

# Your Lovable Bunny!

## Personality

Domesticated rabbits can be friendly and affectionate pets and will entertain you with their cheeky, curious antics. Some people have even 'gone off' cats and dogs as pets, preferring and being totally smitten by their lovable bunny.



## Diet

All living creatures require a balanced diet in order to maintain the best of physical health and rabbits are not exempted. Your bunny will enthusiastically eat a wide range of dry and fresh food, which cost very little or economically nothing at all. Although rabbits do not drink a great deal of water, fresh water should always be available. Use either a heavy earthenware/ceramic bowl or a water bottle, suspended upside down with a drinking spout. Be sure to scrub clean bowls or bottles (including spout) on a regular basis and regularly check that the ball bearing moves as sometimes it can jam denying availability to essential water.

## Dry food

Meadow, oaten, barley or clover hay, straw, dry grasses and autumn leaves are very useful as bedding as well as providing high fibre food to munch on between main meals. Rabbit pellets are a labour-saving convenient food however, they would be monotonous if given little else day after day. Other dry foods are: dry bread or toast in moderate amounts or sparingly (fattening and high in carbohydrates) rolled oats, wild bird or rabbit mixes added to the feed bowl.

## Fresh food

Many a rabbit delicacy can be found in the kitchen after preparing meals or whenever weeding or pruning in the garden. It is best not to over feed any one vegetable such as a whole cabbage leaf or apple as such an overload may cause stomach upsets, a little of different varieties is a good rule. Poisonous foods are: anything mouldy, green potatoes, oleander, rhubarb, potato or tomato leaves, lily of the valley or other bulbs, foxglove, azalea, rhododendron and various indoor plants and so on. Unhealthy or unsuitable foods are any aged half-rotting food, cooked vegies, left over salads with dressings, cakes, lollies, chocolate, onions or pickled foods. When bunnies have free run of the garden it is fascinating to see the variety of flowers or shrubs they are keen to nibble on.

## Health

Domestic rabbits are hardy and should remain fit and healthy alleviating worries and vet bills providing you follow a few simple rules. An inadequate diet may cause lower immunity and resistance against infections and disease. Avoid a poor diet by providing essential protein, vitamins and minerals in grass, weeds, pellets,

vegetables and hay et cetera. Other important factors to encourage good health are:

- Adequate ventilation is necessary though also ensure bunny is protected from unnecessary drafts by covering part of the hutch on very cold nights.
- Exercise: a rabbit sitting in a hutch day in day out is not much fun for him or for you. He will become bored and you can become bored with him. An indoor house bunny will have ample exercise though will appreciate frolicking out in the garden on a fine day. A tame, easy to catch bunny may be given free-range exercise in your secure garden. Only allow such freedom whilst you are home and keep an eye on him for his general protection and safety. Another exercise idea is to construct a playpen (permanent or portable) with play equipment such as a pipe, tunnel, mound of dirt or sand, a ramp, a log of wood or tree branch – even just a cardboard box can be a fun toy!
- Rabbit claws can overgrow if kept on soft surfaces and need routine clipping. Excessive long nails cause deformed toes, broken claws and no doubt major discomfort. By snipping off the sharp tips, you will also avoid accidental scratching when handling your bunny. If by chance, you clip a nail too short and it bleeds, do not panic, a quick home remedy is to pack damp cornflour on and around the nail.

## **Myomatosis**

This is an unpleasant disease caused by the myxo virus. Initial symptoms are swollen genitals, ears and eyelids then progressing to blindness, lethargy, tumours and delirium. First symptoms are noticeable seven to ten days after contagion. Depending on the virulence of the infecting strain, death could occur from two to twenty days after first symptoms appear.

Infected rabbits are capable of infecting others from a day or so before first symptoms appear and until their death or (extremely rare) recovery. In Australia, this introduced disease cannot be legally or effectively treated, it is best to put the suffering animal out of its misery. As wild rabbit fleas, mosquitos and biting flies (close contact and mites are also suspect) transmit the virus we can take measures of precaution. It is unusual to find fleas on a domestic rabbit but if you do find any dust your bunny with a cat flea powder then wipe the surface of his coat with a damp cloth. Flyscreen mesh tacked over the hutch windows and gaps covered protects your pet from potential myxo (and calicivirus) carrying insects/mosquitos. Avoid early morning and before dusk outdoor exercise when mozzies are most prevalent or be sure to apply a safe to use on rabbits insect deterrent. Sometimes precautions are not necessary in suburban areas, but it would be tragic if your pet is exposed to this deadly virus.

## **Calicivirus – otherwise known as RCD or RHD**

This virus was reportedly first discovered in China in 1984 and has since spread to many other countries around the world including Australia. During trials conducted on Wardang Island in 1995, the virus somehow managed to travel to the mainland.

A vaccination is available to protect your pet against calici. The vaccine can cause side effects with some rabbits. It is important to keep a close eye on their behaviour and daily examine the injection site for a few days. Vets inject in the area at the back of bunnies neck and should immediately massage the site to diffuse the thick serum. To avoid an injection site abscess or sore, I strongly advise owners to continue massaging the area for longer, especially if they can feel a soft lump near the injection site.

It takes between three to ten days after vaccination for rabbits to acquire immunity. Twelve weeks is the usual recommended age for a youngster's first vaccination. However, current advice is to give 0.2 ml to kits as early as six weeks of age (since they've been known to contract the virus much earlier than previously informed) and then a full dose again at 12 weeks. Annual booster shots is recommended to provide continuous protection.

### **Vaccination side effects**

Minor symptoms are lack of appetite for a few days, lethargic, a slight increase in temperature and or the injection site loses a little fur with skin showing redness. Adverse serious reactions are a high temperature (check if his ears feel very hot), lesions, dermatitis, ulceration, excessive hair loss, inflammation, no appetite and depression. Serious reactions need immediate veterinary treatment (with antihistamine, corticosteroid or adrenaline) as death is a possibility.

### **Calicivirus symptoms**

More often than not bunnies infected with this virus are fine one day and then tragically found dead the next. Symptoms are not obvious and may only be listlessness, not wanting to move about, high temperature (from 39 C elevated to 42 C) and increased rapid breathing. Some people blame a sudden unexplained death on the virus but unless it's confirmed via a post mortem, they can only speculate as to the true cause. A basic autopsy for calici will reveal major lesions, swollen spleen and liver. Blood clots in lungs, heart and kidneys block the vessels and consequently cause heart and respiratory failure in around thirty to forty hours. Diagnosis and treatment is usually not an option when symptoms are minimal and death so unexpected. Death from calicivirus is not painful according to those who promote use of the virus; however, bunny owners adamantly disagree, after witnessing traumatic and obviously painful calici fatalities.

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