



**P & K Pets
Info Sheet #09**

19 Magill Rd

Stepney

SA 5069

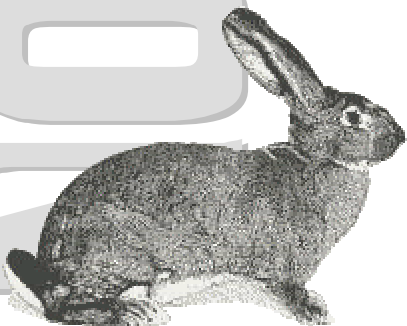
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RABBITS CARE



INFORMATION



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INTRODUCTION

Some 50 varieties of rabbits have been developed from original wild rabbits in Europe and now they are available in many sizes and colours. Fossils, and stone age paintings in Spain suggest they originated in the Mediterranean and were spread to many countries by the ancient Romans who liked their meat. Queen Elizabeth I raised them as pets and started a fad. They came to Australia with the first fleet, and were abundant in Tasmania by 1822. In 1859 they were released near Geelong for sports. Nowadays they are classified as vermin and cannot be bred for meat or kept in large numbers. Despite their reputation in the wild (they are probably responsible for the extinction of some South Australian mammals) they make hardy and affectionate pets living for 4-10 years in captivity. As rabbits are a prey animal, they are timid by nature and need to feel secure and protected.



HOUSING

A large well ventilated cage or hutch at least 900 x 600 mm with strong base is required. It should also have an enclosed space that provides privacy to hide in. Although a cage or hutch is normally required to house your pet rabbits, they can be allowed to roam free in the house or garden. They can even be trained to use a litter tray similar to a cat. Be aware of any dangers should you let your rabbit roam the yard, smaller rabbits and dwarfs may be susceptible to attacks from cats or even a hawk!

A heavy feed dish will be required to hold feed so that it cannot be knocked over. Straw, wood shavings, newspaper or peat moss make good ground cover in a hutch. This will absorb any mess or spills, and should be cleaned and replaced on a weekly basis depending on how much the hutch is used. Other objects should be introduced also, to keep your rabbit entertained.





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Wood chews, roots and twigs are ideal for gnawing, this keeps them entertained and also help prevent overgrown teeth.

Water should also be provided, this should be available anywhere your rabbit is allowed to roam. In the cage or hutch you should use a drip/sip bottle. This keeps the water clean and fresh and it will last much longer than in a bowl.

FEEDING

The basis of a rabbit's diet should be hay, vegetable, and pellets. Anything beyond this is considered a treat and should be fed in strict moderation. The digestive system of a rabbit is susceptible to upset if the diet is inappropriate, and this can be very serious. Pellets should be restricted, but it is vital to make up any reduction in pellets with a variety of fresh vegetables and unlimited access to hay. Pellets are basically designed for commercial rabbit production. They are quite nutritious and energy dense. As a result, house rabbits fed as much as they like of pellets may end up with obesity and related health problems, as well as an excess of other nutrients. That is not to say that pellets do not have their place in rabbit nutrition, as they are rich in several nutrients and contribute to a balanced diet. However, it is important to restrict the amount given, and compensate for the decrease in pellets with fresh vegetables and grass hays.



Quality hay should be the mainstream diet and always available. A small hop for hay can be permanently mounted on their cage or hutch. Always make sure it's full of fresh hay.

Vegetables should be introduced to bunnies around 12 weeks of age, in small quantities and one at a time. As more vegetable are added watch for diarrhoea and discontinue the most recently added vegetable if this occurs. Over time, the amount of vegetables fed is increased, and the amount of pellets decreased, so that by 1 year of age the adult feeding recommendations are followed. This should be unlimited hay, followed by vegetables, and supplemented with pellets. A small amount of fruit can be given for treats, along with other rabbit treats available from pet stores. Some interesting treats or chews your rabbit may like are apple tree twigs (check for pesticides), wood, cardboard, or willow baskets.



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BREEDING

Sexually mature at 5-8 months, the young doe should be introduced into the buck's hutch at 8-9 months (not vice versa as she is rather territorial). Pelvic bones harden and so it is important for a doe to have her first litter whilst young. A doe's oestrus cycle is 16 days and gestation takes 30 days. For several days before and after birth it is important not to disturb the doe. However, she will re-mate within a day or so of birth. Fresh straw and a dry nest box is important and can be given when you notice the doe begin to pull hair away from her nipples to expose them and use it to line the nest. The young must not be exposed to bright light (sensitive eyes) but can be weaned at 6-8 weeks. They will drink 1:1 water:milk and eat pellets.

HANDLING

Pick up gently but firmly by the scruff of the neck and support the hind legs. Rabbits will not usually urinate while held, but may scratch or even bite if insecure. Rabbits may bite or lick, as they like the salt in our skin. This can be reduced with a salt or mineral lick stone. Toenails may need an occasional clipping but rabbits clean themselves regularly. You can still groom your rabbit regularly to keep them looking good, especially long haired breeds. Also, you can get a harness for your rabbit from most pet stores. This is handy when walking, or taking your rabbit somewhere.

GENERAL

Rabbits come in an amazing array of breeds with different colours, sizes, shapes and coat types. The subtle differences between breeds will be of most interest to those who show their bunnies. Still, for those choosing a pet rabbit, it is important to consider breed characteristics, especially size and coat type. Rabbits vary in size from the smaller dwarf breeds (at under 2.5 lbs) to some of the giant breeds (sizes up to 16 pounds). Owners also need to be aware that the longer coated breeds need daily grooming.

Life expectancy varies from breed to breed, anywhere from 5 to 15 years. As a general rule, the larger breeds live longer.

