

The Easter Bunny

The Easter bunny is a figure of folklore and a symbol of Easter depicted as a rabbit bringing Easter eggs. Legend has it that the Easter bunny lays, decorates and hides eggs as they are a symbol of new life. We would ask anybody considering a “real” Easter bunny to research the commitment and costs involved carefully first. Historically rabbits have been seen as cheap pets for children but have ended up being neglected living toys. Rabbits are completely dependent on us, they need affection and attention every day and cannot be left for more than 12 hours without being checked and fed.



Rabbits and children?

Rabbits are generally a bad choice for young children who often don't have the patience needed. They are naturally prey animals, they don't like loud noises or sudden movements and they don't like being picked up and held. Rabbits can bite and scratch when scared and their fragile bones can fracture if they're dropped. They are a joy to watch running, jumping and grooming each other but they are not cuddly pets!

Are you ready for the commitment?

Adults always have the responsibility for any pets. Rabbits are not cheap and easy pets, they can live for 10 years or more.

Costs

Rabbit accommodation must be large and can cost a minimum of £300. The cost of housing and feeding can be surprisingly high.

Pet health insurance cover is strongly recommended to cover the costs of veterinary fees in case of medical emergencies or health problems. Dental issues are the commonest problems seen by vets and it's worth noting that not all insurance companies cover this unless regular veterinary checks have been carried out. Feeding an incorrect diet can cause dental problems which can cost hundreds of pounds every year. Vets and veterinary nurses are happy to advise about correct feeding.

Two is company

Rabbits are naturally sociable and prefer to be with another rabbit. Single rabbits become bored and lonely. Same sex pairs can be tricky and only really work if the rabbits have grown up together but should be neutered as soon as possible. The easiest pairing is a castrated male and spayed female. Remember unneutered rabbits breed quickly!

Guinea pigs should NEVER be housed with rabbits due to the different diets, behaviour and risk of injury.

Indoors or outdoor living?

Rabbits can live happily outdoors as well as indoor “house rabbits” as long as adequate accommodation is provided. Rabbits are very active so if they are only in a run for 2



hours a day that means for 22 hours a day they get no exercise at all. If they are permanently kept in a small hutch, painful skeletal problems can develop as well as behavioural ones due to boredom.

Outdoor accommodation

A large hutch or shed with a permanent attached exercise run should be provided. As an ABSOLUTE MINIMUM for a pair of rabbits, hutches should be big enough for the rabbits to take 3 hops and stretch fully upright. A hutch should be at least 6ft long x 2ft tall x 2ft deep with an exercise run of 8ft long x 6ft wide x 2ft tall. Weather proofing is essential for outdoors to protect from extremes of weather and temperature. The enclosure should also be escape proof, protected from predators, well ventilated and dry.



House rabbits

Rabbit-proofing your home is essential including covering and protecting wires and escape proofing. Indoor rabbits require as much space as outdoor rabbits! They can either be provided with a particular room, part of a room or be allowed to free-range most of the house.

Enrichment

Enrichment should be provided for rabbits. Digging is a natural behaviour so they should be provided with something to dig in as well as a hay rack for access to hay. Tunnels will provide rabbits with a substitute burrow and encourage them to be more active. Runs should enable rabbits to display all of their key natural behaviours including:



- Running
- Digging/burrowing
- Jumping
- Hiding
- Foraging/grazing

Daily Care

A rabbit's diet should mimic that of their wild cousins as closely as possible. This is the "Natural Diet" and consists of:

- Unlimited grass/hay – 80% of diet
- Wide variety of greens and vegetables – 15% of diet
- 1 egg cup of pelleted feed per rabbit – 5% of diet

Muesli style food should be avoided as this is fattening, can contribute to a dirty bottom and causes dental disease. In warm weather the fur and skin should be checked twice daily around the rear end to prevent flystrike.

Fresh ad-lib water should be provided. A bowl is better than a bottle as rabbits are able to drink more effectively.

Rabbits should be groomed regularly to keep them in good condition. They should also be checked for signs of illness or injury every day and consult a vet immediately if pain, injury or illness is suspected. Stressed rabbits are more likely to become ill. Any rabbit that has not eaten for 12 hours should be checked by a vet.

The toilet areas should be cleaned every day and the whole accommodation should be cleaned approximately once a week. Only non-toxic cleaning products should be used and the housing should be dry before placing the rabbits back in.

Vaccinations

Rabbits should be vaccinated yearly with a combined vaccine protecting against myxomatosis and rabbit haemorrhagic disease. Ideally, rabbits should be veterinary checked at least every 6 months to ensure that they are healthy. Rabbits should also be neutered to prevent cancer, aggressive behaviour as well as unwanted litters and it helps to assist with litter training in both indoor and outdoor rabbits.

The benefit of caring for rabbits

Rabbits can make wonderful, exciting and intelligent pets. They have personalities, they play and watching them is entertaining. Although each rabbit will be different they are generally very social and benefit from companionship and many enjoy being with people, but your family must have patience and understanding to earn their trust.

Sourcing rabbits.

If you are considering rabbits as pets then adopt don't shop!

Approximately 67,000 rabbits go into rescue in the UK every year. Rescue rabbits are already health checked, neutered and vaccinated prior to rehoming.

Alternatives to the “real” Easter bunny!

You can get children involved with rabbits and teach them responsibility without purchasing one by:

- Visiting a rabbit rescue. Open days allow children to meet the rabbits and learn about the care they need.
- Visiting farm parks or pets corners for hands on experience
- Helping rabbit rescues with feeding and cleaning to give children an idea of what it is like to look after rabbits
- Buying a toy bunny, this is a lot cheaper and easier to look after and does not suffer when the novelty wears off!
- Buy a chocolate bunny instead.



For more information about caring for rabbits please visit: On the hop The Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund Guide to Rabbit care

<http://rabbitwelfare.co.uk/pdfs/RWAbrochuremaster.pdf>