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The Magazine for Rabbit lovers

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HAY RACKS

Pros and cons

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Keeping rabbits safe in the garden

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WELCOME TO THE WINTER ISSUE OF RABBITING ON



A warm welcome to everyone! As 2020 draws to an end, thoughts turn to 2021 and what the coming months will bring. 2020 has been a strange year for us all, but we are all hopeful that 2021 will bring back some further normality.

Our Spring 21 Rabbiting On is the RWF's (formerly the BHRA's) 25-year anniversary issue – a quarter of a century campaigning for a better life and understanding for pet rabbits, and what an astounding success the last 25 years have been. We are putting together an issue to celebrate advances in rabbit care over the last 25 years, including a feature on the original BHRA members. If you are one of them from 1995/96, and have been with the BHRA/RWF throughout the last 25 years, please email me on claire@rabbitwelfare.co.uk by the 1st December, if you would like to be involved with the article. Now back to this issue, which includes some fabulous features.



Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund
A hutch is not enough

Rabbiting On is the quarterly journal of the Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund, which exists to improve the quality of life of pet rabbits in the UK. For further information about day-to-day rabbit health issues please visit the website at:

<http://rabbitwelfare.co.uk>

To join the RWF please go to the website or telephone the Helpline: 0191 933 9000



Cover picture: K Murley

The subject of conscious dentals, both for incisor and molar teeth, is one which the RWF is asked about on a frequent basis. Rabbiting On Veterinary Adviser Guen Bradbury, has examined the topic and her feature on page 2 outlines her conclusions. Guen has also written the feature on what sexual behaviours may persist in some rabbits after neutering and the reasons for this. This article can be found on page 8.

Whilst some plants look pretty, if consumed they can pose a serious danger to our rabbits. Dr Twigs Way examines the topic of the pretty plants that pose a danger to our rabbits in the garden. You can find her feature on page 4.

Our Five Welfare Needs series continues with the need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns. Dr Laura Dixon, looks at what behaviours are normal for rabbits, and why, on page 22.

The topic of what flooring to use in your rabbits' accommodation can be confusing and overwhelming with so many options available. Some may not be suitable at all for rabbits. Debbie Staggs has researched the topic and her conclusions can be found on page 34.

Don't forget to enter your rabbit photos in our annual Cover Star completion. Full details can be found on page 38, but be quick, as entries close on the 30th December. Not only may your rabbits feature on the cover of the 25-year anniversary issue, but you can also win some fantastic prizes donated by Burgess Pet Care.

Within this issue we also have a selection of other fantastic topics including: how to nurse rabbits with wounds and abscesses at home; petting zoos and why rabbits should not be included in them; the results of a study using mirrors for rabbits in social settings; and if hay should be fed in racks or off the floor, and why; plus lots more!

Your photos, letters, stories and comments are always welcome, so please do keep sending them in to us.

Until next issue, take care.

Claire Speight Editor



Our Winter Star Bunnies are Miffy and Sky, sent in by Lauren Attwood

Miffy and Sky win; 1 x 2kg Excel Nuggets (winners choice of Junior & Dwarf, Light, Mature, Adult Mint or Adult Oregano), 1 x 1kg Excel Forage and 1 pack of snack treats.

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Dental burr suitable for burring cheek teeth under sedation or anaesthesia

Photo: B Lord

DENTAL PROCEDURES - Conscious or not?

By Guen Bradbury, Rabbiting On Veterinary Advisor

Rabbit teeth grow continuously - an adaptation to eating grass that wears away tooth enamel. Many pet rabbits develop dental disease, which means that their teeth don't meet properly. When the teeth don't meet properly, they don't wear down as they should - we call this dental disease.

Why do some rabbits have dental disease?

When the rabbit is on the right diet and is using their teeth and jaws in the way they are evolved for, this continuous growth increases their chances of survival. However, when the rabbit has an environmental or genetic problem with its jaw movement and tooth position (such as a poor diet or hereditary malalignment of the teeth), the dental disease will require ongoing management. Depending on the location of the problem, this typically requires filing back the molars and sometimes burring of the incisors. Depending on the severity of the problem, this procedure may need to be done every six months or every four weeks.

This poses a welfare problem. Frequent hospitalisation with sedation or general anaesthesia is very stressful for rabbits. General anaesthesia is riskier for rabbits than other companion animal species, with estimates of risk ranging from 1.9%¹ (in rabbits undergoing routine neutering; where all rabbits that died had other health conditions) to 4.8%² (in rabbits at a referral centre, which likely had severe levels of disease). Rabbits that have dental disease are more likely to be older and have other diseases (given that dental disease is often caused by poor diet). Additionally, general anaesthesia or sedation are more expensive - so this frequent financial cost can be a challenge. This means that some vets are offering conscious dentals.

What causes dental disease?

Dental disease can be influenced by genetic and environmental (dietary) factors. These influence the degree to which different teeth grow in abnormal ways. Trauma can also result in dental disease.

Genetic factors typically cause the incisors (front teeth) to not meet in the middle. This means that the incisors grow apart very rapidly - rabbits with hereditary dental problems are usually very young (under six months). Depending on when the problem is detected, the incisors are abnormal but the molars (back teeth) can be normal.

The environmental cause of dental disease is a poor/incorrect diet. Incorrect calcium to phosphorus ratio in the diet is likely to play a part

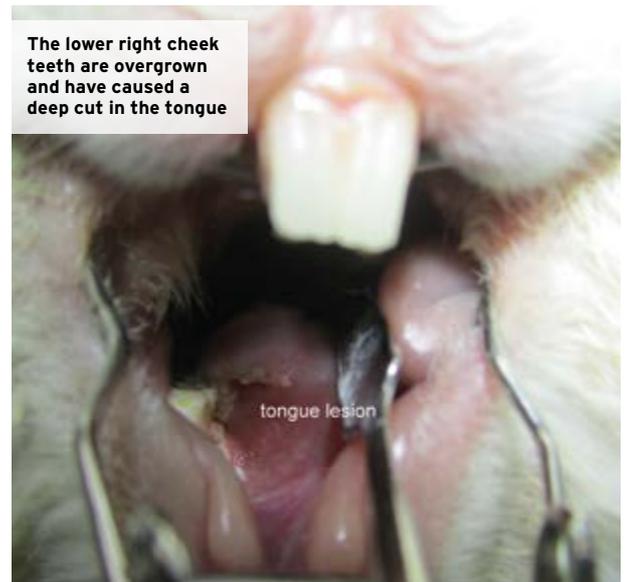


Photo: E Mancinelli

in dental disease. When rabbits do not eat enough hay and grass, the molars don't get worn down and become too long. This pushes the jaw angle wider, which means the incisors no longer meet. As the incisors are not wearing down on each other, they get too long - typically the upper incisors grow down and sideways (like a moustache) and the lower incisors grow up, into the mouth. Sometimes, rabbits on a poor diet have relatively normal incisors but have molars that don't overlap properly, leading to spikes that stick into the cheek or into the tongue. Rabbits with dental disease caused by environmental factors are usually older than six months. The cartilage and skull deformities that make a rabbit have lop ears increase the risk of these rabbits having dental disease³.

Let's look at what a dental procedure involves and work out which parts could be done with the rabbit conscious and which parts would require sedation or anaesthesia.

Diagnosis of the dental abnormalities present

When a rabbit is first presented with dental disease, it is important to understand what the underlying problem is. The vet will palpate the rabbit's head - feeling for swellings or pain and feeling for tooth roots growing abnormally out of the jaw. The vet may use a small device to look inside the mouth. This can indicate spikes or molar overgrowth, but it can be hard for vets to diagnose these reliably unless they are very severe or the vet is very experienced.

This means that many vets recommend sedation or general anaesthetic for X-rays and to allow them to have a better look in the mouth. X-rays show how the molars are meeting, what the jaw angle looks like, and how long the tooth roots are (in some severe cases, they can push into the nasal space and cause eye problems). When the rabbit is unconscious, the vet can move the tongue out of the way, open the mouth wide, and have a very good view of the disease. Sedation is often less expensive, but because the rabbit doesn't have an ET tube in their airway, if anything goes wrong, it is harder to resuscitate the rabbit.

Overlong incisors

Once the problem is identified, the vet can plan the ongoing management. For rabbits that just have overlong incisors, there are two options. The vet can extract the incisors (and the peg teeth - the small teeth behind the main upper incisors) completely. This is a permanent solution for rabbits without molar overgrowth. It is a much more invasive procedure, requires general anaesthesia and is more painful, but it means that the rabbit no longer needs ongoing dentals. However, sometimes the teeth can break during removal, and more than one attempt is required to fully extract all the teeth and destroy the germinal tissue, so the teeth do not regrow.

The other option is burring of the incisors - using a tiny drill to shorten them. This is not painful though can be stressful to some rabbits.

Overlong molars

If the molars are too long, they need to be shortened so the teeth can meet normally to grind food. If there are spikes, those spikes need to be removed. This is carried out with a rotating burr or a rasp. This is much more unpleasant for the rabbit than incisor burring - the rasp/burr go much further back in the mouth, the vet can't see what they are doing



The incisor teeth can grow incorrectly

Photo: C Speight



The 4 incisor teeth after removal, without the peg teeth

Photo: L King

so they can accidentally catch the rabbits gum or lip, and it is hard for the vet to tell when they have done enough, so the rabbit is likely to have a worse outcome. The other major risk is that there are some big arteries in the tongue and jaw of the rabbit, so if the rabbit moves while the vet is filing the teeth, the artery can be damaged and the rabbit may bleed to death.

What procedures can be done conscious?

If you have a rabbit with dental disease, ask your vet to examine the rabbit while it is sedated or unconscious (with or without X-rays) so they can plan the best ongoing care. This also means that, while the rabbit is unconscious, the vet can do a really good dental procedure that will maximise the time before the next is needed.

If that first assessment shows that the major problem is the incisors, then the owner can decide whether to have them removed or whether to have them burred off. Most rabbits tolerate conscious incisor burring fairly well, and it is a very quick procedure, so it can outweigh the stress of hospitalisation every few weeks.

If that first assessment shows that the major problem is the molars, however, then conscious procedures will be harder, more stressful, more painful, and riskier. I would recommend that molar dentals are done under sedation or anaesthesia - and only conscious if the rabbit is too sick to be sedated or anaesthetised (in which case its quality of life may be so poor that euthanasia is the best option).

In conclusion, many rabbits require ongoing dental procedures. Some types can be done when the rabbit is conscious, but some cannot - they cause too much stress, pain, and risk of injury to the rabbit.

References

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- ² Lee, Hoi W., Hanna Machin, and Chiara Adami. "Peri-anaesthetic mortality and nonfatal gastrointestinal complications in pet rabbits: a retrospective study on 210 cases." *Veterinary anaesthesia and analgesia* 45.4 (2018): 520-528.
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Dangerous to all pets is the tempting Hemerocallis. Even the pollen can be dangerous

Photo: Creative Commons

PRETTY POISONOUS PLANTS

– Keeping rabbits safe in the garden

By Twigs Way

Most rabbit owners are aware of the possibility of accidentally picking a poisonous plant in the wild whilst out foraging, and take great care to make sure they have correctly identified anything they collect, but often people forget that many of the plants we put into our gardens will also contain a variety of toxins. The good news is that, unlike plants in the wild, we can control what we grow in our gardens. The bad news is that finding out what plants are dangerous is much harder because there are simply so many garden plants now available to us from all over the world.

This article gives an overview of what the dangers are and the worst offenders in the garden borders, but obviously can't cover all the thousands of plants that you might find on offer at the garden centre or nursery.

Do some research first

A very large proportion of our garden plants originally came from countries such as America, Japan, China etc. and there is no reason to think that the native European rabbit should have any instincts about whether these plants are toxic or not. Choosing less 'exotic' plants can be helpful when planning a rabbit-friendly garden, as it is more likely that any harmful effects will already be commonly known in this country and easily discovered. If you have a longing for a choice plant from China, or an exotic from Ecuador, you should carry out as much research about it online before you buy it (try searching the plant's Latin name and then the word 'Toxic'); or set aside a specific area of the garden protected from rabbits for your special collection.

Why are some garden plants poisonous?

Almost all garden plants started off as wild plants somewhere in the world, even if they were smaller and less showy before humans started to play around with them. Many contained toxins which acted as a 'protective' mechanism to prevent the wild plants being grazed to the ground before they could reproduce, or as incidental to their chemical make-up to some other purpose (this is not a botanical evolutionary article!). Toxins are particularly common in early spring plants, and in seeds and bulbs that are designed to 'store' the plant from one year to the next or provide the next generation, and that includes a lot of our garden plants.

Although some plants have toxins in every part of them, others only have toxins in the seed, or the fruit, or the root, or only at certain times of year. This means that you do not have to panic if you see your rabbit nibbling a leaf of a plant like honeysuckle, where the leaves and flowers are edible in small quantities but the berries contain toxins (which is very common with berries and fruits as they contain the seed). However some plants have leaves that are particularly toxic at certain times of year, or when they are wilted. Even pollen can be poisonous, as most cat owners know in the case of Day Lilies (Hemerocallis) and Easter Lilies (Lilium



Stunning but lethal, Monkshood

Photo: T Way



Pink or white Oleander is an increasingly popular garden plant, but is unsuitable for a rabbit garden

longiflorum), although fewer are aware of the dangers of Lily of the Valley (*Convallaria majalis*), which is highly toxic to any animal if ingested. The glorious purple Monkshood (*Aconitum*) is so dangerous that its common name is 'Wolfsbane', but few people realise it shares many of its toxins with the Delphinium!

Will my rabbit 'naturally' know which plants to avoid?

To a certain extent, it does appear that rabbits will avoid toxic plants: hence the proliferation of bluebells in woods, which also host large colonies of rabbits, and the survival of some plants in gardens beset with wild bunnies! However, domestic rabbits may not have the 'field skills' of their wild cousins. Some rabbits are naturally cautious eaters, preferring to stick to a simple diet of grass, strawberry leaves and apple sticks - these are simple, safe, and happy souls. Others, however, are 'adventurous eaters' who will happily experiment with hellebores, euphorbia, grape hyacinths, agapanthus, sofas, floorboards, scones (with or without jam), Chinese rice noodles, and 'bedding', in both senses of the word.

All animals vary in their tolerance/intolerance to certain foods. Rabbits not only have a digestive system that is very different from that of most other animals, they are also very little studied as far as many plant toxins are concerned, and certainly those thousands of exotic plants in the garden centre will often never have come face to face with a rabbit before! It is therefore possible that some of the plants listed as toxic here, which are listed on the basis of their toxicity to humans/cats/dogs etc., may not actually be toxic to rabbits. However, it is not worth taking the risk.

A common comment from rabbit owners is that 'my rabbit ate x which is said to be poisonous, but the rabbit appears perfectly fine and keeps nibbling it'. Although some toxins will have acute (rapid) fatal or near-fatal effects (foxgloves or lily-of-the-valley for example), or will result in symptoms that result in a dash to the vets, others cause small amounts of chronic change in organs such as the kidney, liver or brain, which build up over months or years. This means you may let your rabbits constantly nibble a plant under the impression it is safe, but actually it is slowly causing irreversible damage. Neither you or the rabbit may realise what is going on.

Toxins are many and various, and include cardiac and cyanogenic glycosides, alkaloids and saponins and combinations of those chemical compounds. Many have recognised medicinal and pharmacological properties. **Just because a carefully measured chemical dosage is used medicinally does not mean your rabbits should be allowed to randomly ingest the plant it comes from, for any reason.**

Can you give me a simple and easy list of garden plants to avoid?

Yes and no! Lists of common garden plants which are in some way 'poisonous' are increasingly criticised for being too short and over simplistic. As the number of garden plants available, and the number of rabbit owners with 'tastes' for fancy flowers has grown, a list cannot hope to encompass all the possible plants you might think of buying for the garden. In addition, some lists include only plants that have dramatic acute effects. Others include plants that contain only the smallest amounts of toxins at only certain times of year, that may or may not harm rabbits, based on the theory that your rabbit may go mad and eat 50 of

the plants in one sitting at the 'wrong' time of year - although actually with some rabbits that could easily happen (a newly arrived tray of bedding plants springs to mind!).

Recently there has been a move amongst people interested in this area of rabbit welfare to divide plants into categories:

- 1. Dangerous levels of toxins DO NOT plant in garden and if already there dig up:** Beware that in books by gardeners who are not rabbit lovers this can also be listed as the seemingly innocuous 'rabbit resistant'.
- 2. Contains some toxins but safe for the odd nibble:** A single plant in a distant corner amongst others is fine.
- 3. Not known to contain toxins but mysteriously rabbits avoid it:** This rare and treasured category probably means it should be in the category 2 but we haven't found out why yet!
- 4. No toxins and rabbits will happily eat this:** These are often mysteriously 'missing' in a garden with free-range rabbits.

Categorisation is complex, as we know so little about rabbit reactions to the very numerous toxins, but is likely to be the way forward in future, as more people allow indoor and outdoor rabbits time to play 'free range' in the garden (under supervision).

The following list is best viewed as a basic 'starter' list of the toxic plants, drawn mainly from category 1, that a not-very-adventurous gardener might have considered planting in a garden before they realized they really shouldn't! It is NOT a complete list of poisonous garden plants.

NB: Common names are followed by Latin binomial, except where a version of the Latin name is used as the common name.

Toxic Garden Plants

- Aconites (*Eranthis hyemalis*: the Winter aconite): this is not the Monkshood Aconite but is still toxic
- Alliums: included as they can cause anaphylactic shock in guinea pigs and it is thought some rabbits may also have this reaction, although not all
- Aquilegia: seeds and roots
- Arum (*Arum italicum* is the garden variety): all parts poisonous
- Azalea: all parts poisonous
- Bergenia: the rhizomes are poisonous to dogs
- Bluebells and all hyacinthoides: mainly the bulbs
- Celandine (*Cheladonium majus*)
- Cherry Laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*): all laurels other than bay contain hydrocyanic acid
- Cineraria: it is the grey leaved *Senecio cineraria* which is toxic, being related to ragwort
- Colchicum: the Autumn crocus
- Cyclamen: both indoor and outdoor cyclamen plants are toxic
- Daffodil: bulbs
- Daphne: all parts are toxic
- Day Lily (Hemerocallis): extremely dangerous to most animals
- Delphinium: mostly flowers and seeds
- Euonymus: leaves, berries etc.
- Foxgloves (*Digitalis purpurea*): all parts very toxic and extremely dangerous, causing cardiac arrest
- Helenium: all parts
- Hellebores: the bitter taste means few rabbits eat this spring staple of gardens but it is toxic

- Honeysuckle (berries contain toxins): all *Lonicera* plus the commonly named 'Himalayan Honeysuckle' or Pheasant berry (*Leycesteria Formosa*) which is very toxic
- Hyacinths (bulbs): including the small Grape Hyacinth and Bluebells
- Ivy: berries are the danger, nibbling leaves is fine
- Laburnum (also known as Golden Chain Tree): all parts, but be very careful of seeds dropping and remove from rabbit gardens
- Larkspur (a member of the delphinium family): mostly flowers and seeds toxic
- Laurel (of all kinds): leaves and berries toxic
- Lily of the Valley (*Convallaria majalis*): this common cottage garden plant is extremely dangerous
- Lobelia: except the bedding lobelia *Lobelia erinus*
- Love-in-a-Mist (*Nigella Damascena*): only the seeds appear toxic
- Lupin: mostly the seeds
- Monkshood (*Aconitum napellus*): all parts are very highly toxic. This is a very dangerous plant!
- Nicotinia: *N. sylvestris* the flowering annual bedding plants and *N. tabacum*
- Oleander (*Nerium oleander*): all parts are very highly toxic
- Periwinkle (*Vinca major* and *V. Minor*): perhaps a category 2 plant as leaves may be nibbled
- Peony: the roots are worst, but all parts have some toxins
- Primroses: perhaps a category 2 plant as leaves may be nibbled
- Privet (*Ligustrum ovalifolium*): mainly the berries are toxic
- Rhododendron: all parts toxic
- Robinia pseudoaccacia: also known as Locust or Black locust tree - all parts toxic
- Solomons Seal (*Polygonatum x hybridum*): roots and young shoots are not poisonous
- Snowdrops (*Galanthus nivalis*): mainly the bulb is toxic
- Sweet Pea (Annual: *Lathyrus odoratus*) and Perennial (*Lathyrus latifolius*): the seeds are toxic
- Tulip: bulbs
- Wisteria: all parts may cause digestive upsets but the seeds are especially dangerous
- Yew: all parts, but berries are the worst and may get caught in the fur and ingested
- Zantedeschia: also known as Calla Lily, all parts highly toxic.

In the vegetable garden, you should also be aware of the following toxins: parsnip tops, potato plants, rhubarb plants, runner beans and tomato plants.



Foxglove has acute, fatal or near fatal toxin effects

Photo: T Way

Do I have to dig up any toxic plants?

If you decide to grow these known toxic plants, please do not allow your rabbits in the area they are growing. For those where just a few mouthfuls of any part of the plant could be lethal, either do not grow or allocate a totally separate part of the garden to avoid any possibility of ingestion. I would suggest you do not grow Monkshood (*Aconitum napellus*) at all, as accidental deaths of gardeners are well documented.

I do grow daffodils, snowdrops and primroses in my main lawn, which does have rabbit access, and have had no problems, as the bulbs are the main toxin and the rabbits do not dig up the lawn to get to them, but I would not have them in an area where rabbits dig. I have only once known a rabbit eat mushrooms growing on a lawn, but would recommend that any fungi and mushrooms noticed (usually in wet parts of the lawn) are removed.

Evergreen trees (and Eucalyptus and bamboo) have not been individually listed here, but have a very specific chemical in them which acts to delay the degradation of the needles or leaves. This is to enable the plant to colonise areas by smothering any undergrowth. The same chemical means that these leaves are very indigestible and may cause problems of impaction. Therefore rabbits should not be allowed access to these.

Remember, some of the weeds in the flower borders and lawn may also be poisonous and it is worth checking in '*Foraging for Rabbits*' for a list of toxic weeds.

NOTE

If you are worried about something your rabbit has eaten, then IMMEDIATELY contact your vet or out-of-hours vet. If they do not know the answer, they have direct contact to an animal poisons helpline. Do not wait for any symptoms to start.

I would like to thank Eileen Walthall from Wild Nutrition & Foraging for Pet Rabbits UK (Facebook group), for her help and advice.

Photo: T Way



Lily of the Valley, a pretty but dangerous cottage garden plant

Photo: C Speight

As long as it's not given in a concentrated form and doesn't put the rabbit off drinking adequate water, it shouldn't do harm

APPLE CIDER VINEGAR

By Richard Saunders, RWF Veterinary Adviser

At the RWF, we are frequently contacted to enquire about tips that people have heard from social media, seen online or heard through word of mouth. Some of these may be true, some untrue and some dangerous. We asked Richard Saunders to look into one which we had been contacted about recently - apple cider vinegar being added to drinking water to aid health.

Apple cider vinegar is vinegar made from fermented apple juice. Bacteria and yeasts in the apples produce alcohol from sugars, which is then converted to acetic and malic acids by another fermentation step, involving "The Mother", another bacterial organism. It is acidic, unpalatable and irritant in its concentrated form, but harmless when diluted, unless contaminated with additional yeasts and bacteria. In rabbits, any such bacterial contaminants are most likely to be killed by their acidic stomach content. If using this product, care should be taken

that the taste of the water is not changed, leading to reluctance to drink it, and concentrated forms should be avoided, especially any capsule or tablet or other solid forms, which could irritate the mouth and oesophagus.

As to its possible health benefits, many are claimed, and few, if any, are proven, even in humans. The nutrient content of ACV is so negligible that it's not a useful source of vitamins or minerals. Any "helpful" bacteria present are unlikely to survive the stomach acids. The acidic nature of the product is, likewise, not going to have any effect on the pH of the rabbit's body or blood, or urine. If it conversely makes the water MORE palatable to an individual rabbit, this could be really helpful in diluting urine sediment and helping to reduce urine scalding.

In humans, there does appear to be some useful effect on blood sugar levels after eating¹.

However, rabbits only very, very rarely develop diabetes, and their feeding strategy should involve ad-lib green leafy grass, hay and other plants, rather than high carbohydrate foodstuffs, so it's difficult to extrapolate from humans to rabbits.

In short, unless given as a concentrated liquid or solid form, and unless it puts the rabbit off drinking adequate water, it shouldn't do any harm. However, it's equally unlikely to do any good, again unless it encourages an individual rabbit to drink more.

Reference

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WHAT CAUSES SEX-SPECIFIC BEHAVIOURS IN RABBITS?

By Guen Bradbury,
Rabbiting On Veterinary Adviser

Neutering doesn't prevent all sex-specific behaviours

All photos: D Staggs



At RWF, we advise that all rabbits should be neutered to prevent unwanted litters and unwanted sexual behaviour, such as mounting and spraying. However, even after neutering, many male rabbits will still mount their companions and many female rabbits will continue to dig large holes (some males also). Owners often worry that the rabbit wasn't neutered successfully, but these behaviours are not just driven by hormones from the ovaries or testicles. In this article, I'll explain what sex-specific behaviours are, when they start and why they happen. I'll describe what neutering does and why it doesn't prevent all of these behaviours. Finally, I'll advise on how to manage these behaviours.

What are sex-specific behaviours?

Sex-specific behaviours include scent-marking behaviours, such as spraying urine on other rabbits, people, or objects and leaving dry faecal pellets around their enclosure to mark territory. They also include courtship behaviours, such as circling around people or rabbits and making a humming sound. Finally, they include mating behaviours - mounting rabbits or people.

When do sex-specific behaviours start?

Sex-specific behaviours start at puberty. The testicles of male rabbits descend around 10-12 weeks of age (female rabbits reach sexual maturity around a month later), and both sexes start to show sexual behaviours.

What drives sex-specific behaviours?

These behaviours are driven by the sex hormones oestrogen and testosterone. When an animal reaches puberty, the part of the brain called the hypothalamus starts producing more of a hormone called gonadotrophin-releasing hormone. These gonadotrophin-releasing hormones tell another part of the brain, the pituitary gland, to release hormones called gonadotrophins. These gonadotrophins then act on the ovaries or testes (the gonads) and make them produce more oestrogen or

testosterone. Rabbits are seasonal breeders - when the days start to get longer in spring, their brains start to produce more gonadotrophin-releasing hormones, and this seasonal rhythm drives seasonal sexual behaviour.

But these gonadotrophins don't only act on the ovaries or testes - they also act on the adrenal gland (the gland that most people know produces adrenaline).

The adrenal gland releases a variety of different hormones, two of which are oestrogen and testosterone. This means that these hormones don't just come from the ovaries and testes.

What happens when we neuter a rabbit?

When we neuter a rabbit, we remove the sperm and egg-producing organs. When a vet neuters a male rabbit, they make an incision in the scrotum and remove both testicles, the blood supply, and some of the spermatic cord (though not all of it, which is why male rabbits may still be fertile for 4-6 weeks after neutering). When a vet neuters a female rabbit, they make an incision in the abdomen and take out both ovaries. Many vets used to take out the ovaries and uterus, but we've found that this big surgery increases pain, time under anaesthetic, and other health risks. This means that some vets now just take out the ovaries - providing all of the ovarian tissue is removed, the ovarian hormones will also be removed. At RWF, we recommend neutering male rabbits as soon as the testicles descend (10-12 weeks) and females at four months.

Why do some behaviours persist after neutering?

Not all sex hormones are produced by the ovaries and testes, so when we remove these, the adrenal gland will continue to produce some. Although the rabbit cannot produce sperm or egg cells, the adrenal gland can still produce some sex hormones - especially during the spring. Some rabbits will show more sexual behaviours than others - this seems to be because some adrenal glands produce more testosterone than others, and in some rabbits, the adrenal glands may increase production of testosterone when the testes are removed. Neutered rabbits have higher levels of sex hormones than neutered animals of other species (like ferrets, cats, and horses) - this would indicate that the adrenal gland produces a fairly substantial amount of sex hormones (House Rabbit Society, 2004).

These persistent levels of sex hormones in neutered rabbits explain the sex-specific behaviours that we see. This may also explain why male-female pairs are easier to bond and less likely to fight than single-sex pairs - the sex hormones cause different motivations and need for resources between male and female rabbits, and so there is less competitiveness between rabbits of the opposite sex.

Neutered rabbits may show social, sexual, or even mild aggressive behaviours in the spring. Females may dig new burrows. Rabbits may become more aggressive to their companion rabbit or to people - they may chase and mount them more and may 'chin' to mark their territory more frequently.

Very rarely, sex-specific behaviours may indicate incomplete removal of the ovaries or testicles. Neutering of a male rabbit is a simple procedure and it is extremely unlikely that part of the testicle is left behind. If the rabbit has a retained testicle (it has not descended into the scrotum), then the vet will discuss this with you. Sometimes, a bit of ovarian tissue may be left behind in a female rabbit - speak to your vet if you see behaviours such as fur-plucking from the dewlap in your neutered female rabbit.



Sex-specific behaviours include scent-marking behaviours, such as spraying urine



Even after neutering, many male rabbits will still mount their companions

What can we do about sex-specific behaviours?

Sex-specific behaviours in neutered rabbits rarely cause a serious problem. Many bonded pairs may have more disagreements in spring and early summer. There will be more mounting and chasing but as long as there is no fighting this should settle down in a few weeks. If serious fighting breaks out, they'll need to be separated, given time to calm down and then carefully reintroduced once their hormones have settled down. This may take several weeks. Try not to bond new rabbits at this time of year as there is a higher chance that they may fight - if you need to, then keep a closer eye on them than usual.

Keep a close eye on your rabbits at this time and act immediately if you see any fighting or signs that a fight may have happened (scattering of fur, blood or wounds on one or both rabbits). Give them plenty to do in their home to keep mentally and physically active. Allow them the freedom to express their normal behaviours of digging, foraging, running and jumping.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the majority of neutered rabbits will continue to show some sex-specific behaviours because neutering doesn't remove all of the sources of these hormones. Neutering can reduce the severity of unwanted behaviours and prevents unwanted litters. The remaining sex-specific behaviours give your rabbit some of her or his unique personality!

Reference:

<https://rabbit.org/sex-hormones-in-altered-rabbits/>

Rabbits often seem to feel more secure in a towel than in human hands

All photos: RWAf

RESTRAINING A RABBIT AT THE VETS - TRANCING OR TOWEL WRAPPING?

By Guen Bradbury, Rabbiting On Veterinary Adviser

When a rabbit is at the vets, it is likely that they will have to be restrained in some way to allow the vet to perform a full examination or provide some treatment. This is because the veterinary practice and procedures are very stressful for rabbits, which means that they will try to escape if possible. When they try to escape, they may jump off the table and injure themselves, or (rarely) may scratch or bite the owner or vet. Different methods of restraint will be appropriate for different rabbits, depending on the temperament of the rabbit and the procedure that needs to be performed.

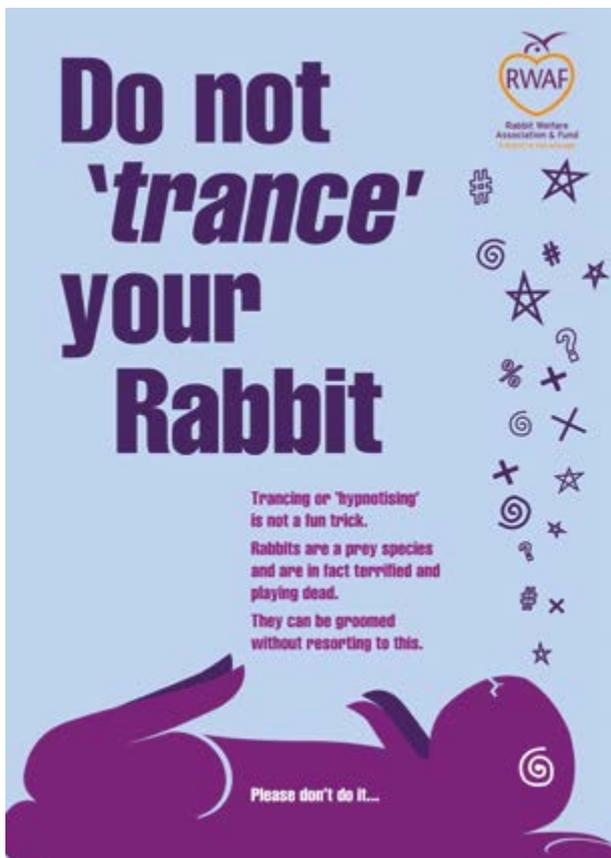
Why to restrain?

The amount of restraint required partly depends on how stressed the rabbit is feeling. The calmer the rabbit, the less likely they will need a lot of restraint. Owners can help to reduce the stress by always transporting rabbits with their companion, by keeping them in an appropriate carrier,

and by bringing a towel that has been in the rabbit's enclosure at home, so smells familiar.

Most vets should be able to do most of the exam without much restraint of the rabbit. They should try to keep the rabbit in its carrier as much as possible (owners can help with this by using a carrier that opens at the top). The vet will need to take the rabbit out of the carrier to check their anogenital area and weigh them. The rabbit will have to be restrained if the vet needs to use an otoscope to check the rabbit's teeth, to clip the nails, or to take blood, for example.

There are three major ways that rabbits can be restrained - in someone's hands or arms, in a towel, or on their back. Let's go through these one at a time.



The RWAFF produces a poster advising people not to trance rabbits

Restrained in hands

The simplest and fastest way to restrain a rabbit is to hold them in someone's hands or tucked under their arm. This has the advantage of being easy to do and convenient. It is also easy to manipulate the rabbit to examine different areas of the body - so is useful for procedures like nail clipping. However, rabbits really dislike having their feet or abdomens touched by human hands, and so this can be very stressful. If their hind legs are not supported and they kick out, they can generate enough force to fracture their spine. With larger rabbits, it can be hard to restrain the head, forelegs, and hind legs with one person's hands alone - sometimes scruffing can be required (providing the hind legs are supported) to control the rabbit sufficiently. Hand restraint is commonly used because it is so quick to do.



The simplest and fastest way to restrain a rabbit is to hold them

Many vets may ask a nurse to come in to hold the rabbit - nurses are very experienced in restraining a rabbit to hold them in exactly the right position for the vet to do the procedure they need to do. Some vets may ask the owner to restrain a rabbit, but only if they know them very well and are confident that they can hold the rabbit. Rabbits will be less stressed with a familiar person. However, many vets won't ask the owner to hold the rabbit in case the rabbit kicks out and hurts itself or hurts the owner - then the vet could be liable.

Restrained in a towel

The second option for restraining a rabbit is to wrap them up in a towel, leaving the head or relevant area of the body exposed. The advantages of this are that the restraint is complete (so even if the rabbit kicks or jumps, they are enclosed), and that rabbits typically find it less aversive to be touched by an inanimate object than by human hands. Rabbits often seem to feel more secure in a towel than in human hands, so are less likely to try to escape. Additionally, if the owner brings a towel from home, then the scent will be familiar to the rabbit.

The major disadvantages to this method are that it requires a bit of practice to wrap a rabbit effectively and that it is a bit more challenging to expose different areas of the body in sequence. However, it is a very useful means of restraint for blood sampling or dental examinations.

Restrained through trancing

The final option for restraining a rabbit is to 'hypnotise' or 'trance' them - using its instinctive tonic immobility response to fear. This refers to the state of paralysis that is induced in a rabbit when they are turned onto their back - probably a way of deterring predators by 'playing dead.' This response is shown when the rabbit does not believe it can escape from danger - so the only chance they have is to pretend to be dead and hope the predator leaves them alone.

There are two major disadvantages to using this method of restraint - the stress of trancing itself, and the unpredictability of the restraint achieved.

Trancing is extremely stressful. Despite appearing non-responsive, rabbits in this state are very scared, are acutely aware of the environment, and still feel pain. Rabbits find being tranced very stressful - their heart rates, breathing rates, and levels of stress hormones increase.

Trancing gives unpredictable levels of restraint. The degree of paralysis varies - some rabbits remain immobile on their back even when no longer held, and some do not become immobile at all. The degree of paralysis depends on the temperament of the rabbit and the fear they are feeling - the more scared they are, the easier it is to trance (because they are more likely to fear for their life). Some rabbits struggle and kick when they are turned on their back, which risks spinal fractures. As the response is so variable but can only be tested by turning the rabbit on its back, this means that a proportion of rabbits will be turned over, stressed out, and then not trance, so will suffer that stress needlessly.

Vets should only use trancing if there is no other option available. However, the best form of restraint is just enough to get the job done. If a vet is very experienced at trancing rabbits and can do a procedure very quickly, or if there is no-one to help in an emergency, then trancing may be an acceptable solution in a few cases. **However, if trancing is considered, then the vet should also consider whether chemical restraint (sedation) is a more humane alternative.**

Conclusion

In general, veterinary surgeons will usually use hand restraint for short, relatively non-painful procedures, because it is so quick to do. However, for anything that is likely to be more unpleasant for the rabbit (dental examinations, taking blood sample), I'd recommend using a towel. It provides excellent restraint with minimal stress - allowing necessary procedures to be done to ensure the rabbit's ongoing health.

Every single person they encounter is going to be a stranger

DO RABBITS BELONG IN PETTING ZOOS AND FARM PARKS?

By Dr Emma Milne, Veterinary Surgeon

If you are a parent, you will know the sensation of pondering what on earth you can do to entertain your little angels on countless weekends and in school holidays. Often the UK weather isn't conducive to a rambling walk in the countryside, so people try to find other ways to pass the days. We all know that kids just love cute and cuddly animals, and this is one of the reasons that petting zoos and farm parks are so popular; children can see a variety of adorable creatures, the hours are filled, and mum and dad don't need to have pets making a mess at home. But, as we've asked throughout this series of ethics articles, is it good for the animals or just for us humans?

Listening to Mother Nature

As you may know, I love to look at how animals behave and live in the wild, to teach people about their welfare needs. Looking at those welfare needs is a really good way to think about the things we put animals through. So let's think about some things where rabbits are concerned.

There will be small differences between petting zoos and farm parks but, for the sake of argument, let's treat them as essentially the same. They usually have a combination of large and small pets and farm animals, ranging from donkeys, ponies, cows and goats, to the small furrries, like rabbits and guinea pigs. In virtually all cases, one of the attractions is the opportunity to get close to the animals and feed them and, especially when it comes to the little ones, pet, stroke, hold and cuddle them. Many such places let people hold children's birthday parties there too, implying that whole groups of children can get involved.

One thing is for sure; for most animals, children are pretty scary. They are loud, clumsy, they smell different, they are chaotic in the way they move, they shriek and squeal and laugh, and - most disconcertingly for the animals - they love to hug and cuddle.

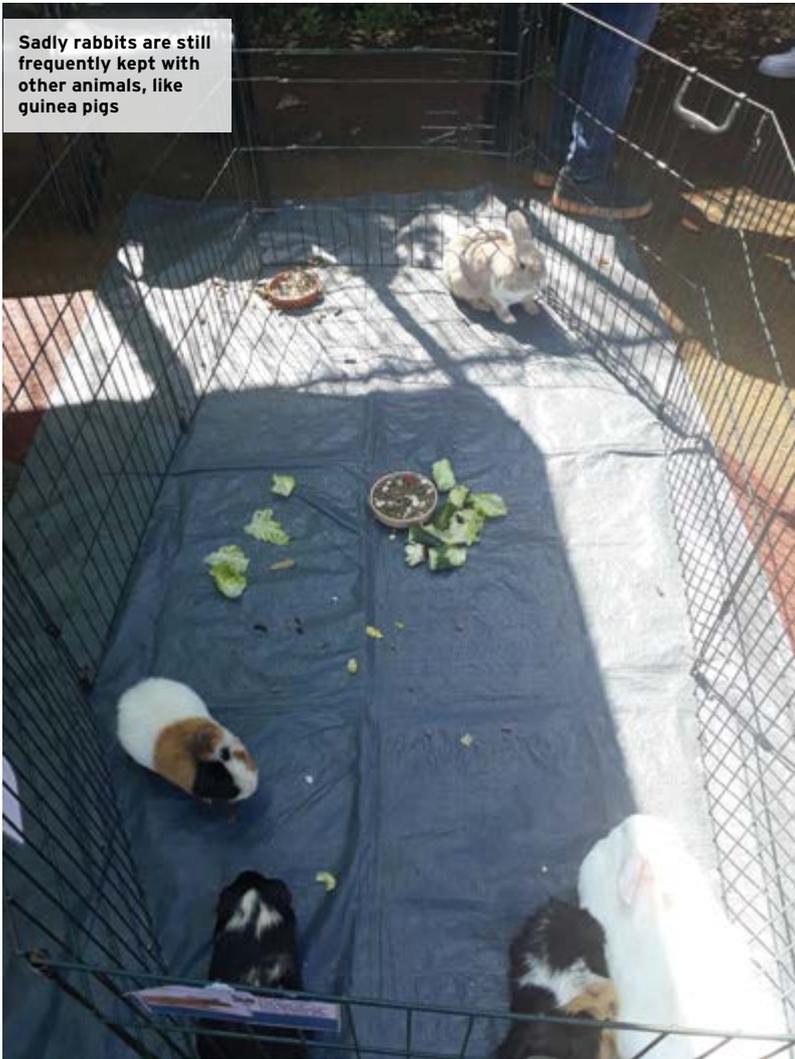
One of the biggest causes of injuries to children by animals is the fact that children want close physical contact but they don't read the body language and communication of animals. Added to this is the fact that many adults also don't understand the language and behaviour of animals, so it's no wonder that many children never learn to respect the animals' space. Humans are a very tactile species. We show love and affection by physical contact. But we are fundamentally predators, and the vast majority of animals that we use in petting zoos are prey animals. Being handled, stroked, close to people and especially being picked up or restrained are all incredibly stressful events, because the animals think they are going to be captured and eaten. And of course, in the setting of a zoo or farm park by definition, apart from long-term staff, every person they encounter is a stranger.

Rabbits, even pet ones, and many other prey animals tend to be most active at dusk, dawn or during the night. These are the times when there are fewer predators around and by default this means that most of them sleep most of the day - or would like to! Humans visitors need to fill their daytime hours, so animals like rabbits are subjected to an unnatural daily rhythm to satisfy us touchy-feely people.

Welfare needs

All animals have five basic needs for their mental and physical wellbeing; the right diet and fresh water, the

Sadly rabbits are still frequently kept with other animals, like guinea pigs



The rabbit's diet is often poor and not suitable, leading to health problems

right environment, the need to be with or without other animals, the need to behave normally and the need to be protected from pain, injury and disease. Let's consider these in a petting zoo situation.

Diet - Pet rabbits often have poor diets because people still feed too much dry food and not enough fibre. This causes tooth overgrowth, obesity and gut problems. Hopefully, people running parks and zoos will be educated with regard to the rabbits' diet, but if visitors want to feed animals then it could easily go wrong. People like to give animals treats to eat, and if this happens all day, 5-7 days a week, the diet could easily become very unbalanced. It's also unlikely that fresh water is going to be available all the time in these circumstances, and even if present, the stress of the situation may inhibit eating and drinking.



Mobile zoos tend to have very barren and inappropriate environments

Many petting zoos are mobile affairs, offering to bring animals to a party or local fete. These journeys will undoubtedly be stressful, but also probably mean that food and water will not be available for appreciable periods of time. For all small species, including rabbits, this can be a major health issue.

Environment - As with diet, the simple fact that animals are on display means that their environment is not ideal, at least for large periods of time. Rabbits like to hide, they need to feel safe and have time to sleep. Mobile zoos tend to have very barren environments to keep things simple and easy to clean. People familiar with my work will know how I feel about sacrificing welfare for human convenience!

Social and behavioural needs - Rabbits are very social animals and should always be with other rabbits. They should be free to express behaviour like digging, hiding, browsing and grazing, exploring, running and hopping. You can imagine, I'm sure, that in the petting zoo environment this will be virtually impossible. Sadly, rabbits are still frequently kept with other animals like guinea pigs. They are different species with different needs and many guinea pigs are badly injured by rabbit companions.

Pain, injury and disease - I would hope that protecting against these is indeed a priority for such establishments, but with frequent travel, inexperienced handling, a suboptimal diet and frequent stress, I have my doubts. Unvaccinated animals would also be especially at risk because of the high throughput of visitors and the travel.

Best interests of the animals

As I've said in previous articles, I know I sound like a right killjoy, but the older I get, the more uncomfortable I become with the use of animals for human entertainment, and, for me, these petting zoos and farm parks are just this. I think for larger animals that are easily visible, it's possibly not an issue, but rabbits, by nature, like to hide, and they have very complex behavioural and social needs. Hauling them into the public eye and moving them around for large chunks of their lives simply can't be in their best interests, in my opinion. Of course, it's for you to decide how you and your family feel about this, and hopefully I've given you some food for thought. For me, though, the question isn't whether rabbits belong in petting zoos, but rather do we feel that petting zoos are ethical at all?

NURSING CARE AT HOME

Caring for rabbits with abscesses and wounds

By Claire Speight, Registered Veterinary Nurse

Last issue, we started our new 'Nursing at Home' series, to help guide owners on how to care for their rabbits at home, when faced with nursing care needs. This issue, we look at caring for rabbits with abscesses or wounds and the care they may require after treatment from your vet.

Different wounds

There are lots of different reasons why rabbits may have wounds or an abscess, and the location upon the body, and severity, can vary significantly. Some wounds may be infected (have bacteria and pus in them), others may be contaminated (have debris in them), and some may be clean wounds. The nature of the wound will affect the nursing care required. Clean wounds will need less care than infected or contaminated wounds.

Why do rabbits suffer with wounds and abscesses?

Wounds are often the result of fighting amongst rabbits, and rabbits can inflict some serious and nasty injuries upon each other. This is one reason why the bonding of rabbits must be performed carefully, and by people who are experienced in the process, so they do not reach a point whereby serious fighting breaks out. Wounds may also be caused by other animals, such as cats and dogs, or by injuring themselves on a sharp item within their enclosure.

Wounds caused by flystrike may be superficial, if the condition has been detected and treatment started early, but can become serious and life threatening if not. These wounds are often infected and contaminated, and require a great deal of treatment.

Other wounds such as pododermatitis (sore hocks), lesions caused by myxomatosis, and self-mutilation may also be apparent.

Abscesses on the head are often dental related and require a thorough workup by your vet, to get to the root of the problem, followed by after care at home.

Veterinary treatment

Undoubtedly, your rabbit is likely to be on some medication prescribed by your vet. This may be antibiotics, if the wound is infected or at risk of becoming so, pain relief, prokinetic medication to encourage the gastrointestinal tract to keep moving,



Flystrike wounds may be infected and severe

or creams to apply to the wound/s. Whatever your vet prescribes, you should administer the medications to your rabbit at the required dose, timing, route and length of treatment. Do not take advice from social media about changing your rabbit's medication, without speaking to your vet first. They are the one who has clinically examined the rabbit and is trained to give advice. Treatment may vary from rabbit to rabbit, even for the same or similar conditions.

You may have to flush out abscess sites or large wounds to help encourage healing. This will be demonstrated by your vet or vet nurse, and if you have any questions or concerns you should raise them directly.

At home care

The care you are able to give your rabbit at home is important in their recovery. You will need to be able to provide:

- **Clean living environment** - ideally this should be inside, so the rabbit is as protected as possible from flies, which may be attracted to wounds and abscesses. If your rabbit is not used to living indoors, take great care to watch them for signs of stress. Try to keep them in a quiet area in the house, away from other animals, TVs, radios, computers, busy areas, cooking smells, etc. and if possible, keep them with their companion and with familiar items from their outdoor enclosure. You need to make sure the enclosure is safe and secure and does not become either too hot in summer or cold in winter. If you bring your rabbit inside for care in winter, bear in mind they will not be able to go back outside until the spring, when the weather has warmed up a bit.
- **Assisted feeding** - if your rabbit is not eating, you will need to syringe feed them to ensure they receive the calories and nutrition they require. This may need to be repeated several times a day and some rabbits are easier to syringe feed and more accepting of it than others.
- **Bedding** - you need to use bedding which will not stick to or contaminate the wound - Vetbed is good for this, but make sure they do not attempt to eat it. Hay still needs to be provided, but should be done so in a manner that the rabbit doesn't rest on it with their wounds - this will depend on the location of the wound/s. If the wounds are likely to become contaminated with the hay, then placing it in a low rack may be a better option in the short-term.



After surgery, wounds may require care at home

Photo: N Stapleton



Wounds on the hock can be difficult to treat

Photo: R Lamb

- **Time** - do not underestimate the time you will need to keep wounds clean/flush wounds, vet visits and administer medications. This is a considerable commitment and will need to be fitted in around work, childcare, other animals/family and commitments you already have.
- **Cost** - if your rabbit is not insured, can you provide care for the amount of time necessary? Speak to your vet for their opinion about the length of treatment which may be required, bearing in mind it may exceed their estimation.
- **Preventing wound interference** - rabbits who are on sufficient pain relief are unlikely to interfere with their wound/s, but a companion rabbit may. If this is the case, the rabbits need to be kept together but separated by wire, so they can still see and smell each other, ensuring their bond does not break down.
- **Buster collars should never be used in rabbits** - they are likely to cause a great deal of distress, as well as stopping the rabbit grooming themselves and mobilising properly. Pet medical t-shirts are sometimes tolerated, but care needs to be taken to ensure the wound does not rub on the t-shirt, making it sweat and sore.
- **Tough stomach** - some wounds are not pleasant to look at, and whilst they may not bother your rabbit, if they are on adequate treatment from the vet, you have to be able to cope with the daily, sometimes more often, cleaning and flushing. Some areas of the wound may become necrotic (black) and die off; sometimes it may be that you need to remove these sections by carefully soaking them. This is especially true for wounds associated with flystrike and abscesses. You need to ensure you are going to be able to cope with this.

Hard decisions

It can be hard to nurse rabbits with obvious and serious wounds, because they are not pleasant to look at and we do not want to think of our rabbits having to go through the necessary treatment.

The successful outcome does depend upon the cause of the wound and severity. Small rabbit bite wounds are likely to heal quickly and with minimal nursing care required; however, serious flystrike wounds, marsupialised abscesses or wounds from serious fighting, may take weeks or months to heal and may never 100% heal. Take one day at a time, draw up a care plan stating the times/doses/route of each medication, cleaning of wounds, applying topical creams, changing bedding etc., so you do not forget or get yourself into a muddle.

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Winter can see a dip in numbers of rabbits rehomed

WINTER RESCUE WOES

By Angie Bell, Rabbit rehoming co-ordinator and chair for Barnsley Animal Rescue Charity, South Yorkshire

Winter time can be challenging for rescues on many different levels.

The most obvious thing is the weather. With numerous rabbit set ups on site, it can be a cold, wet and windy time. Volunteers are sometimes thin on the ground, cleaning out can be a long, hard slog and not everyone is up to it.

Here at BARC, I now have my bunny shed, but my fosterers still have outdoor hutches and I spent ten years with outdoor set ups before getting my shed .

Stretching funds even more

Weather can also be a problem with regards to the condition of rabbits arriving in rescue, and this is especially true of strays. We tend to get more poorly rabbits coming in over the winter months than the rest of the year, which puts extra strain on our time and funds.

Influx of rabbits and shortage of forage

In very cold weather, there is often an influx of people wanting to hand in their rabbits for rehoming. The cute, fluffy pets bought for children in the summer months

become a burden in cold, wet weather.

During spring, summer and early autumn, our rabbits enjoy lots of natural fresh forage along with their hay, vegetables and pellets. In winter, however, there is a shortage of forage and we have to rely on dried stores which we have prepared over summer, and more vegetables and herbs. This of course adds to our food bills. When we are full, this can easily add £30 per week to our food costs.

Less funding available and fewer rabbits rehomed

Then we come on to funding. Our charity shops have lower footfall in winter and therefore less money coming in. There are fewer car boot sales and fundraising opportunities too, and often fewer donations, although we tend to have a rise on the run up to Christmas. Our costs go up over winter - vet visits, heating, more hay and straw and higher vet bills.

In terms of rehoming, winter can see a dip in numbers of rabbits rehomed. A combination of bad weather putting people off outdoor rabbits, struggles with bad weather to get set ups ready, and



Regardless of the weather, rescues have to function

lack of money, especially on the run up to Christmas, means fewer people want to adopt rabbits.

Visits and collections can also fall foul of bad weather, slowing things down.

Trapping and getting stray rabbits to safety is a difficult and urgent task in winter too. While a released or escaped rabbit may survive several months in mild weather (if they are lucky), in winter they have far less chance of surviving for any time at all. Some of our winter stray rescues have been very memorable over the years.

Help your local rabbit rescue

Every season brings its own problems and worries. But a harsh winter, especially a long one, takes determination to get through and we value every tiny bit of help from our volunteers and the public. Please do try to support your local rabbit rescue during the winter, by volunteering your time or help with fundraising to see them over the difficult months.

The winter weather brings more challenges for rescues





HOW MIRRORS AFFECT THE BEHAVIOUR OF RABBITS IN DIFFERENT SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS

By Jennifer Howse, Lecturer in Animal Science, Hartpury University

Despite UK recommendations for social housing, almost half of UK companion rabbits remained housed in isolation in 2019. To examine if a mirror could offer some benefit to rabbits housed in either partial or complete isolation, a study was conducted by Hartpury staff and students, at Gloucestershire rabbit rescue centre 'Windwhistle Warren'. Findings suggested that, whilst not a suitable replacement for another individual, the use of a mirror may offer some benefit to individuals facing temporary isolation.

A popular companion

The third most common companion animal in the UK is the rabbit, with an estimated 900,000 kept in the domestic environment in 2019 (PDSA, 2019). Their popularity as companions may be a result of their endearing appearance, quiet nature and the outdated and incorrect opinion that they make affectionate pets for children. The environment in which rabbits are kept varies considerably: some roam freely in homes,

whilst others are confined to inappropriate and small outdoor hutches. For many, there is limited space and opportunity for natural behaviour performance, which can lead to concerns for their health and welfare.

Rabbits in isolation

Despite domestication, rabbits retain much of their natural behavioural repertoire and a lack of stimulation in the captive environment can result in the development of abnormal behaviours, a common welfare problem. Rabbits are naturally social animals, living in open areas in large colonies in the wild environment. However, even with recommendations from organisations such as the RSPCA, RWF and BSAVA to house them in compatible pairs or groups (with campaigns such as 'it takes two'), a number remain

housed alone and with only their hutch to roam within.

The annual 2019 PDSA Animal Welfare (PAW) Report reveals a reduction in the number of companion rabbits housed alone, but still almost half are not housed with conspecifics (49% in 2019 compared to 54% in 2018 and 65% in 2012). Solitary housing may result from initial purchase as an individual, loss of conspecifics, as well as through an inability to establish and maintain compatible pairings. Aggressive interactions occur in the wild, but individuals can distance themselves and avoid others; this is not always possible in captivity (due to enclosure size and style), and incompatible pairings may result in increasing numbers of individuals housed in isolation.

Social isolation induces physiological symptoms of stress in rabbits; alongside abnormal behaviours, reductions in activity can be seen (potentially leading to obesity and other health problems). It is important to consider methods which increase animal welfare, especially in situations where social housing may not be an option. This can include in rescue centres, where single rabbits can be easier to rehome with individuals often looking for a companion for an existing rabbit, rather than a pair. Whilst environmental enrichment in the form of toys can be used, another possible option is the use of mirrors. Mirrors have been shown to temporarily enrich the environment of some social species when kept in complete or partial isolation (horses (Kay and Hall, 2009) and birds (Henry et al, 2008)). Whilst other mammals including elephants and dolphins demonstrate self-awareness when presented with a mirror, rabbits are assumed to see the image as another individual, potentially providing a level of social interaction.

Mirror use with companion rabbits

Whilst positive findings have been obtained from studies examining the use of mirrors with rabbits housed in laboratory and farm environments, differences in housing and management make it difficult to generalise the results to companion rabbits in the domestic environment. When

given the option, 72% of isolated rabbits chose a mirrored enclosure over a non-mirrored enclosure, and the presence of a mirror has been seen to increase investigatory behaviour and led to decreased time spent inactively gazing out of an enclosure, an indicator of poor welfare.

The study population from Windwhistle Warren comprised 24 individuals, divided into three groups by pre-existing housing arrangement: eight rabbits were housed in pairs, eight in partial isolation (visual but no physical contact) and eight in complete isolation. Their behaviour was observed for six hours a day over eight days; two days pre-mirror, four days with mirror and two days post-mirror. Mirror tiles were used (30cm x 30cm) and placed into one half of each hutch so rabbits could be next to the tile or avoid it completely.

Prior to mirror presence, rabbits in complete isolation spent over half (51%) of their time showing inactive behaviours such as sitting or lying and gazing out of their hutch. This decreased to just over a quarter (26%) of their time when the mirror was present, before rising back (to 50%) after the mirror was removed. In comparison, those in partial isolation displayed less inactive behaviour at the beginning of the study (38% of their time), this dropped to 15% with mirror presence before increasing again (to 32%) once the mirror had been removed, indicating that despite not being in complete isolation, the presence of a mirror influenced activity levels. Rabbits housed in pairs spent just 4% of their time showing individual inactivity behaviours (away from their pair), this saw a reduction to 1% with mirror introduction before returning to 4% after mirror removal.



Photo: J Howse

Rabbits should always be kept in compatible pairs or groups

When a mirror was given, single rabbits spent 26% of their time being inactive, compared to 51% when there was no mirror



Photo: C Speight

Stereotypical behaviour (behaviour which is repetitive, invariant and lacking goals) is often seen in unstimulating environments. A significant reduction in stereotypical behaviour when mirrors were introduced was not seen, however stereotypical behaviour was only identified as taking up 9% of time for individuals housed in complete isolation (5% in those in partial isolation and 0% in those in paired housing) and over half of these were shown by a single individual. The low level of stereotypical behaviour seen by individuals in this study is likely to result from them being housed in suitable environments which (aside from a lack of social housing in areas) does provide them with stimulation and therefore does not encourage the development of these abnormal behaviours. Further studies are warranted to examine the effect of mirrors on those rabbits in domestic environments which are displaying stereotypies.

Mirror-directed behaviours (such as sniffing, sitting or lying next to the mirror) differed between the three groups; for those housed in social groups, the mirror gained little interest with just 5% of time spent completing mirror-directed behaviours. Higher levels of interaction were seen by those in partial (35%) and complete (28%) isolation, suggesting that whilst a mirror may not replicate the interaction which can be gained from a live conspecific, in the absence of another, a mirror could go some way to mimicking social interactions.

Using mirrors in the domestic environment

There are likely to be situations in which rabbits find themselves in partial or complete isolation, for example, after the death of a conspecific (prior to obtaining another), when in short-term rescue or when undergoing medical treatment, although keeping companions together should always be encouraged. In these situations mirrors may provide some welfare benefit by reducing inactive behaviours and encouraging interactions with a conspecific in the form of their reflection. However, it is still always recommended to house rabbits in compatible pairs (or groups) where social interactions can take place. A mirror does not allow physical interactions which are crucial in ensuring good health and welfare for a social species such as the rabbit, but can offer a visual conspecific with

which limited interactions can take place. Behaviour changes may result from novelty; although a reduction in inactive behaviour is positive, it is not certain how long this may last, and so should not be used as a substitute for longer term compatible pairings. However, for those rabbits facing temporary isolation, mirrors do appear to be able to offer some benefit to animal welfare.

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Wild rabbits can spend
80% of their waking
hours foraging

Photo: H Brindley

THE FIVE WELFARE NEEDS

The need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns

By Laura Dixon, Research Scientist

This is the third article in a series looking at the Five Welfare Needs, and how they apply to our pet rabbit care. As a reminder, the Five Freedoms (now more commonly referred to as the Five Welfare Needs), were developed as a way to assess animal housing and management, and they are¹:

- **Need for a suitable environment**
- **Need for a suitable diet**
- **Need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns**
- **Need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals**
- **Need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease.**

Here we will be looking at what normal behaviour patterns are for rabbits, and why it's important for rabbits to have the opportunity to express normal behaviour.

What is normal behaviour?

Animals have evolved and adapted their behaviour to suit their natural environments. This results in each species having a characteristic set of behaviour patterns that allows the animals to cope with aspects of the environment. Coping refers to physiological health, mental state, and the ability to use behaviour to alter the environment to meet needs that are important to the animal, like finding food or a safe place to rest. Domesticated animals, like pet rabbits, show a similar range of behaviour patterns to their wild ancestors, when housed in appropriate conditions. It is generally agreed that welfare is good when domestic animals can display a natural or normal range of behaviours².

What behaviour patterns are normal for rabbits?

Rabbits are a prey species, so need to feel safe and secure and have hiding spots available to them, so they have the confidence to perform other behaviour patterns. They may want to hide from aerial threats, so would need a spot that blocks them from views above, or they may want to hide from ground threats, so a hiding spot that blocks them

from ground view is needed. Also, some behaviour patterns, like grooming and resting, make the rabbit more vulnerable, so they may prefer to perform these behaviours in hiding spots. In order to scan their environment for potential threats, rabbits will rear up on their hind legs as a vigilance behaviour. Rabbits may also rear up to access or investigate parts of their environment, or to look for other rabbits in the enclosure that may be out of sight.

Wild rabbits can spend 80% of their waking hours foraging, and being able to forage is important for pet rabbits too. This involves searching for, and consuming food. Our pet rabbits are often given food in specific areas, meaning they don't need to spend a lot of time searching for the food. This can lead to boredom or frustration, and the rabbit may display abnormal behaviours as a response to this. Additionally, rabbits will dig to uncover food, create burrows or resting areas and to explore the environment³. Although the functions of digging are different for pet rabbits compared to wild rabbits - they don't need to create burrows to survive or dig to find food - they are still motivated to dig, and need an appropriate place to perform this behaviour.

Rabbits will also mark their territories with chin secretions (chin rubbing), and urine and faecal droppings. This is normal for rabbits and a way for them to communicate (with scent) to other rabbits in the area⁴. Having surfaces that the rabbit can rub and mark will make the environment feel more secure. Although we need to keep our rabbits' homes clean, it may be worth rotating the areas you clean or leaving a few areas with droppings to keep that familiar scent for the rabbit.

Rabbits need an environment allowing for exercise and mental stimulation



Rabbits are also a social species, so display social behaviours, such as resting or playing together, or grooming each other. Being without a companion is very stressful for most rabbits and not only removes the ability to perform social behaviour but also decreases play and vigilance behaviour⁵. Rabbits like to spend time apart from each other too, so it's important to have areas of the environment where the rabbits can be separate, if they choose. Animals usually show play behaviour when other needs are met, and play behaviour is often used as a sign of positive welfare and positive emotions⁶. Rabbit play can involve hopping (binkying) and racing around. Behaviours like play will decrease or become absent if there is something wrong in the rabbit's environment. Rabbits need a reasonable amount of space to display this kind of behaviour too, so keeping them without access to runs can prevent play.

What problems can occur if normal behaviour can't be expressed?

The inability to perform behaviour patterns can lead to boredom, frustration, stress and the development of abnormal or stereotypic behaviour⁷. Abnormal or stereotypic behaviours in rabbits can be shown as repetitive circling or head weaving/bobbing, or repetitive biting or digging at parts of the environment (different from normal digging behaviour which isn't stereotyped), fur chewing or over grooming, restlessness and increased aggression. These behaviours are thought to be a way to help an animal cope with an inadequate environment. Unfortunately, these problems will not go away until the environment is improved to allow for expression of different behaviour patterns. It's important to note that if you have rescued a rabbit from a poor environment, some of these behaviours may persist for a while after moving to a better environment, because they are thought to become habit-like after a period of time.

Providing a suitable companion helps optimise welfare needs



Many rabbits are motivated to dig



What to do to encourage normal behaviour?

Rabbits should have a complex environment that allows for exercise and mental stimulation. This should include areas to dig and scent mark, different types of shelters or hiding places, space to be within sight of and interact with other rabbits (social behaviour), and areas where the rabbit can be alone. To encourage foraging behaviour, food can be spread throughout the enclosure or treats can be hidden in and under things. You can also introduce new toys or healthy treats for variety. Allowing an animal some control over their environment, that is, letting them have the freedom to decide which behaviour they want to perform and when, is key to helping reduce stress and frustration, and as a result decreases the incidence of abnormal or stereotypic behaviour.

In conclusion, rabbits are a social species and have evolved to display a wide range of behaviour patterns. Performance of these behaviours is important for rabbit health and mental wellbeing. Providing a suitable companion for your rabbit, and a complex environment, will allow for exercise and mental stimulation which will help with good welfare and reduce the chances of abnormal behaviour development.

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- **25 years of rescue** – Mairwen Guard MBE, founder of Cottontails Rescue, discusses how rescue work has changed over the last 25 years.
- **Nutrition** – Burgess Pet Care look at 25 years of feeding rabbits.
- **Spring grass** – Rabbiting On Veterinary Adviser, Guen Bradbury, examines the truth about feeding spring grass to rabbits.
- **Showing and extreme conformation** – Dr Emma Milne continues her ethics series, focusing on showing rabbits and breeding for extreme looks.
- **Dangerous drugs** – Veterinary surgeon, Molly Varga, explains which drugs should never be used on rabbits, and why.

And much more...Don't miss out! Ensure that your subscription is up-to-date so you can receive the issue hot off the press in February 2021.

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READERS' LETTERS

Ash and Dotty - Together again



Ash and Dotty were never far apart

I got Ash when he was two months old. At the time, I didn't know about rescue centres. I thought Ash was happy until I decided to get him a companion from Barnsley Animal Rescue Centre, and adopted Florence. Sadly, one month after being bonded, they had a big fight resulting in Florence needing emergency surgery. Sadly, it was thought best if Florence returned to BARC, and the lady, who had been fostering her previously, decided to adopt her permanently.

After a short break, I adopted Dotty, and once they were bonded, they

were never apart, always grooming each other, sleeping together, using the litter tray together; they always had to be able to see each other. If one went out of sight, the other would go looking. Years later Dotty developed *E. cuniculi* and was treated with Panacur. She lost the use of her hind legs and bladder control, which did get better with treatment, but she never fully regained control. I moved them both indoors and set them up in my spare room, so I could monitor them.

I tried physio with Dotty, and it helped, but sadly because Dotty was putting extra pressure on her front legs she started to develop pressure sores. I tried the suggested veterinary treatment, but unfortunately it wasn't to be. After discussions with the vet, we decided to let her go, as she had no quality of life due to not being able to move on her own.

Ash was almost eleven by then, and was on pain relief for arthritis. He had a cataract in one eye and I didn't want to put him through the stress of finding him another companion. One day I found a lump on his right shoulder. The vet took a sample from it and later confirmed it was cancer. Although I was very sad, I knew Ash had had an amazing life. Ash didn't change in any way at all, even with the lump getting bigger.

Seventeen days after his diagnosis, Ash wasn't himself, he just hid in his den and had lost all his bladder and bowel control. I knew that it was time to say goodbye.

Now Ash and Dotty are back together, as they always used to be, under some pictures of them in my living room.

Nicola Sands

Birthday donations

The RWAF has recently received donations from two individuals as a present for their birthdays, one of these a child. We want to thank them publicly for their kindness.

Alice was 12 years old on August 22nd. She could not decide what to have for her birthday. After getting some art materials and a bucket hat, she asked for a £25 donation to be made on her behalf, towards RWAF. We have 2 pet rabbits, and during lockdown Alice has spent a long time taming Rosie. Rosie is our rescue rabbit, and loves being stroked now by Alice. She and Fudge are now a happily bonded pair.

Emma Mckendrick



Alice with Rosie and Fudge

I'm from London and now live in San Francisco working as a software engineer.

Growing up, my brother and I had four rabbits as pets and think they make wonderful friends around the house.

In the last few years, I fostered a pair, Flynn and Frannie, who have since been happily adopted. They were shy at first but became a lot more playful, and happy to be around people.

As my birthday came up, my mum asked me what I wanted as a present. I came across the RWAF website and I'm very supportive of their efforts, so asked for a donation to be made to them. I'm glad that they have so many high-quality guides on how to best take care of rabbits.

Thanks for your hard work!

James (surname withheld)

Health**Richard Saunders**

BSc (Hons) BVSc
MSB CBiol DZooMed
(Mammalian) MRCVS

Richard was the RWF's last Rabbit Resident at the University of Bristol, and is now the RWF Veterinary Adviser, as well as continuing to see rabbits and other animals in small and zoo animal practice.

**Guen Bradbury**

MA, VetMB, MRCVS

Guen Bradbury is the Rabbiting On Veterinary Adviser and is a vet who runs a teleconsultancy to help rabbit owners, vets, and vet nurses with behavioural problems in rabbits. Her textbook on the subject, 'Behavioural problems in rabbits' has been available through online and high-street retailers since the end of October 2018.

Behaviour**Carol Valvona**

MSc (CABC)

Carol (Bonafido Pet Behaviour And Training) is a member of the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors and has a Masters degree in companion animal behaviour counselling. She has rescued giant breeds for a number of years.

Houserabbit Advice**Leo Staggs**

Experienced rabbit owner Leo Staggs lives in Kent with his wife, 3 children and 2 house rabbits.

Welfare**Georgia McCormick**

Georgia is the Welfare Officer for the RWF. With a law degree and a background in animal welfare she is perfect for any welfare related questions you have for her.

**Mark Dron**

Mark works on a part-time basis as a consulting Animal Welfare Officer for the RWF.

After 27 years as a Police Officer and with Local Authority Trading Standards Units, many of which were spent dealing with Animal Welfare and Wildlife Crime issues, he now provides his services as a consultant to the RWF's Capone Campaign, which identifies and gathers intelligence relating to online breeders and sellers of rabbits around the UK.

We regret that our experts are only able to answer a few questions in the magazine. If you think that your rabbit may be ill, please seek veterinary advice immediately.

ASK THE EXPERTS



Photo: K Scott

Worried about hurting her

Q One of my rabbits loves running around under our feet. I am really scared that we are going to accidentally hurt her one day. She is a free range house rabbit, so what can we do to try to minimise the risk of this happening?

A It does sometimes seem as if our rabbits take delight in darting between and around our feet, deliberately trying to trip us up, as we're walking about. This behaviour is quite common, although not all rabbits do it; it means the rabbit wants your attention for some reason. Maybe she wants a treat, is trying to initiate play, or is asking to be petted.

The exact meaning will vary depending on how your bunny communicates with you. Generally, circling you is a good thing. It means your rabbit trusts you, and is happy you're there. It can also be a sexual behaviour, and more information can be found on page 8.

However, as you have said, there is a risk of injury to your rabbit, and you, if she misjudges your feet. There is no way to completely eliminate the danger, unfortunately, but you can reduce it by following a few simple steps. First, always assume she is already at your feet, so stop, and look at the area immediately around your feet. Second, if she isn't there, remain stationary and look further afield to see if she's watching, ready to run after you. Finally, when you do move, walk slowly, carefully, and with smaller footsteps than usual. You could also teach your rabbit a 'safety command'. The 'out' command can be given when you need your rabbit to leave a room.

Leo Staggs

New puppy worries



However much work you put in, a dog is still a predator and a rabbit is still prey

Q I have a pair of house rabbits who have free range of my whole house. They are generally very laid back and don't seem to be easily scared. I am getting a Cocker Spaniel puppy in about 4 weeks' time. How is best to introduce the rabbits to the dog, or should I restrict my rabbits' access in the house, so they never come into contact?

A It's quite amazing, when you think about it, that some rabbits and dogs can happily share the same living space. Having said this, you do need to remember you are introducing a predator and is it necessarily fair to expect prey and predator to live together? You say your rabbits are laid back, but have they ever had any experience with dogs, and were they positive ones?

Introducing a dog will take a considerable amount of time, and a lot of patience on your part. Puppies have a sensitive period for social development (between 3 and 14 weeks), so it's great that you will be able to start any introductions during this phase, but on the flipside, do remember it may be a long time before your puppy has any self-control around your rabbits. Dogs are hardwired to respond to movement. Those individuals with a high drive not only enjoy chasing but need to do it and will constantly find things to pursue. So, predatory drive is inherent in a dog, but the things they choose to chase are learned. Therefore, it is imperative that you do not give your pup any opportunity to chase your rabbits, as every time it exhibits this behaviour it will be internally reinforced and therefore strengthened.

Management is going to be crucial - both to keep your rabbits safe and to prevent your puppy from learning that chasing them is fun. This will mean having separate areas in the house to keep them apart. I am assuming you will be crate training your puppy, so this will be the first step. Next, you need to familiarise your pets to each other's scent (both on you or on a cloth). Once your puppy is happy in the crate, you can begin by placing it there when it is tired and with something nice to chew on like a stuffed Kong. Make sure the crate is in a room where the rabbits are comfortable (but not their safe place), give them plenty of places to hide, as well as some tasty food, and then let them in. Keep these sessions short so that your puppy doesn't get over excited and your rabbits don't panic and run. You should build the length of time up gradually (the idea is to desensitise each party, not sensitise).

In parallel with this, you must start some basic training with your puppy. There is not enough time to go through exercises here, but you need to teach a number of cues such as a leave command, a recall and a settle. You must ensure that it has an extremely reliable response to these, even if they are given suddenly and out of context. This is a skill that requires

much practice. Make it a point to rehearse getting a cued behaviour quickly, in many different locations, several times a day, until the response becomes a habit. Not until you reach this stage will you be able to use these exercises reliably around your rabbits. Remember, if you wish to interrupt a dog's behaviour sequence, you must do so within the first half a second of a behaviour commencing. That means you have a very small window in which to interrupt it and give it something more appropriate to do. Even once your puppy knows these new behaviours, there is every chance it could go wrong, with potentially disastrous consequences for your rabbits (e.g. if one of your rabbits startles and runs). You may wish to muzzle train your puppy. The idea is that it has positive associations with a muzzle and does not see it as a punishment. It would be used in conjunction with your other training, when you think you are ready to let your dog nearer your rabbits. By this point, you need to be as certain as you can that your dog will not try to chase - the muzzle is for your peace of mind rather than a tool to stop your dog grabbing your rabbits.

Also, if your rabbits are not already used to a cage, work on this as well. Later on you could try reversing the process and popping your rabbits in their cage (again with plenty of hiding places etc.) and then bring your puppy in to the room on a house line so that you can prevent it from bouncing at the cage. Keep your pup settled, then quietly praise and reward this calm behaviour. Again, keep these initial sessions short, then remove your puppy from the room and give him something nice to chew on elsewhere - never set your puppy up to fail.

Finally, and I'm sure I don't need to say this, never leave your pets together unattended. However much work you put in, a dog is still a predator and a rabbit is still prey. You might have to accept that it isn't going to work and that it would be unfair to continually stress your rabbits and I would also add the situation may be unfair on the puppy too.

Carol Valvona

Are they hiccups or should I be worried?



Rabbits can suffer from hiccups

Q Do rabbits hiccup? I know puppies and babies do, but I am sure my rabbit does also? They seem to happen when she is lying down and last about 30 seconds. There is no noise and no discharge from her nose. She is totally fine in herself, so I am not concerned, but more intrigued.

A Yes, rabbits do hiccup. Hiccups are involuntary contractions of the diaphragm, which force air out of the lungs, and may help to move gas out of the stomach as well. They are only found in mammals and they become less common as animals get older. Scientists have suggested a couple of reasons for hiccups - perhaps that they help young animals remove gas from their stomachs while suckling, or perhaps that it is an evolutionary remnant from an earlier type of breathing.

Young rabbits are more likely to get hiccups. They are often normal, but sometimes, they can be a sign of breathing problems or digestive problems. Often, the spasms are so frequent that they can even be mistaken for a seizure. If the hiccups become more frequent, persist for a long time, or are associated with other symptoms, consider taking your rabbit to the vet. An x-ray may be able to show lung problems or digestive problems that could cause this unusual sign.

However, if your rabbit is otherwise well in herself, then you are probably seeing normal hiccups. Sometimes, hiccups can be worsened if a rabbit eats a large amount of food very quickly. Make sure that the majority of her diet is hay and fresh grass and limit pellets to no more than 5%. It's hard for a rabbit to eat hay quickly enough to cause hiccups, but it's much easier to scoff pellets. If her diet and health are good, just enjoy watching your rabbit perform an unusual behaviour!

Guen Bradbury

How long does an owner have to come forward?



Is there a timescale and protocol before a rabbit can be rehomed?

Q I run a re-homing and boarding service for rabbits and guinea pigs. A lost or abandoned rabbit has been handed over to me from a member of the public.

I have advertised for the owner to come forward. How long must I give the owner to come forward before I can offer the rabbit for adoption, please? I have taken the rabbit to my vets and she has been treated for mites and been scanned for a microchip, which was absent.

A Other than dogs, there is no law about lost small animals, so rabbits etc. as well as cats are not covered by the same requirements.

They are classed as property, for the purposes of the theft act, so if you find one then you must take all reasonable steps to trace the owner, and I would suggest that someone keeps records of what they have done in that regard in case they are challenged by the Police in the future.

As regards the rules around lost property, the Police no longer administer these as they have been deregulated, so you need to take "reasonable steps" to locate and identify an owner before title to the "property" can pass to you.

In the case of animals, one of the reasonable steps mentioned is to put the animal on a found notice board online such as - <https://www.animalsearchuk.co.uk/search>.

You should also contact your local RSPCA, council animal warden, local vets and other rescues to see if they have been advised of any lost animals matching the description of the one you have found.

I am not an expert in lost property law, so I cannot be held responsible for any inconsistencies in the advice that may cause issues for people in the future; in essence, if you keep a rabbit you have found and receive a visit from the Police, then they will expect you to be able to explain your actions and the steps you have taken to identify the owner(s); nothing in this article would allow you to reply upon advice from the RWAf in court.

Mark Dron

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Lindsay, 7th May 2020

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A hay rack stops rabbits spreading hay around the house

Photo: L. Waister

HAY RACKS: A helpful feeding tool or a recipe for disaster?

By Tom Ingleton, Veterinary Student

Hay is an important part of a pet rabbit's diet, harvested at just the right time for maximum nutrition, then dried to lock in this goodness. Hay has been proven to aid digestion in rabbits, providing fibre and helping nutrient absorption. Hay is also one of the best foods for a rabbit's teeth, as it requires a lot of chewing which gently and gradually wears them down.

A problem for many rabbit owners is the subsequent mess that comes with this tasty treat, caused by the rabbit soiling the hay and throwing it around the enclosure or house. A hay rack might appear to be the solution, keeping the hay off the floor and all in one place. However, before you go out and get one, we're going to help you decide what's best for you and your rabbits.

Pros

Firstly, we're going to focus on the benefits of using a hayrack, of which there are a few, primarily centred around cleanliness and the potential for improved hygiene, alongside convenience for us as owners.

• Hygiene:

The argument in favour of using hay racks is usually based around hygiene, to prevent rabbits soiling their food. Elevating the hay off the ground keeps it out of the way of urine and faeces. Although for a well litter-trained rabbit, this is unlikely to be a significant concern for the owner.

• Cleanliness:

Another benefit of using a hay rack, for some, is that it encourages general cleanliness in and around the enclosure, by preventing the rabbits spreading the hay around and creating a mess. Unfortunately, there might not be a solution to this! Rabbits love not only eating hay, but they also play with it, so it is completely normal for them to spread out hay throughout their enclosure, inevitably creating a bit of a mess! This is likely to occur whether the hay is provided in a hay rack or on the floor.

Providing hay on the floor, preferably scattered, encouraged rabbits to eat naturally



Photo: R Merriman

- **Convenience:**

Convenience has already been partially covered, with the potential for improved hygiene and cleanliness. It is also more time efficient to have one location to put food and it's also easier to see how much hay your rabbits are getting through when it's provided in one place.

- **Cons**

Having covered the benefits of using a hay rack, we're now going to look at the other side of the argument and see the associated disadvantages. These include safety, health risks, and the fact that they encourage the rabbit away from their natural feeding position and behaviours.

- **Potential safety risk:**

A hay rack is a potential hazard which could lead to an unwanted trip to the vets. This is due to the holes often being large enough for your rabbit to get their legs, head or neck trapped. The racks are often made of metal, which makes them strong and sturdy, but not very forgiving on a rabbit's limbs or neck.

Eating from the hay rack regularly may result in painful sores around the mouth, nose and face, if they're rubbing against the often-abrasive frame of the hay rack. These wounds can very quickly become infected, leading to pain and the risk of the rabbit going into gastrointestinal stasis.

- **Mould:**

Perhaps surprisingly, a hay rack is far from an ideal environment to store hay in - it is exposed to the air and moisture which can quickly cause mould to form. Filling a hay rack instead of spreading it out in the enclosure can mean that mould goes unnoticed at the bottom of the rack.

Mouldy hay produces spores which, when inhaled by the rabbit, can cause dangerous respiratory problems. If the rabbit eats the hay that has gone mouldy it is even worse, causing potentially life-threatening illness.

Hay should be stored in air-tight, dry, metal containers and never provided in too much of an excess that any mould might go unnoticed. Mouldy hay smells bad and is discoloured. If you're not sure about your hay, throw it away - it's not worth the risk.

- **Natural feeding:**

Rabbits are often known as herbivores (they're completely vegetarian) but they can be more specifically described as graminivores, which means that a large proportion of their diet is made up of grasses, and a huge proportion of their time is spent grazing. This has led to rabbits having a specially adapted digestive system, which is in its natural position when they have



Hay is an important part of a pet rabbit's diet

Photo: C. Samson



Feeding hay from the floor reduces the risk of inhaling dust, particles and spores

Photo: J. Viljakainen

their head down and all four feet are on the floor.

This position, and the resulting natural feeding behaviour, is not encouraged when food is supplied in a hay rack, which forces the rabbit to reach up to access food. By providing food on the floor, preferably scattered throughout the enclosure, rabbits are encouraged to eat naturally. By feeding in this way, the rabbits are at not nearly as much risk of inhaling dust, particles or spores from the hay.

- **Behavioural benefits:**

Foraging throughout the enclosure is the most natural way for rabbits to eat and this is much harder to achieve when a major food source is placed in just one area, a hay rack. Foraging should be encouraged for all food. In the wild, even when grazing, rabbits spend time searching for the best blades of grass and there is no reason why they shouldn't be able to do the same with hay.

Providing rabbits with the opportunity to forage results in several behavioural benefits, by combating boredom and stereotypic behaviours such as bar-biting. Wild rabbits spend around 80% of their time foraging and eating, but if we're only providing them with food in a dish and in a hay rack, this natural feeding pattern won't be seen in our companion rabbits.

It could be argued that hay racks have the benefit of making the food harder to access, therefore giving the rabbit an added challenge. However, I think this would quickly become repetitive and involves little searching for the food. In terms of a mental stimulus, having to find food through 'scatter-feeding' in tubes and around the enclosure would be much more challenging and enriching.

Recommendations

Overall, we recommend that you don't use hay racks, and that eating scattered hay off the floor is best for rabbits. This encourages their natural feeding behaviour and aids digestion, whilst minimising any potential health risks. Hay can be spread throughout the enclosure to encourage natural foraging and grazing behaviours, whilst ensuring that the rabbit is eating in its natural feeding position. If a litter tray is used, hay can also be placed in the tray to allow the rabbit to eat whilst they use the litter tray. This should be changed at least daily.

A hay rack at floor level solves the problem of increased inspiration of dust because it's at floor level. However, it does create a 2D wall rather than a 3D space for the rabbits to interact with the hay and prevents normal behaviours such as digging in the hay. It also still makes it look like there is plenty of hay, even when the rabbit has gone through and eaten all the bits that it wants, which means that owners are disincentivised to provide more hay daily.

If hay racks on the floor are used, then the rabbit should also be provided with additional sources of hay on the floor at all times. Often, that means that there isn't much point to having the hay rack in the first place.

Also, remember that as the weather gets colder, it is important to give your rabbit lots of cosy bedding. Straw is warmer than hay, and although it provides no nutritional benefit if eaten, both should be increased to provide extra insulation. Mixing hay in with the bedding guarantees your sleepy rabbits are never far from a midnight snack!

CAMPAIGN UPDATE

Welcome to another Campaign Update, keeping you informed of our constant fight to make things better for bunnies.

Finding a good rabbit vet within a reasonable distance is important



Rabbit Friendly Vet List

Photo: RWF

A reminder that you can access the Rabbit Friendly Vet List via our website. However, please do make sure that you see the named vet (or vets) on the list! We are updating this list constantly.

The RWF is keen to put owners in touch with rabbit savvy vets via our Rabbit Friendly Vet List. To be listed on the list, the vet practice completes a detailed questionnaire, and this includes nominating up to two named rabbit friendly vets. The questionnaire is based on their clinical experience, as well as the facilities of the practice. Richard Saunders, our Specialist Veterinary Adviser, reviews each questionnaire and will often go back to the practice to confirm any relevant details or ask further questions. As stated on our website, to benefit from the list, you must see the vets that are specifically named on the Rabbit Friendly List, not just any vet at that practice.

There have been some cases recently where members have been disappointed with their experience and reported them to us. In each of these cases, it was a different vet in the practice that was seen.

We just wanted to make everyone aware of this. There are probably plenty of rabbit savvy vets out there but it is only the named individuals on our list that have gone through the qualification process, not every vet at the practice.

It is also worth noting that not every practice that applies makes the list. Some have been refused, or asked to review some aspects of their application and then reapply.

You can access the Rabbit Friendly Vet List via our website



Photo: E Boyd

Update from Mark Dron, RWAF Rabbit Welfare Officer:

"September has been the busiest month yet. The project with Freedays has generated masses of data to review, and I intend keeping it open until November, so I suspect it will only get busier.

"It looks like there has been an increase in breeders and sellers during lockdown, and I have identified 18 totally new breeders who have cropped up in the period between March 2020 and September 2020. That is massive, and I suspect the number will increase as the project progresses.

"In relation to cases, I am looking at these now as any trader I identify who has multiple adverts, usually more than two at any one time, or more than two a month is the usual rule of thumb.

"Case-wise I am now counting cases as anything that takes more than two hours of my time in enquiries and follow-ups; we are now at 230 cases for 2020 - a lot of these are self-generated, although as you know there have been quite a few complaints to follow up this year as well".

A huge well done to Mark for all the work he is doing. Mark passes 'cases' with evidence on to the relevant local authorities, the RSPCA, and HMRC where relevant. Unfortunately Mark's herculean efforts do not always translate to the outcomes we would like, but it won't stop him trying, and working hard to improve the lives of rabbits everywhere and to clamp down on back yard breeders.

Another enquiry we have had was regarding 'rabbit rental' schemes, which do not sound like they would benefit the rabbit at all. This basically involves someone renting out a rabbit, hutch and food for a day, week etc. Mark has done a lot of research into this and has found that there is unfortunately very little that can be done legally to prevent them.

They are not a pet shop, and they are not exhibiting the animals for reward, so there is no licensing issue; the only possible in-road would be a suggestion that the animal's welfare needs would not be met, but anyone raising a complaint would need to be able to satisfy the best evidence rules on this to prove a case, and in order to do that the prosecuting body would need to show:

- a) The condition of the animal at the point of rental;
- b) The tenure of the rental and whether the animal's need for food, water, shelter etc was being met throughout that tenure;
- c) The condition of the animal at the point of return.

It would be massively labour intensive for any prosecutor to try to progress under this route, and without a licensing requirement it would be very difficult to bring any pressure to bear on the organisation that is renting the animals out.

The only potential enforcement route on this one would be that they mention a zoo, as zoos need a licence from their local authority. If it could be proven which zoo was doing this, it might be that you could persuade the local authority to visit and make an assessment, but there is nothing to be found in zoo licensing rules that prohibit renting out of animals.

So it looks like this would be something we would have to appeal to the general public not to support and hope that anyone considering doing this would take our advice and avoid it. If you do see any of these rental schemes advertised, please let us know.

Another line of work for Mark was to try to get someone removed from an online selling platform. A supporter contacted us with lots of screen shots of someone who was both buying and selling rabbits via a selling app. Mark presented this evidence to the app and they removed the user. If you do see something concerning like this please do let us know.

Change of helpline number

Please note our helpline number has now changed

We have a new helpline number! **0191 933 9000** is the new helpline number.

We have moved away from the old 0845 number. This means that the new 0191 number may be free for people to call if they have free minutes with their call plans (08 numbers are usually not included in these).

A reminder that we can not give health advice via the helpline, you need to contact your own vet for that.

FLOORING WHAT TO USE AND WHAT NOT

By Debbie Staggs

A variety of flooring and bedding options can be used in enclosures

Photo: D Reynolds



Housing advice for pet rabbits is often focused on its size. However, another important factor to be considered is flooring. Unsuitable flooring can cause rabbits discomfort, and potentially serious health problems, even if they are living in the most spacious of homes.

Role of flooring in the rabbits' home

A floor, by definition, is the lower surface of a room on which one may walk; but for rabbits, it is a surface on which they will also hop, run, sit, and lie down. Therefore, it needs to provide traction and be comfortable. They will use at least one corner of the surface as a toilet, so this area will need to be absorbent (provision of a tray containing litter is the best solution). This article discusses the suitability of some of the flooring, bedding, and litter options available.

Flooring or bedding?

All rabbits, living indoors or outdoors, should have some kind of safe shelter (minimum size 2m x 0.5m x 0.5m high), with permanent access to a larger area for exercise (minimum size 3m x 2m x 1m high). The choice between flooring or bedding may differ between these areas. For example, wood pellets may be fine for shelters but unsuitable for covering larger exercise areas. There is some overlap between flooring, bedding and litter.

Flooring options

Mesh floor – Although often incorporated into hutch and cage design, it is uncomfortable and damaging to rabbits' feet. It should **never** be used.

Newspaper – Newspaper offers an inexpensive option for covering the floors of hutches, cages or enclosures. It is fairly absorbent, cheap, and easy to replace. However, most rabbits will waste no time in ripping, scrabbling, and eating newspaper. It is not absorbent enough (of moisture or odour) to be used alone in litter trays, but can be used beneath a layer of litter or bedding to assist cleaning. If newspaper is used as a floor covering, it is important to provide an additional form of comfortable bedding.

Existing household flooring – Hard flooring, such as wooden or laminate flooring, and ceramic or stone tiling, offer the advantage of being easy to clean. However, although some lino-type floorings are textured and cushioned, most hard floorings provide no traction and little cushioning. Rabbits' furry feet have no pads, so they may slip and

find it difficult to run or binky. Their feet are designed so that the claws sink into the ground at the front – if the flooring doesn't allow this, the extra pressure on the back of the feet causes sore hocks. Hard surfaces also tend to be cold. Therefore, it's best to cover at least some areas, or provide 'stepping-stones' of softer flooring.

Carpets provide greater traction than hard flooring, but 'accidents' are not easily cleaned, and vacuum cleaners may struggle with the amount of fur deposited by rabbits! Some rabbits will 'graze' on and dig the pile, which not only destroys the carpet but can be fatal if fibres are ingested. Carpets can also cause carpet burns to rabbits' feet, or sore hocks, if they are not cushioned. For these reasons, it may be necessary to cover carpets with an additional type of flooring.

Mats – Available in many forms, mats can be fitted to size, are cheap to replace, and easy to clean. For outdoor rabbits, mats can be used to cover a shed floor, or a paved exercise area (paving is hard on rabbits' paws and can become scorching in sunshine). For indoor rabbits, mats can be put in the living area to provide cushioning and traction, warmth, and to protect existing household flooring from typical rabbit-inflicted damage (especially around a litter tray). Options include:

- Carpet tiles or offcuts – natural fibres are safest
- Carpet runners
- Interlocking foam tiles
- Playmats
- Textured vinyl flooring
- Towels
- Seagrass or water hyacinth mats.

Horse stable mats – Stable mats are increasingly popular with rabbit owners. They are highly durable (less likely to be damaged by rabbits' chewing or digging), non-slip, and cushioned. The mats are available in a variety of weights, sizes, colours, and as interlocking tiles.



Seagrass mats, which are safe to chew, are useful for covering areas of carpet destroyed by bunnies, but can be messy!

Bedding options

Wood flakes - There are many sources and various forms of wood flakes. Some are produced within the pet industry, and others sold as a by-product of the timber industry. These products can be used in litter trays, although absorbency of moisture and odours vary. They should be covered with hay, as some are fine and can cause irritation to the eyes and respiratory system. They tend to spread out of the litter tray, making a mess. Wood flakes are not great for large areas, as they will disperse to the edges, leaving much of the floor exposed.

Some studies suggest that phenols released by pine and cedar may cause alterations in the liver's enzymes, and also carry a possible cancer risk. The risks are not confirmed, and would vary depending on the drying process. Aspen is safe, but it may be safest to avoid wood flakes unless there is clear information on the packaging.

Hay - Hay can be spread across the floor of the rabbits' area, and helps to keep outdoor rabbits warm, but ideally it needs to be on top of a cushioned flooring. Although hay can be used in litter trays on top of newspaper, it doesn't really absorb urine or odours. Always check that hay is fresh - it should smell fresh. Stale hay containing mould spores is very dangerous. Dust-extracted hay is recommended for rabbits with respiratory problems.



Some rabbits will 'graze' on and dig the pile, which not only destroys the carpet but can be fatal if fibres are ingested



Dijon enjoys the comfort of his IKEA dolls' bed covered with a piece of VetBed

Straw - Often cheaper than hay, and not as palatable to rabbits, straw can be used to cover floors, especially in hutches and sheds. It provides warmth, but be aware of the risk of eye injuries from sharp ends. Like hay, it is not very absorbent or cushioning.

Horse bedding products - Some horse bedding products can be used for rabbits. They are made from natural materials, are absorbent, biodegradable, and cost effective (they tend to be sold in bulk). They include:

- Wood pellets made from heat-treated and compacted sawdust (e.g. Sorbeo)
- Oilseed rape straw
- Soft, fibrous substrates made from the chopped stems of hemp or linen flax - these are absorbent and non-palatable (e.g. Auboise, ProRep, Equisorb).

Fleece - Fleece bedding, such as VetBed, can provide extra comfort in the rabbits' preferred sleeping area. It is also great for wicking away moisture, making it especially useful for elderly, incontinent rabbits (puppy pads can be placed underneath to absorb fluids).

Purpose-made Litter - Most litters on the market are unsuitable for rabbits. Clay-based and clumping litters can cause lethal blockages if ingested; silica gel crystals and mineral-based litters are toxic if eaten; and some litters are made from materials which rabbits will eat but can swell in their guts (e.g. corn and oats). Safe options include:

- Compressed sawdust pellets (any toxic compounds are removed during the manufacturing process)
- Straw pellets
- Paper-based pellets (e.g. Back-2-Nature, Bio-Catoleet, Breeder Select)
- Wood pulp (e.g. Megazorb, Critter Care, Carefresh Natural).

Conclusion

Choosing the right flooring, bedding and litter for your rabbits is an integral part of providing a suitable home. It must provide a surface on which they can perform their natural behaviours with ease, without discomfort, and without risk to their wellbeing. What suits one rabbit may not suit another, so be prepared to try different options. Often the best solution is to provide more than one type of flooring or bedding and let the rabbits decide - given the choice between a comfy VetBed and a cold tiled surface, they may surprise us!

Check that rabbits are not chewing and ingesting flooring, bedding or litter. If they are, remove it, or cover with an alternative, immediately!



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RABBIT VACCINATION STUDY

By Sadie Shoebridge,
Registered Veterinary Nurse

Rabbits are the third most popular pet in the UK

Photo: D West

Oryctolagus cuniculus (rabbits) are the third most popular pet in the United Kingdom, with the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA) estimating a UK population of 900,000 rabbits (PDSA, 2019, p.7). With more people keeping rabbits, it is important that the knowledge of health and welfare is kept up to date. To evaluate how veterinary practices can impact owners' compliance towards vaccinations, two online questionnaires were distributed; one aimed at rabbit owners and the other aimed at veterinary professionals. The two questionnaires were launched on the 17th December 2019, with 100 respondents from each group collected. Questionnaires aimed at veterinary professionals were distributed through social media pages on Facebook, Twitter and the RWA Veterinary subscription list. Likewise, the questionnaire aimed at rabbit owners was shared on rabbit social media pages, where, on reflection, a further study to using postal paper copies may be used to widen the variety of the sample.

Expectations

The expectations for this study were that there would be a low percentage of owners vaccinating their rabbits, in line with previous literature reviewed. Other expectations were that veterinary practices would be an important factor in whether owners were getting their rabbits vaccinated, and the ways of promoting rabbit vaccinations within practice would be similar amongst all the respondents.

The reality

The study showed a higher amount of rabbit owners getting their rabbits vaccinated than expected, compared with previous literature. In the study, 95% (95/100) respondents' rabbits have had their initial course of vaccinations, and of these 91.7% (88/96) had then proceeded to get their rabbits' booster vaccinations. PDSA (2019) found that only 49% of the 5036 participants had their rabbits' initial course, and 51% had their annual boosters (PDSA, 2019, p.7).

Reasons given for not vaccinating

In this study, the reasons given by those who chose not to vaccinate, or decided not to continue their annual booster vaccinations, included cost, not feeling it was necessary, or the lack of knowledge on the requirement to complete annually. This was consistent with the findings of the PDSA (2019) and Dalley *et al.* (2018), where 16% of the 587 participants felt it was not necessary. Even with these results,

the perceptions of veterinary professionals on owners vaccinating their rabbits was as expected. 67% (67/100) of the veterinary professionals either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, "Most rabbit owners keep up to date with their rabbits' vaccinations".

There was a variation in the course of vaccinations that owners were getting. The study found that 79.8% (75/94) had protection for all three diseases and that other respondents only had protection for RVHD1 and 2 or Myxomatosis and RVHD1. Similarly, there was variation within what veterinary practices offered as their rabbit vaccination protocol. 78.8% (78/99) of respondents' practices offered a full course of vaccinations, to cover all three diseases.

However, shockingly 20.2% (20/99) of the veterinary professionals' practices offered only vaccination for myxomatosis and RVHD1 with no cover for RVHD2*.

Veterinary practice responses

A similarity between both rabbit owners and veterinary professionals, was that there was a lack of interest regarding rabbits. Veterinary professionals were asked a question as to why they felt owners did not get their rabbits vaccinated. The most commonly selected answer was cost and misconceptions; however, some stated they felt owners did not value their rabbits as much as cats and dogs, and felt they were replaceable. Likewise, when asked how they felt their practice could encourage owners to get their rabbits vaccinated, some respondents suggested that equal amounts of time should be



Photo: M Trominsky

spent on promoting rabbit vaccinations as they do on dogs and cat vaccinations.

As the aim of this study was how veterinary practices can encourage more rabbit vaccinations, questions were asked to both veterinary and rabbit owners on what they felt would be beneficial for owners. Rabbit consults were regarded as useful by both veterinary professionals and rabbit owners.

76% of owners said they would utilise rabbit clinics; however, only 57.6% (57/99) veterinary professionals stated their practices provided them. Both rabbit owners and veterinary professionals felt that cost incentives such as monthly direct debit care plans and social media would encourage owners to vaccinate. Likewise, rabbit owners were asked to rank which they found most useful for finding information on rabbit vaccinations. 46% of respondents ranked veterinary practices as the most useful source, with the second highest being rabbit social media groups, with 16% putting this as their most useful. This further emphasises the impact veterinary practices have on their clients.

Conclusion

Overall, from the literature reviewed, and the study itself, it can be concluded that veterinary practices do have an impact on whether rabbit owners get their rabbits vaccinated. However, the present study did highlight a gap in the veterinary industry with regards to the same level of knowledge and enthusiasm towards rabbits when compared with cats and dogs. Further studies aimed at veterinary professionals' enthusiasm and knowledge of rabbits should be performed to test whether this has an impact on rabbit owner compliance. It is clear that the use of promotions (monthly direct debit care plans), social media and rabbit clinics within veterinary practice should be taken advantage of in practices that do not already utilise this, to encourage rabbit owners to provide the best preventative healthcare.

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*Data compiled prior to launch of combined 3 in 1 vaccination, covering myxomatosis, RVHD1 and RVHD2.

MAKE YOUR BUNNIES RABBITING ON COVER STARS!

Photo: Amelia-Mayes



Soda and Copper owned by Jacqueline England were the 2019 overall Cover Star winners

Are your rabbits Rabbiting On cover stars in the making?! We are on the hunt for our cover stars of the future and are running a competition to find them.

As well as having your rabbits proudly adorn the cover of the Spring 2021 Rabbiting On, there are also some prizes to be won and the competition also helps raise vital funds for the Rabbit Welfare Fund - so everyone is a winner!

The competition is open to photos of two or more rabbits, and photos must be portrait in orientation (the same way Rabbiting On is printed). Photos of single rabbits or landscape format will not be entered into the judging.

We will be offering prizes to 1st to 3rd place, and thank Burgess Pet Care for their sponsorship of the competition and donation of prizes.

Prizes on offer!

1st place: 2 x 2kg nuggets (winner's choice of Junior & Dwarf, Light, Mature, Adult Mint or Adult Oregano), 1 x 1kg hay and 2 packs of snack treats.

2nd place: 1 x 2kg nuggets (winner's choice of Junior & Dwarf, Light, Mature, Adult Mint or Adult Oregano), 1 x 1kg hay and 2 packs of snack treats.

3rd place: 1 x 1kg hay and 2 packs of snack treats.

Entry details

To raise vital funds for the important work that the RWF does, there is a small entry fee of **£2 per photograph entered. You can enter as many photos as you like but the entry fee must be paid for each photo.**

Photos can be entered as prints or digital images (preferably saved on a CD). Please set your camera to the maximum image quality to ensure that the resulting file is large and detailed enough to be reproduced in

Rabbiting On. Save the digital photos at 300dpi, and at least postcard size. Make sure that your name, address, telephone number, RWF membership number and the rabbits' names are on the CD.

If you send prints, please stick a label on the back of each photo listing the information above.

Send your photos/CDs and entry fees to: **Cover Star competition 2020, RWF, Enigma House, Culmhead Business Park, Taunton, Somerset, TA3 7DY.** Please make cheques payable to: **The Rabbit Welfare Fund.**

Regrettably, we are unable to return photos or CDs, so please do not send your only copies.

The easiest way to enter is by uploading your photos to our website. First, please ensure you visit <https://shop.rabbitwelfare.co.uk/product/rwaf-cover-stars-competition/> to pay the entry fee for each of your photos, then visit <https://rabbitwelfare.co.uk/about-the-rwaf/photo-submissions/> to upload your photos. You must include your name, address, telephone number, RWF membership number, the rabbits' names and the payment transaction number the shop will generate when you pay for the entries.

The closing date for entries is 5pm on the 30th December 2020 and the winners will be announced in the Spring 2021 Rabbiting On. Good luck.

Terms and Conditions

All of the photos entered that aren't fortunate enough to be amongst the winners will be considered for future Rabbiting On covers, our Pawprints pages, It's My Bunnies and Star Bunnies pages in future issues of Rabbiting On. They may also be used to illustrate features in Rabbiting On, used in RWF literature, on the website or social media. By entering you are agreeing to these terms.

Prizes will be posted out direct from Burgess Pet Care, so by entering you are giving permission for your details to be passed onto them. Prizes can only be posted to UK postal addresses and will be sent to the address you supply when entering. You **MUST** include a telephone number for the courier.

Prizes may be substituted without prior notice, and a reattempt to deliver prizes will not be tried if you have supplied an incorrect postal address.

Top tips for a good photo

- Make sure your background is uncluttered
- The rabbits should be in focus and your camera/phone settings set to ensure a high quality image
- Ensure your photo is portrait (magazine orientation)
- Get your rabbits looking towards you
- Ensure there is no red eye and use a flash if necessary or make sure the lighting is good.



Inky and Rolo were one of the 2019 winners

RWAF FOCUS - WHO IS WHO AT THE RWAF

Emma Milne

RWAF Patron

I qualified as a vet from Bristol university in 1996 and have been passionate about animal welfare all my life. Since qualifying, I have worked on many campaigns for animal welfare, including hunting with dogs, tail docking and pedigree animal health issues, and been lucky enough to work with many excellent charities, such as the RWAF.

In practice, I was often dismayed at the number of people who had made inappropriate pet choices, most commonly through impulse buying, not doing enough research, or being pestered by their kids! This so often leads to animals that are not ideally cared for, and rabbits are probably top of this list. So many are kept alone and in woefully inadequate cages. I've always felt that the social and behavioural needs of our pets are as important, if not more so, as their physical needs. All animals deserve to be happy as well as healthy.

Back in 2015, I decided to write a series of children's books about choosing the right pet and what their basic needs are. Rabbits and cats are almost polar opposites as pets, but what they have in common is just how much they are misunderstood by their owners, so Pet Detectives Rabbits was written first, followed by cats.

During the research for the rabbit book, I came across the RWAF. Along with their Veterinary Adviser, Richard Saunders, they very kindly gave me lots of information, photographs and fact-checking along the way. The rabbit book is endorsed by RWAF, and 10% of the royalties go to the charity. During the writing of the book, I was very flattered to be asked to become a patron and immediately said yes.

Since then, I try to do what I can for them - social media posts, writing ethics articles for Rabbiting On and so on. I chaired the RWAF conference last year, and this year we had planned a whole day's conference devoted entirely to welfare and ethics of rabbits. Sadly, this was postponed due to Covid-19, but we will hopefully be hosting it sometime in 2021. RWAF is a really fantastic charity and well worth your support if you're a rabbit lover.

I live in France now, and continue as much welfare work as I can, alongside a husband, two kids, two gerbils and a cross-eyed cat called Stella!



Emma is passionate about animal welfare



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SOME FOR ME, SOME FOR YOU

Growing edible plants for you and your rabbits

By Belinda Francis of Galen's Gardens

Sharing your garden with rabbits means you need to be a little more inventive than the average gardener. Your garden needs to be rabbit-proof and rabbit-safe, provide a rabbit exercise area, which the rabbits should be able to access 24 hours a day and, ideally, provide food for you and your rabbits.

So much to choose from

Rabbit waste makes a great natural fertiliser, so it is easy to create a closed system, allowing you and your rabbit to be self-sufficient.

Winter is a great time to plan and prepare for the spring and summer of the following year, so you and your rabbits can enjoy the fruits of your labours.

Well, you can enjoy the fruit, your rabbits can have the leaves and stalks! Apple and pear trees are rabbit-safe, but the trees of single stone fruits such as plum, peach, nectarine and cherry are not, and should never be offered. Safe leaves and wood include blackberry, raspberry, mulberry, hawthorn, grape and strawberry.

Fruit trees, berry bushes and grape vines can be fan-trained along a wall, fence or free-standing support of wire or trellis. Strawberries are safest in window boxes or hanging baskets, out of the reach of marauding rabbits.

It is in the vegetable patch, though, where you have the most to gain from gardening for you and your rabbit. The parts of vegetables that are the most delicious and nutritious from a rabbit's perspective, are those which we discard. The parts of the vegetable that we eat are the parts which rabbits can only eat in moderation, if at all.

Caution required

There are, however, two families of vegetables which we cannot share with our rabbits: those in the Allium family, which includes onions, leeks, garlic and chives; and those in the Solanum family, which includes tomatoes, potatoes and aubergines.

Another family, the Brassica family, includes broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower and kale. These are fine to share with your rabbits and they produce a lot of leaf and stalk, which rabbits enjoy. They will grow in pots; you can pick the bottom leaves as a regular source of green food, and excess leaves can be dried for winter use. If they go to seed, you can feed the flowers to your rabbits; they produce a lot of seed, which you can save to grow more plants.

The downside is that they need protection from pigeons and insects, which means they need to be covered with netting.

With all green leaves in the brassica and beet family, including chard, you need to be aware of the calcium and oxalate levels. The formation of stones and sludge within the urinary tract is down to a combination of factors, including inactivity, obesity, lack of water consumption, an inability to void their bladder of urine,



The Brassica family includes broccoli, brussel sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower and kale (pictured)

and potentially excess calcium in the diet. If your rabbit has bladder stones or sludge, you should speak to your rabbit savvy vet about their diet.

Always feed small amounts of any fresh green initially, and increase gradually until you are sure that your rabbit tolerates that food. Brassica and beet greens have a reputation for causing gas build up in rabbits, but this isn't true of all rabbits (see 'To feed or not to feed - Gas is the question' feature, by Nadene Stapleton in the Spring 2019 Rabbiting On). Sweetcorn stalk, leaves, silk and husk can all be fed to rabbits. Keep the corn-on-the-cob for yourself though. You need to grow a group of them together in order for the plants to pollinate.

Most rabbits enjoy carrot tops and they are a healthy treat. Carrots need to be protected against carrot fly, which means growing them in pots on a table, in a raised bed, or protecting them with fine netting. Rabbits can also have beetroot and khol rabi leaves in moderation.

Pea vine and hulm can be fed to rabbits. Mange tout type peas are probably the best to grow, as your rabbit can have the odd one or two as a treat. Dwarf or French bean leaves and stalks can be fed, but many sources caution against runner bean greens.

If you like celery, keep the stalks for yourself and let the rabbits have



Strawberries would be safer in window boxes or hanging baskets, rather than the ground

the leaves and roots. Feed in moderation, as celery is a diuretic.

Courgettes is a difficult one: although we can eat the young leaves cooked, the leaves of courgettes and edible squash are not considered palatable to rabbits. The main issue with courgettes is the presence of cucurbitacins, a bitter substance which is toxic. Although it has largely been bred out of the edible species we consume, there has been a recent incident where a rogue batch of Fothergill seeds caused many people who ate the courgettes to become very ill, so should be avoided in rabbits.

Vice versa - eat what your rabbit eats!

When choosing vegetable seed, it helps to know that heirloom varieties differ slightly from hybrid seed. When you save the seed from an heirloom plant, you can be sure the plants grown from it will be the same as those the seed came from. Hybrid varieties are crosses, designed to incorporate the benefits of more than one variety.

You can also try eating some of the plants you might grow specifically as rabbit food. Marshmallow and Inula (Elecampane) roots were candied as digestive sweetmeats. Sunchoke or Jerusalem Artichoke is part of the sunflower family, with the root being considered a delicacy in human cuisine (despite a reputation for causing flatulence).

Minutina (Erba Stella) is a form of plantain grown in Italy as a salad vegetable. The Italians also cultivate salad dandelions. Malva crispa is a salad leaf mallow with very small flowers but delicious curly leaves. Although regular carrot tops may not be palatable to us, there is a salad variety of that too, which will grow quite happily in pots on a windowsill. We sell carrot microgreen seeds designed to be eaten as young leaves. Nicky's Nursery sells a variety of carrot grown for its edible leaves https://www.nickys-nursery.co.uk/product_info.php/carrot-edible-leaf-1000-seeds-h222-p-20085 and these can be grown to a decent height and then eaten. They also sell edible/salad dandelion https://www.nickys-nursery.co.uk/product_info.php/dandelion-italiko-red-500-seeds-h301-p-20715.

Nasturtium leaves and flowers are a delicious addition to your summer salad, and you can pickle the green seeds, which some say taste better than capers. Your salad can also include Chicory leaves and flowers, Cornflowers, Pansy flowers and Sunflower petals.

Grape vines leaves are not just for dolmas. Low in calories and high in fibre, you can use them instead of pasta sheets for a diet lasagne. Grape leaves also make a great alternative to green tea, rich in antioxidant polyphenols.

Meadowsweet and willow leaves can be made into tea to help relieve a headache. They both contain salicylic acid, the active ingredient in aspirin, so should be avoided by those intolerant to aspirin or already on certain pain relief. Speak to your vet if you are in any doubt.

For the more adventurous or curious who fancy it, you can even eat the weeds or wild plants that you might grow for your rabbits. Foraging for wild plants was an important part of our ancestors' hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Wild food is enjoying a renaissance in fine food restaurants across the globe.

Eatweeds, wild food recipe books by Robin Harford, include recipes for Chickweed and Chickpea Pate, Pickled Cow Parsley Stems, Crispy Herb Bennet leaves (described as an alternative to 'crispy seaweed'), Meadowsweet Sorbet, Nettle Cordial, White Deadnettle Frittata, Buttered Prickly Sow Thistle tips, and Aubergine bakes with Cleavers or Plantain.

RABBIT ROUNDUP



The 2020 RAW reached over 1 million people in the UK

Rabbit Awareness Week

Rabbit Awareness Week is the UK's largest welfare campaign for rabbits, bringing together rabbit experts, veterinary professionals, leading charities, and pet owners, to help improve standards of rabbit care.

This year, despite the pandemic, RAW had one of its most successful campaigns yet, reaching over one million people across the UK. The event was run purely online as a 'virtual festival' for the first time in its fourteen-year history, and featured live Q&A's and educational videos from the UK's leading animal welfare organisations and charities.

Over 3000 digital packs were downloaded by owners, vets, rescues and retailers to help them run their own RAW Festival campaigns online. The packs included a 'Better Bunnies' programme, which encourages rabbit owners to follow a daily care plan for their pets and ensure that their five main welfare needs are met.

If you missed any of the content, you can still download a pack from rabbitawarenessweek.co.uk and catch up on all of the content on the Rabbit Awareness Week Facebook page.

On behalf of the organisers, thank you to everyone who took part in RAW Festival 2020, we look forward to our 15-year anniversary in 2021.



The Burgess Excel Vet Award winners will be announced soon

Burgess Excel Vet Awards

Back in March, Burgess Pet Care, in conjunction with the Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund (RWAFF), launched the Burgess Excel Vet Awards, to recognise and reward the hard work of veterinary professionals who work tirelessly to improve the lives of domestic rabbits in the UK.

There have been over 250 nominations, which are being shortlisted for judging ahead of the announcement of the winners in November.

One winner will be selected from each of the below categories

- Rabbit Vet of the Year, open to all practising UK veterinary surgeons
- Rabbit Nurse of the Year, open to all practising veterinary nurses in the UK
- Rabbit Veterinary Practice of the Year, open to all practices on the RWAFF rabbit friendly list
- RAW campaign of the year.

The judging panel for the Burgess Excel Vet Awards features a selection of industry experts, veterinary professionals and rabbit specialists comprising the following individuals:

Dr Suzanne Moyes *MVB, MRCVS*, Veterinary Director at Burgess Pet Care and lead spokesperson for Rabbit Awareness Week.

Rae Walters, Director of the Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund, the UK's largest rabbit welfare charity.

Dr John Chitty *BVetMed CertZooMed MRCVS*, co-director of a small animals/exotics practice in Andover and outgoing president of the British Small Animal Veterinary Association 2017-2018;

Dani Sewell *MICPR*, Communications Director at Fred Marketing, a full-service marketing agency specialising in the pet/animal welfare sector.

Look out for announcement of the winners in the Spring 2021 Rabbiting On!

We are learning too

Learning is a lifelong process and we all need to have an open mind.

The RWF offers advice based on the most up-to-date information, which is reviewed by our advisers prior to publication. This may come from published papers, studies or other reliable avenues, including those based on other animals which can be extrapolated for rabbits.

We have recently updated information on our website about how best to provide your rabbits with hay. In light of recent research, we no longer recommend using raised hayracks. A study on horses showed they inhale particles that can cause respiratory problems and that needs to be extrapolated to apply to rabbits. Provide hay on the ground to help avoid it occurring (see feature on page 30).

We are just as eager to learn as all of our members are. We take seriously what is available in properly-conducted research and check our sources carefully. Nobody can know it all, and that includes us at the RWF. We all need to keep open minds, but also to be very careful not to take on board information for which there is no support, or evidence, or that based on hearsay.

This is one reason why you can be assured that the information offered by the RWF is reliable and up-to-date.

Payment by cheque reminder

As from August 2020, it is now costing us 90p for each cheque we pay into our bank account. This is almost 4% of the £24 adult membership. Although we do expect there to be some fees for the majority of the transactions that we process, we cannot absorb that cost, especially having just increased the fees for the first time in 8 years, to ensure that we are around for a long time to come! By comparison, Standing Orders are free, and we pay less than 1% of the membership fee via 'Take Payment' on our website.

So unfortunately, if you would like to pay by cheque, we ask that you pay the £90p fee, in addition to your annual subscription, so for adults that will be £24.90, and for vets £55.90, etc.

You can pay over the telephone, at no extra charge.

If you would like a Standing Order form, please let us know, and we can send one to you.

You can of course pay via our website too.

THE RWF SANCTUARY RABBITS

By The Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund

The RWF and RWF are not rescue centres. Together, they are a campaigning and educational organisation.

However, at times we have stepped in and taken in rabbits. In some cases, where we have acted as a rescue, we have been able to rehome the rabbits ourselves, but there are many who have stayed and become part of the RWF 'Sanctuary'. Here we introduce two more of these rabbits: Mango and Melon, or 'the twins' as they are known!

Mango, who came from Scotland, was on this fourth home, and was kept in a 3ft hutch. He was rarely let out and when he was, obviously he would not go back in, so was getting chased around the garden etc., and so the family he lived with just stopped letting him out. Emma (another Director) was made aware of this, and stepped in to remove him from the situation, meeting Rae half way between Edinburgh and Taunton, so we could give him a place in the sanctuary.

It took him a little while to gain his confidence, but now he is often seen binkying when he realises that he is going to be given his daily ration of pellets. As he had been through so many homes, and was only about a year old, we thought we should keep him with us for the time being – he had been through quite enough. We had space for him, but he needed a partner. A few days later, Rae was asked to take on another rabbit, who was living solely in an indoor cage, with no hiding place, and kept in the living room with 5 Mastiff dogs barking and sniffing around her. How she did not die of fright we do not know. We brought her back with us, named her Melon, got her neutered and paired up with Mango. It was a love-at-first-sight bonding, and although she is understandably still very nervous, she has gained a lot of confidence from living with Mango and in a much more suitable environment.

Next issue, in the final instalment, we update on the RWF Sanctuary rabbits we have previously featured.

Mango and Melon found love at first sight



PAW PRINTS



We'd love you to contribute to Rabbiting On, and how better than with photos of your own rabbits? We know there are some gorgeous bunnies out there, and we'd all love to see them. Please share your favourite photos with us, and we'll choose the best shots for our regular Paw Prints feature.

We also choose photos for Star Bunny (on the Contents page) and our It's My Bunny! Competition from your Paw Prints pictures - and there are prizes to win!

Pictures submitted to Paw Prints may also be chosen to illustrate features in Rabbiting On.



Colin and Butty
SARAH BAMBER



Keith and Marjorie
AUSTIN BRAILEY



Percy and Smudge
JENNIE WRIGHT



Otto and Olive
DARCIE COOK



Rupert
ABI WOODWARD



Lilo
JADE HANNA
MCLAUGHLIN



Lola and Felicity
EMILY EDGE



Martha and Henry
FRANCESCA DOWN



Tilly
DAWN WALES



Ostara and Loki
S TROMINSKY

RULES FOR PHOTO SUBMISSIONS

We love to see your photos of your rabbits, and we're delighted to be able to feature them in Paw Prints, as well as it's My Bunny, and the Star bunny on the Contents page. Remember that one picture on Paw Prints wins a mystery prize. And we also choose our cover pictures from the photos you submit, so your bunny could even become a cover star! We also use photos in advice leaflets, on our website and on our Pinterest boards, so your rabbits could become Internet stars too! If you aren't familiar with Pinterest, you'll find our boards here, courtesy of one of our wonderful volunteers, Jo Hinde <http://www.pinterest.com/rwaf/> But unfortunately some readers send us photos that we are unable to use, because they're not high enough resolution for printing in the magazine, or the rabbit's or owner's name aren't supplied.

Please email your photos to: rwafphotos@gmail.com

Also, it's vital that your camera is set up properly before you take your photos, as it isn't possible to increase the resolution afterwards. We need you to set up your camera to the highest image quality. Any photos you submit should be about 1 - 1.5Mb (or more) if it's a jpeg or jpg file, and around 2.5 - 3Mb (or more) if it's a tiff (please compress tiff files before sending)

If you have difficulties, please contact hq@rabbitwelfare.co.uk or the helpline on **0191 933 9000**, and we'll do what we can to help.

You can also send print photos or photo CDs to: **Rabbiting On Photos, RWAf, Enigma House, Culmhead Business Park, Taunton, Somerset, TA3 7DY.**

We're looking forward to seeing lots more lovely bunnies!

CAN WE HELP?

Contacting the RWF

- Members can ring the **RWAF telephone helpline: 0191 933 9000**, for general rabbit advice, help with locating a rabbit friendly vet, finding the nearest rescue centre and bereavement support.
- Log on to the website at www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk for advice and articles on many rabbit related topics.
- To contact the RWF by post please write to:
RWAF, Enigma House, Culmhead Business Park, Taunton, Somerset TA3 7DY
Please include an SAE if you would like a reply.
- To contact the RWF by e-mail, please send e-mails to:
info@rabbitwelfare.co.uk

RWAF departments

BOARDING YOUR RABBIT

If you are looking for someone to board your rabbit while you are away from home, or offer this service yourself, please call the RWAF telephone helpline 0191 933 9000 or email info@rabbitwelfare.co.uk

ON THE HOP

The quickest way to process bulk orders of On The Hop may be found online at shop.rabbitwelfare.co.uk in the 'Books and Leaflets' category. Alternatively, call our helpline 0191 933 9000 or email info@rabbitwelfare.co.uk

FIRST ALERT SERVICE

We run a First Alert e-mail service which notifies subscribers of Myxomatosis and RVHD outbreaks as we are informed of them, as well as other information we think you will be interested in, such as new vaccine information.

In accordance with The General Data Protection Rules we want you to be aware that you can sign up to our First Alert service by e-mailing us at info@rabbitwelfare.co.uk. If you are already on the First Alert service you can leave at any time by e-mailing us at the same address and asking to be removed from the list.

Rabbiting On

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(Photos can be e-mailed to rwafphotos@gmail.com. Please do not e-mail photos to the Editorial e-mail address.)

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JOIN THE RABBIT WELFARE ASSOCIATION AND FUND

If you have enjoyed reading Rabbiting On, and are not already a member of the Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund, why not join now to be sure of receiving the next issue, packed full of interesting and informative features?

Cut out or photocopy the form below and send it to: **RWAF, Enigma House, Culmhead Business Park, Taunton, Somerset TA3 7DY** or for instant membership simply phone the RWAF Helpline: 0191 933 9000. Or you can join or renew online at shop.rabbitwelfare.co.uk in the 'Memberships' category.

As a member of the RWAF you will receive 4 copies of Rabbiting On each year along with the RWAF Members Handbook, On The Hop (a complete guide to rabbit care), an RWAF car sticker, and a 'Home Alone' card. You will also have access to the RWAF's team of expert advisers.

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IT'S MY BUNNIES

**If these are your bunnies,
then there is a prize waiting
for you to claim**



The owner of this issue's lucky bunnies will receive a mystery prize

If these are your bunnies, all you have to do is send the bunnies names, along with your name and address and your RWAf membership number to: It's my Bunny, Rabbiting On, RWAf, Enigma House, Culmhead Business Park, Taunton, Somerset TA3 7DY.

In each issue of Rabbiting On we picture a different bunny (or bunnies), chosen from all of the photos sent to Rabbiting On, and that bunnies owner wins a mystery prize. So keep looking, it could be your rabbit next time. But hurry - you need to claim your prize before the next issue of Rabbiting On is published.

There's also a chance that your bunny could be chosen to appear on a future cover of Rabbiting On, or to illustrate a feature in the magazine, so keep on sending in your pictures.

RULES FOR PHOTO SUBMISSIONS

We love to see all your lovely rabbit photos. You can submit prints and CDs to the address above (make sure they're labeled with your name, address and the rabbit's name).

You can also submit digital images. Unfortunately some readers send us photos that we're unable to use, because they're not high enough resolution for printing in the magazine, or the rabbit's or owner's name aren't supplied.

Please email your photos to: rwaphotos@gmail.com

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We are a small
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as rescuing and rehoming small furries.

Email: bristolrabbitrescue@outlook.com
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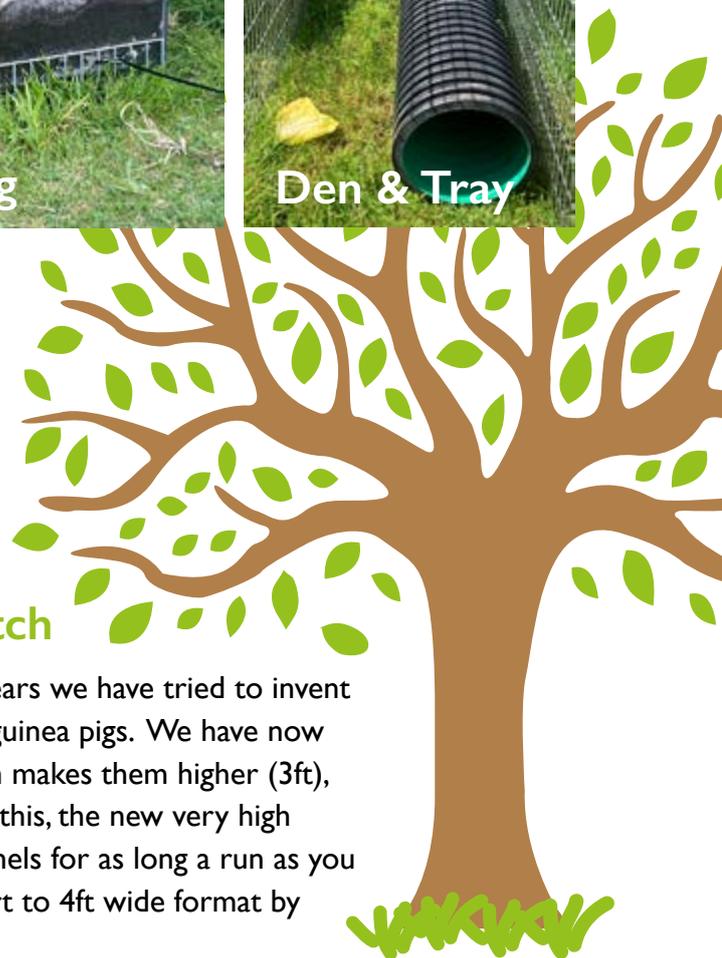
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