

# Welcome to the Wonderful World of Rabbit Ownership!

*courtesy of Animal Info Publications*

**Author:** West Australian Rabbit Council (Inc)

In order to keep your rabbit happy and healthy here are a few important tips to remember...

## **Hutch and Bedding**

Before you buy your bunny you should prepare for its arrival. Find out as much information as you can.

The person that sells you your rabbit should be able to give you lots of information about the particular care of your new rabbit. Your hutch should be secure and escape proof, and should be in a protected area of your yard. It is very important that it is in a cool and shady spot in summer and protected from the wind and rain in winter. Find out what sort of bedding may be required for your hutch and whether it is available locally. Wire floored hutches do not need bedding but a piece of wood or carpet on the wire is a good idea to protect the rabbit's feet. Wood hutches will need some type of bedding. Pine wood shavings are probably the best especially if you are planning to show your rabbit as it will not stain the feet as hay and newspaper will.



## **Diet**

Do not suddenly change a rabbit's diet as it may result in gastro upsets or even death. Introduce new or different foods gradually. All rabbits become accustomed to a particular type of food. The person that sells you your rabbit should provide a small bag of food to take home with you. If you can't obtain the same brand of food please introduce your food slowly over a period of 7-10 days. Some rabbits are accustomed to some green foods such as celery tops, broccoli leaves, carrot and apple. It is a good idea to check with the previous owner. Give this type of food in small amounts and introduce them slowly to rabbits that are not used to having it. It is not a good idea to give lettuce as this may cause diarrhoea and cabbage may cause colic. Hay is also an important part of a rabbit's diet. Make sure it is nice fresh hay without any mould. Hay is much nicer than straw.

## **Food Dishes**

It is a good idea to use terracotta feed dish or a bowl attached to the side of the cage. This prevents the rabbit tipping it over or tossing it about in his cage and losing his food. A specially designed water bottle is better to use than a bowl. This will ensure that the rabbit has water at all times and also prevents the hutch floor from getting wet. Always check the water bottle to make sure the ball is not stuck in the drinking spout.

## **Care in Summer**

Always provide plenty of fresh water especially in summer. Always place the hutch in the shade and in very hot weather it is a good idea to place frozen plastic bottles of water in the cage for the rabbit to lie next to. If the rabbit is suffering from heat stress it will pant and be wet around the face. Immediately cool the rabbit down by wetting it with a cloth or dunking it in a bucket of lukewarm water.

## **Sharing and Caring**

A rabbit is quite happy kept on his own provided he gets plenty of attention and cuddles. A rabbit is like any other domesticated animal - if it is handled roughly or not at all it will become harder to catch or cuddle. Your bunny may enjoy a short 'exploration' of your garden with supervision. However if you allow him to run loose in your garden for long periods you will find that he will start to make large burrows and may become difficult to catch. He will also be in danger of local cats and dogs. It is really more cruel to subject him to these dangers than to keep him safely in his hutch when you can't be there to play with him.

If you have more than one rabbit you should keep them in separate cages. Do not keep two bucks in the same cage as they will fight possibly causing serious injury. They should be separated by about 4 months of age. Even two does will fight if they are kept together in a hutch that is too small. Whenever two rabbits are housed together the dominant rabbit will harass and boss the weaker rabbit making its life miserable. If you really feel your rabbit would like some company a guinea pig makes a good companion.

## **Toenails**

Toenails need to be clipped once the rabbit reaches maturity. The sharp tips can be cut when the rabbit is younger and regular clipping should be commenced whenever necessary depending on the breed of rabbit and the type of floor the bunny is living on. Special nail clippers can be bought which makes the job easier. Take care not to cut them back too short or the nail will bleed.

## **House Training**

A rabbit can be house trained if required. With a little patience and practice they will use a kitty litter tray. Take care if the rabbit is loose in the house that all electric cords are out of reach as the rabbit may chew these.

## **Breeding**

If you decide to breed from your rabbit spend some time finding out about your rabbits' requirements. You should seek advice from experienced rabbit fanciers about the best colour or breed to mate with your rabbit. It is not a good idea to randomly mix colours or breeds with no regard to the outcome. Also make sure you can find homes for your babies. To give rabbits away to an uncertain future or releasing them into the bush is very cruel. Being domesticated they probably will not survive in the wild.

A pregnant doe will need to be separated from the buck as the buck will try and kill the babies. The gestation period is approximately 31 days. A box that protects the babies from the wind and rain should be provided to the doe several days before the babies are due. Also give the rabbit some hay to make a nest. When the doe begins pulling fur from her tummy the birth of the babies is imminent. She will line the nest with her fur. Usually the doe has no trouble delivering her babies and takes good care of them without our interference. A doe does not nurse her babies as a mother cat does: she only feeds them once or twice a day and stands over the top of them when she is feeding them. Baby bunnies can be weaned when they are six weeks old. Rabbits should not be separated from their mothers any earlier than this.