

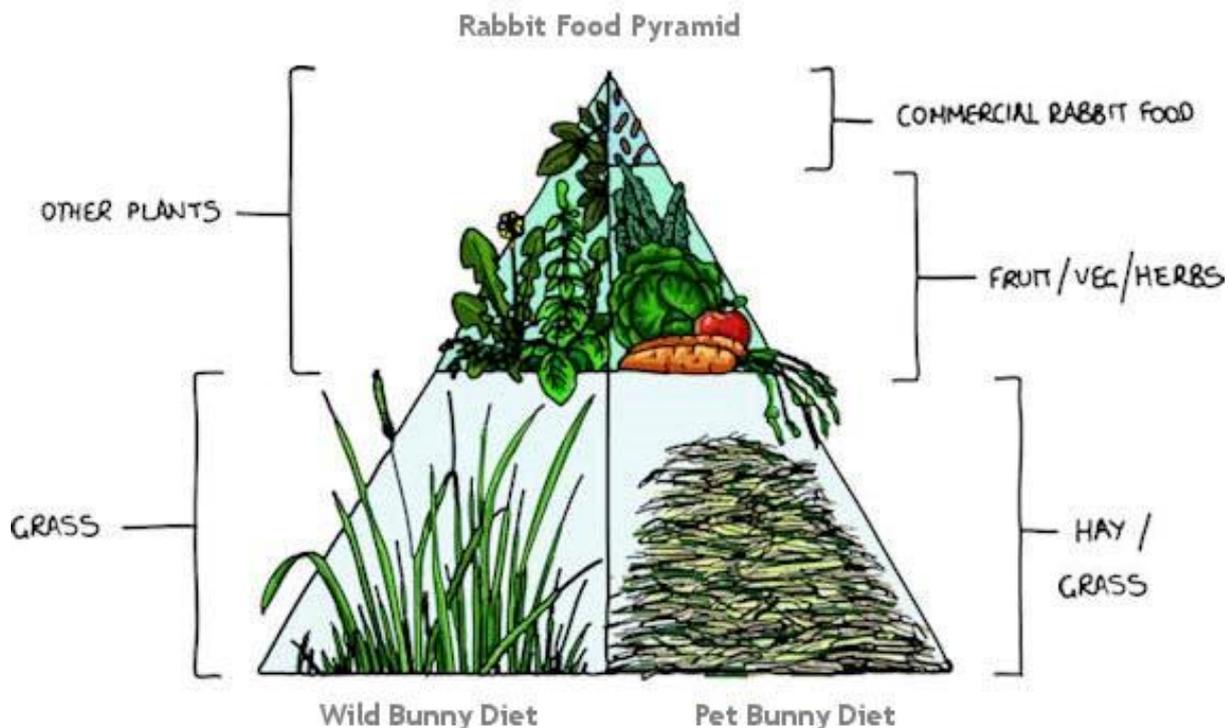
Owning a rabbit

Congratulations on your new rabbit! You are joining millions of pet lovers who think of rabbits as ideal pets. Naturally social animals, rabbits can quickly become part of the family and are very affectionate animals. Owning a rabbit is a big commitment, so at Hillside we've put together some information on how to best care for your new little friend and how to create the best possible home and environment and keeping a happy bunny!

Feeding

The most important piece of advice that we can give is on the correct feeding of your rabbit. Thoughts have changed over the last few years on the best diet and information in many older books, what you may have done before and even advice given by the pet shop or rabbit breeder, may be a little out of date now.

Pet rabbits are closely related to their wild cousins who eat grass, grass and more grass and the digestive tract of your rabbit is designed to do the same. As soon as we start to feed more energy rich foods such as cereals (as found in all commercial rabbit mixes and pellets) and especially sweeter foods such as bread, biscuits, cakes, chocolate and even sweet fruits such as bananas, we run the risk of upsetting the delicate balance of the rabbit's digestive system. The healthiest and most appropriate diet for your rabbit is **grass** and **hay**. All other foods should be fed as a small supplement to this and the best thing you can do for the health of your rabbit is to start out as you mean to go on. The diagram below shows the proportions ...



Unlimited access to good quality hay as a food, not just as bedding is the first most important point. A commercial food can be given but must be regulated to avoid overeating (causing obesity). It is generally recommended that commercial rabbit diets be fed up to a **maximum of 25g per kg bodyweight per day**. This means the average adult lop rabbit should have only **50g (approximately two egg cups)** of rabbit food per day. When choosing your hay, opt for good quality meadow hay or (ideally) Timothy hay. Hillside stock a range of Timothy hay products, or if we haven't got what you need we can order this in for you for the next day.

Leafy greens (not lettuce) and especially vegetables that grow on the surface are also a good feed for rabbits. For example carrot tops are better than the carrots themselves. Rabbits are sensitive to chemicals so all fresh food should be rinsed thoroughly before feeding. Most rabbits will also enjoy herbs, including basil, oregano, parsley and even mint. A portion the size of your rabbit's head given twice a day is about right.

Pellets or mix? Most rabbits will be *selective* (picking out) on their eating given a choice, so we recommend a good quality pellet where the rabbit cannot pick out the bits he likes and leave the rest. We stock a range of pelleted rabbit foods and would be happy to advise you on which would be most suitable for your rabbit.

Treats are fine for your rabbit, but try to stick to healthy treats such as carrot, broccoli, apple cores, peelings, cauliflower stalks, sweet corn, and cucumber. These should be given in moderation - carrots for example are quite high in energy for rabbits - one or two a week is plenty.

You will find more information and dos and don'ts on our specific **Feeding your rabbit** guidance sheet.

Water Rabbits eating lots of greens may not drink much but those on more dried food will drink more. Offering both a drinker bottle that can't be knocked over and is easily kept clean, together with a drinking bowl is the best option to give your rabbit the choice.

Teeth

Rabbit's teeth have evolved to grow throughout their lives in order to keep up with the wear of eating so much hard plant material. Poor diet, poor breeding, selective eating and most importantly not enough fibre in the diet can cause the teeth to overgrow. This is a potentially life threatening condition requiring regular trimming or extraction of the teeth and much ongoing care. Once a rabbit has developed dental problems it can only ever be controlled and never completely cured, so feeding the correct diet from the start is vital for the long term health of your rabbit.



Vaccinations

There are two main infectious diseases that we see in rabbits and fortunately there is a vaccine available for both.

Myxomatosis is found frequently in the wild rabbit population and is passed most commonly in the UK by insect bites (biting flies and fleas). A fox or cat passing through your garden can leave fleas behind that can then be picked up by your rabbit. Myxomatosis is a horrible disease which initially causes

conjunctivitis, but as it progresses causes weakness, swelling around the eyes and genitals, blindness, and then unfortunately eventually death. Even with intensive treatment it is rare to be able to save a rabbit once it has become infected with Myxomatosis.

Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD or RHD) is less well known but an equally deadly virus that can also be passed on by wild rabbits, or virus particles can be carried into your garden by other animals. The virus causes massive internal bleeding, so most owners do not realise that their rabbit has been infected, and instead unexpectedly find their rabbit dead. Some rabbits will bleed from their nose before death, but there may be no outward signs of disease at all.

As both diseases are so easily spread we recommend that all rabbits, including house bunnies are vaccinated annually.

Neutering and multiple rabbits

Rabbits make fabulous pets and are lovely sociable animals, but if you keep more than one **neutering** is normally required. Rabbits are often happier in pairs (or more) and two neutered bucks (males) will often become very closely bonded for life.

Even for single rabbits, neutering is strongly recommended for a longer and healthier life as it prevents against the very common diseases of uterine and ovarian tumours in females and testicular tumours in males. It can also make litter training easier and reduce urine spraying in males as well as aggression. At Hillside Vets we recommend neutering of both males and females from around four months old.

Modern anaesthetics and techniques make rabbits' anaesthetics very safe and are considered no more of a risk than for a dog or cat.

Housing

Rabbits make excellent house pets and there is specific information available (see below) on how to 'rabbit proof' your house and how you can toilet train your new bunny – yes it is possible!

Bunnies do need space and exercise. The best option is a good weather proof hutch that is raised off the floor, lined with shavings (not dusty sawdust) or newspaper then a large amount of bedding on top - straw is better than hay as it is coarser and does not get so caught up in their coats. A separate area for feeding good quality hay, possibly in a manger can then also be used. Rabbits also need to exercise so it is vital that they have daily access to a good sized secure run, the larger the better. If left unattended you should always ensure the run is fox and predator proof as well as being 'escape proof' by your bunny.

Rabbits can also be kept indoors – known as 'house bunnies' and becoming more and more popular - and can usually be litter trained. They will need some form of indoor cage providing bedding, food and water which can then double up as a place for them to snuggle up and sleep.

House rabbits do enjoy chewing so make sure you provide plenty of chew sticks (willow sticks or fruit tree branches such as apple trees are best) and it's important to protect wires and cables as much as possible. You should provide them with a litter tray (a cat's litter tray is perfect) which can be easily seen by them and accessed. Putting them in the tray at regular intervals might help in the training process, as well as putting some of their hard faeces in the tray to indicate this is the place to go. As with dogs and cats, patience and perseverance is the key and most of them will get there if not take to it straight away. At Hillside we can give more advice on toilet training your rabbit if required – just ask.

Insurance

Rabbit medicine is constantly progressing; with new techniques being developed and allowing treatment for conditions that may previously not have been possible. Specialist treatment can be expensive, so we always recommend taking out pet insurance for your rabbit. See our separate Pet Insurance page on our website – www.hillsidevets.co.uk/pet-insurance.html.

Healthy Hopper clinics

We run specific nurses' clinics for rabbits (and their owners) which we call our Healthy Hopper clinics. These are free appointments where your rabbit will be given an all over health check, including teeth, rear end, ears, coat and nutritional advice. We will do our best to answer any of your questions or concerns regarding your rabbit to ensure a long and healthy life.

At Hillside Vets, we pride ourselves on being an extremely '**rabbit friendly**' practice with Chris and Gemma both having a particular interest in rabbit welfare. Please feel free to chat with any of the clinical team if you have any further questions or queries concerning your rabbit.

Further information

- Feeding your rabbit handout
- Preparing for your new rabbit handout
- www.rabbitwelfarefund.co.uk is the excellent website of the **Rabbit Welfare Fund** – this site includes a lot of further information about caring for your rabbits.

Disclaimer: Hillside Vets' website is intended to be used only as a guide and information resource, not as an alternative to a veterinary consultation and advice. Nothing contained in this website should be construed as medical advice or diagnosis. For specific healthcare advice please discuss the particular symptoms and circumstances of your pet with your vet.