an easy way to get a glucose fix. As a result, they can pick out unhealthy elements of muesli-style foods and leave the rest. This is called selective feeding and will inevitably lead to an imbalanced diet, lacking in calcium, phosphorus and vitamin D. Above all, this behaviour can lead to a lack of fibre with potentially fatal consequences. When taken with the fact that muesli-style foods are commonly low in fibre to begin with, the problem is compounded.

And finally, the unhealthy ingredients in muesli-style foods are high in sugar and starch. These are difficult for rabbits to digest and can lead to health problems and obesity. Rabbits eat caecotrophs directly from their bottoms – obese rabbits often cannot reach the caecotrophs which can lead to malnutrition and death.



The problem can be avoided by sticking to **The Excel Feeding Plan** and giving your rabbits **Excel food**. Both were developed by Burgess with one of the world's leading small-animal vets to provide a perfect daily balance of fibre and nutrition.

## The Excel Feeding Plan

Burgess Excel is the first range to offer a complete feeding plan which provides all the essential fibre, nutrients, vitamins and minerals that rabbits need. Health and happiness in five simple steps.

### The Excel Feeding Plan = Complete Nutrition



#### Step 1 – Excel Herbage and Forage

These premium quality hay and grass foods should form most of your pets' diet. They are especially good for dental health as they contain high levels of Beneficial Fibre that help to wear down teeth. The teeth of rabbits are constantly growing and overgrown teeth can be the cause of potentially fatal problems.

#### Step 2 – Excel Tasty Nuggets

These contain 100% natural, wholesome ingredients, are naturally high in Beneficial Fibre for digestive health and have added vitamins, minerals and prebiotics. Because they're not a muesli-style mix, they prevent selective feeding.

#### Step 3 – Excel Nature Snacks

These healthy, nutritious natural snacks are ideal for rabbits as they promote emotional health - preventing boredom and encouraging bonding and interaction between you and your pet. They can be fed daily, because they're packed with goodness, and all made with pure, natural ingredients. Some are specially designed to be fed by hand which helps pets to get comfortable with human attention.

#### Step 4 – Fresh Greens

Rabbits can be fed fresh greens to give additional fresh nutrients and to provide some variety. But you need to be careful about what you feed them, and how much – please see below for more information.

#### Step 5 – Fresh Water

A plentiful supply of fresh, clean water must always be available.



## Not all fruit, vegetables and greenery are good for your rabbit – here's a brief guide.

### Good

Apple (pipless), asparagus, banana, basil, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, carrots and carrot tops, cauliflower leaves and stalks, celery, chicory, cucumber, dill, fennel, grapes, green pepper, kale, mint, orange (peeled), oregano, parsley, red leaf lettuce, red cabbage, romaine lettuce, Savoy cabbage, spinach, tomato, turnip, watercress.

### Bad

Apple pips, potato and potato tops, rhubarb (leaves and stalks), tomato leaves, locust pods and beans.

There are also several plants that are poisonous to rabbits. Make sure you don't feed them to your pet and that there are none growing in your garden.

This isn't an exhaustive list, but some common plants that are harmful to rabbits are: autumn crocus, begonia, black nightshade, busy lizzie, buttercup, carnation, chrysanthemum, clematis, cowslip, geranium, hemlock, laburnum, laurel, poison ivy, poppy and yucca.



## Common health problems

There are many different health problems that rabbits face, but most can be avoided by regular vaccination and maintaining good diet and lifestyle.

### Infectious diseases

There are four main vaccinations and some simple preventative measures to keep your pets free from infectious diseases. You should ask your vet for more details and always keep up to date with vaccinations.

Here's a brief guide to the four main infectious diseases. But if you are in any doubt whatsoever, it is vital that you consult your vet as soon as possible.

#### Myxomatosis

This disease spreads via blood-sucking insects, like fleas. Even house rabbits are not immune, because the disease can be spread by mosquitoes.

#### Symptoms

Swellings around the head, face, ears, lips and anus.

#### Effects

Blindness, swelling around the face, disorientation, death.

#### Action

Rabbits must be vaccinated. See your vet for more details.



## **Viral Haemorrhagic Disease**

A very serious condition which causes internal bleeding and shut down of internal organs. This disease kills – and there is no cure.

### **Symptoms**

Depression, collapse, difficulty in breathing, convulsions, high body temperature, lethargy, bleeding from the nose.

### **Effects**

Death.

### **Action**

Rabbits must be vaccinated. See your vet for more details.

## **Encephalitozoon cuniculi**

A microscopic parasite which affects many internal organs like the kidneys and brain.

### **Symptoms**

As the parasite acts internally, symptoms are manifestations of the internal organs being attacked.

#### **Kidney**

Increasing thirst and weight loss.

#### **Brain**

Convulsions, tremors, hind limb weakness, coma, loss of balance. Nervous system – urinary incontinence.

### **Effects**

Seizures, kidney disease, hind limb weakness, loss of vision and balance.

### **Action**

Rabbits must be vaccinated. See your vet for more details.

## **Flystrike**

A disease which occurs when flies lay their eggs around the rabbit's anus.

### **Symptoms**

Droppings stuck around the bottom (that attract flies), diarrhoea can also be a precursor, wounds around the bottom.

### **Effects**

The eggs hatch into maggots which mature and burrow under the skin making the rabbit extremely ill. Can be fatal. Pets most at risk at are those suffering from obesity, dental disease, diarrhoea, arthritis and skin wounds and those living in dirty hutches. The majority of cases are due to flies being attracted to droppings or diarrhoea stuck to the rabbits bottom caused by poor diet (low fibre, high sugar and starch foods).



### **Action**

A vaccination is available from vets. However, a good diet of Excel Herbage and Tasty Nuggets taken according to The Excel Feeding Plan, can help to prevent obesity, dental disease and diarrhoea and guard against fly strike. Good hygiene is also vital.

## **Problems caused by poor diet**

There are two major problem areas which can be avoided with a good diet, plenty of exercise and regular health checks.

### **Dental problems**

A rabbit's teeth will continue to grow around 10-12cm a year all its life. Vets say that three-quarters of the rabbits they see have problems with their teeth – the most common problem being overgrown molars and spurs which can cause extreme pain and can lead to death.

Problems like these generally develop because rabbits aren't eating enough hay – naturally abrasive fibre-rich food that helps to wear down the teeth. Feeding Excel Herbage combats this problem.

Common symptoms are excessive drooling and loss of appetite. Check your pets' teeth on a weekly basis but you must visit the vet for a dental check every six months as you will be unable to check their back teeth. (See the Health Checks section on Page 16).

### **Obesity**

Rabbits kept as pets are much less active than those which live in the wild, so being overweight is always a risk. Obesity puts pressure on the heart and joints, can create 'bed sores' on the hind legs and may shorten your rabbit's life. Some obese animals find it hard to clean themselves, which can lead to flystrike. But more importantly, if they can't reach their bottoms they can't re-ingest caecotrophs – the sticky droppings they need to eat as an essential aid to survival.

Prevention is better than cure, so ask your vet about your rabbits' ideal weight. Weigh them regularly to make sure they fall into their target weight. All rabbits, but especially those which spend most of their time in hutches, should have as much exercise as possible.

If your rabbits do become overweight, see your vet for advice. A calorie-controlled food, such as Excel Light Tasty Nuggets, may be suggested.

Never withhold food from your pets – your rabbits must have some fibre in their digestive systems at all times. If their digestive systems stop moving, rabbits will die.



# Health checks

You can help to maintain your pets' good health by learning to do some simple health checks every week. These will help you to spot any problems early so you can get treatment in good time – and this regular handling will strengthen the bond between you.

A vital part of the health check is getting to know your rabbits. Like people, they're all different, so if you become familiar with the way yours move, react and feed, you will find it easier to spot when something is wrong.

Make sure your pets are relaxed, comfortable and willing to be handled when you carry out these checks - an Excel Nature Snack may help.

And if your rabbits are unwell, always contact your vet.



## Ears

Gently look inside to see if they're free from mites and fleas, which can carry diseases.



## Eyes

They should be clear, shiny, not swollen and free from discharge. Dampness or dull or swollen eyes can be symptoms of illness which may lead to blindness.



## Teeth

Check to see there is no excessive drooling. Be careful, rabbits may bite if they're not comfortable with their mouths being examined.



## Bottom

Make sure it's clean and not sticky or wet, which can be a sign of poor diet or malnutrition. Any droppings attached to the fur should be washed off.



## Feet

Make sure the feet haven't been injured and check that the claws haven't overgrown.



## Fur

See that there are no bald patches, no signs of mites or fleas and no signs of injury.