



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

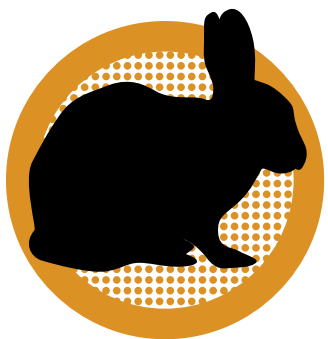
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How to look after your rabbit

Following the code





Introduction



Owning and caring for a rabbit is great fun and very rewarding, but it is also a big responsibility and a long-term caring and financial commitment. You control your rabbit's lifestyle; it is your responsibility to make sure that its needs are met, whatever the circumstances. The law requires that you must take reasonable steps to ensure that it:

- has a suitable environment to live in;
- has a healthy diet;
- is able to behave normally;
- has appropriate company; and
- is protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease.

These are explained in more detail in sections 1-5 of Part 2 of this Code. For further advice, speak to your vet or a pet care specialist. Other sources of information are listed at the end of the leaflet.

Every animal is different and as you get to know your rabbit, you will recognise familiar characteristics. It is important that you are able to notice any changes in behaviour, as these might indicate that your rabbit is distressed, ill, or is not having its needs met in some other way.

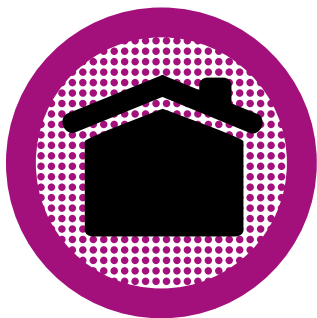


This Code of Practice is issued under section 14 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 (the “Act”). This Code of Practice applies in Wales only, is issued by the Welsh Ministers and comes into force on 11 November 2009. The purpose of this Code of Practice is to provide advice on how to meet the needs of your rabbit. It applies to all persons who have responsibility for rabbits kept as a companion animal. Companion animals include *“any animal kept by private individuals or groups for companionship, interest or hobby, and for breeding, supply or education related to their keeping for these purposes.”* (Companion Animal Welfare Council, 2003).

This Code of Practice is split into two parts. This is Part 1. Part 1 is a summary of the details contained in the main Code of Practice, Part 2.

It is your responsibility to read the complete Code of Practice to fully understand your rabbit’s welfare needs and what the law requires you to do.

To find out how to get a copy, please see the Sources of Information section at the end of the leaflet.



Environment



Make sure your rabbit has a suitable place to live

Living area (hutch or cage)

Your rabbit's living area should have at least two compartments: a darkened sheltered area for sleeping and another for eating/relaxing. It should be a comfortable, dry, clean, well-ventilated and draught-free area where your rabbit will feel safe and be protected from predators and extremes of weather and temperature. Wood shavings or shredded paper should be used as a toilet area.

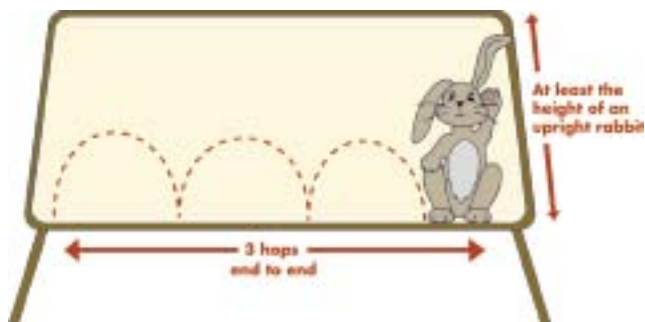
The floor of the living area should be big enough so that your rabbit can easily move around, eat and drink.

The living area should be big enough for it to lie down and stretch out comfortably in all directions, high enough for your rabbit to stand up on its back legs without its ears touching the top, and it should also be long enough for your rabbit to move around, feed and drink. As a guide, it should be able to hop three times from one end to another as a minimum.

If you keep more than one rabbit together, there should be enough space so that each adult rabbit can behave like this. There should also be safe hiding places where each rabbit can choose to be alone if it wants to.

Exercise area (run)

Your rabbit should have daily access to a safe and secure run where it can run and jump. The run should be as large as possible so that your rabbit can stretch upwards to its full height and run, not just hop. This area should provide protection from predators



and extremes of weather and temperature as well as areas where your rabbit can hide if it wants to.

Where more than one rabbit is exercising together there must be enough space in the run so that each can behave like this at the same time once adult.

Hazards

Ensure your rabbit is kept away from potentially harmful substances.

Security

Whether you keep your rabbit outside or indoors, ensure that it is kept within a secure area to prevent it from escaping and to stop other animals getting in, any unwelcome visitors or even theft.

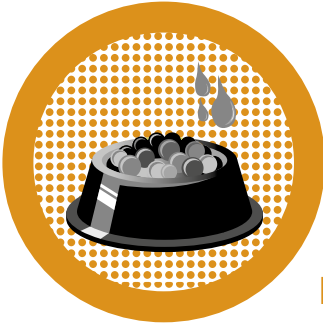
Travel

Make sure your rabbit is transported safely. On long journeys, you should regularly offer food, water and a litter tray within the safe confines of the stationary vehicle.

Rabbits should not be left unattended in a vehicle in warm weather. **This can be life threatening.**

When you are away

You must arrange for your rabbit to be cared for by a suitable person if you are away from home. A responsible person must attend to your rabbit every single day.



Diet



Make sure your rabbit has a balanced diet that meets its nutritional needs

Your rabbit must have access to fresh clean water at all times and a well-balanced diet.

The bulk of your rabbit's daily diet should consist of hay or grass which should be available at all times. Green plants and a small amount of high quality specialist rabbit foods should make up the remainder.

Do not make any sudden changes to your rabbit's diet as this could upset its digestive system and make it very ill.

Healthy Weight

Your rabbit should not be too fat or too thin. Ideally you should easily be able to feel its ribs.

Other dietary needs

Some rabbits have different dietary needs. Your vet or pet care specialist can advise you about the care of your rabbit in these circumstances.





Behaviour



Your rabbit should be able to behave normally

Rabbits have several specific behavioural needs that can make them a complex pet. These needs relate to rabbits being prey animals and so easily frightened. When introducing a rabbit to new things, you should always provide it with the opportunity to escape to a safe hiding place.

Training

It takes time and effort to train your rabbit. Reward good behaviour immediately with something that your rabbit likes.

Never shout at or punish your rabbit. It is unlikely to understand and can become more nervous or scared. If your rabbit's behaviour becomes an ongoing problem, seek expert advice.

Signs of Stress

Watch your rabbit closely for unusual behaviour. If unsure, speak to your vet or a pet care specialist.

Boredom

You should ensure your rabbit has enough mental stimulation from you and from its environment so that it won't get bored and

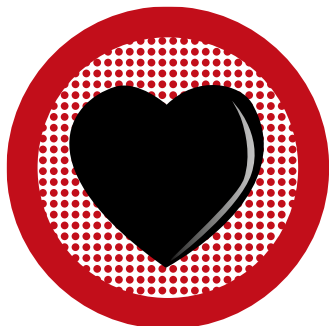


frustrated. Bored rabbits quickly become unhealthy, unhappy and possibly aggressive.

Provide your rabbit with safe toys to play with and chew and regular opportunities to play with people or other friendly rabbits.

Provide your rabbit with suitable materials that allow digging behaviour and areas to mark its territory with chin secretions, urine and droppings.





Company



Make sure your rabbits' social needs are met

Socialisation

Rabbits are social animals and should ideally be kept with another rabbit. Unless you are planning to breed from your rabbit, neutered rabbits of a similar size make the best pairing.

You should be aware of how your rabbit responds to other rabbits and animals. If it does not mix well, you will need to keep it apart from other animals or keep it and/or the other animals under suitable control.

You should handle your rabbit every day from an early age, but not until it is at least one week old.

Relations with other animals and people

Your rabbit should have plenty of things to stimulate it mentally. This can be contact with another rabbit, animal or human. Never leave your rabbit alone with a cat or dog.

Socialisation with other rabbits, animals or humans is an essential part of early learning. This important period of learning is within the rabbits' first three to four weeks of age, but can continue for much longer.

Number of animals

Large numbers of animals need a great deal of care. You should not keep a large number of rabbits if you cannot meet their welfare needs. Neutering should be considered if you keep more than one rabbit (see section 5).



Health & Welfare



You must ensure your rabbit is in good health

Health care

You should examine your rabbit for signs of injury and illness every day. You should especially check around its back end for soft droppings that are stuck, as these attract flies which can lay eggs and cause 'flystrike', which is often fatal. This is particularly important in hot weather. Ensure your rabbit is treated promptly by a vet if it is injured or ill.

Rabbits try to avoid attracting attention from predators by only looking unwell when they are very ill. This is why changes in behaviour, including not eating, may indicate that your rabbit is ill.

Take your rabbit for regular health checks; you can then be advised about routine health care, such as neutering, vaccinations (e.g. Myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD)) and parasite control (e.g. fleas), as well as any health problems your rabbit may have.



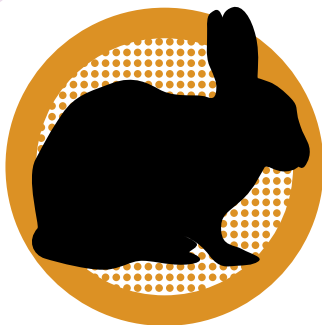
Grooming

You should ensure that your rabbit's coat is properly groomed. A pet care specialist may be able to advise you about coat care. Front teeth and nails should be checked at least once a week as these can grow quickly. Only a vet should correct overgrown or misaligned teeth.

Identification

You should not allow your rabbit to escape. It is useful to have it permanently identified with a device such as a microchip so that it can be returned to you should it stray.





The Law



Animal Welfare Act 2006

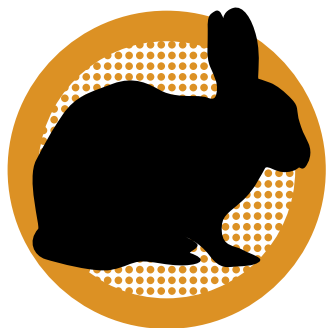
See www.wales.gov.uk/animalwelfare for full Act

This Code of Practice has been issued under section 14 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006. Breach of a provision of this Code is not an offence in itself but, if proceedings are brought against you for a welfare offence under the Act, the court may take into account the extent to which you have complied with the Code in deciding whether you have committed an offence or have met the required standard of care. You should also be aware that failure to meet your 'duty of care' may cause unnecessary suffering, leading to the more serious offence of cruelty under the Act.

Section 4(1)(a) of this Act states that "A person commits an offence if an act of his, or failure of his to act, causes an animal to suffer".

Section 9 of the Act states that "A person commits an offence if he does not take such steps as are reasonable in all the circumstances to ensure that the needs of an animal for which he is responsible are met to the extent required by good practice".





Further information



Useful contacts and
website information

Useful contacts and website information

The Welsh Government's Code of Practice for the Welfare of Rabbits. To obtain a copy, please email:

companionanimalwelfare@wales.gsi.gov.uk

- Your vet.
- Local libraries for books on rabbit care.

Websites such as:

- Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors: **www.apbc.org.uk**
- Blue Cross: **www.thebluecross.org.uk**
- British Rabbit Council: **www.thebrc.org**
- Companion Animal Welfare Council: **www.cawc.org.uk**
- PDSA (Peoples Dispensary for Sick Animals): **www.pdsa.org.uk**
- Pet Advisory Committee: **www.petadvisory.org.uk**
- Pet Care Trust: **www.petcare.org.uk**
- Pet Food Manufacturers Association: **www.pfma.com**
- Pet Health Council: **www.pethealthcouncil.co.uk**
- Rabbit Behaviour Advisory Group: **www.rabbitbehaviour.co.uk**
- Rabbit training: **www.clickerbunny.com**
- Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund: **www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk**
- RSPCA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals): **www.rspca.org.uk**

- DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs): **www.defra.gov.uk**
- Scottish Government: Agriculture: **www.scotland.gov.uk/topics/agriculture**
- Welsh Government website for information on the Animal Welfare Act and to download an electronic copy of the Code of Practice for the Welfare of Rabbits and for other types of animal: **www.wales.gov.uk/animalwelfare**.

Although this Code is only applicable to owners and keepers of pet rabbits, a Code of Practice for the Welfare of Livestock Rabbits can be downloaded from **<http://www.defra.gov.uk/fodfarm/farmanimal/welfare/onfarm/othersps/rabcode.htm>**

