RSPCA

Pocket Pet Handbook



Congratulations and thank you for adopting your new pet from the RSPCA SA. RSPCA small animals make great companions and once you have earned their trust will become a loving pet, friend and family member.

This handbook is designed to provide tips and suggestions to support you and your new pet during the 'settling in' period.



About RSPCA SA

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA South Australia) is the state's oldest and largest animal welfare charity. Since our establishment in Adelaide in 1875, we have remained the leading voice for all creatures great and small across South Australia.

We work non-stop to defend the dignity of animals, while fighting to prevent animal cruelty. We are animal protectors, carers and guardians. We bring solace to the abandoned, surrendered and injured. We offer shelter, education, medical attention and love. We help animals in need find loving forever homes. And we advocate for the humane treatment of all living creatures.

Crucially, we are also the only charity empowered by State Parliament to prosecute animal cruelty and neglect. Our small team of inspectors respond to more than 4,000 reports of animal cruelty every year, investigating complaints against all kinds of animals in all kinds of situations.

Our important animal welfare work is almost entirely funded by community donations. We rely on the goodwill of our loyal supporters to continue being there for animals when they need us most.

Contents

Rabbits	
Rabbit facts and figures	4
Rabbit post adoption check list	5
Arriving home with your new rabbit	6
Rabbits & children	7
Identifying your rabbit	7
What do rabbits need?	8
Litter training	9
Housing your rabbit	10-11
Feeding your rabbit	12-13
Introducing your rabbit to cats or dogs	14-15
Bonding rabbits	16-17
Possible health issues	18-21
Rabbit behaviour	22
Grooming	23

Guinea pigs	
Guinea pig facts and figures	24
What do guinea pigs need?	25
Arriving home with your new guinea pig	26
Housing & feeding your guinea pig	27

Rabbit facts and figures

Lifespan (in captivity):	7-10 years	**Female breeding age:**	From approx. four months old
Male rabbit:	Is called a buck	**Male breeding age:**	From approx. five months old
Female rabbit:	Is called a doe	**Gestation period:**	Approx. 29-34 days
Baby rabbit:	Is called a kitten	**Breeding lifespan:**	Three years
Litter size:	1-13 kittens	**Bucks:**	5-6 years
Weight:	Depends on breed: approx. 1kg for a very small Netherland Dwarf to 10 kg for a very large Flemish Giant.	**Teeth:**	Rabbits have 28 teeth



Did you know?

Rabbits are small mammals in the Leporidae family and are members of the Lagomorpha order (alongside Hares and Pikas). They are sometimes generally referred to as Lagomorphs or Lapines. There are eight different breeds of rabbits, including the European rabbit which is common in Australia. They are not rodents. House or pet rabbits come in different sizes, colours and coat types and can either have lop-ears or erect ears - big or small.

Post adoption check list

When you adopted your rabbit, you should have received certificates for vaccinations, microchipping and desexing. These are important documents and should be stored in a safe location as part of your new pet's health record. This information is required for the future care of your new pet by your veterinarian.

- **Desexing**

  Your rabbit may have had desexing surgery recently. You need to check the wound area daily to make sure that it has not become infected or swollen. If infection or swelling occurs, you will need to contact the RSPCA SA immediately. The adoption staff will notify you as to whether there are any sutures (stitches) that will need to be removed by a veterinarian at a later date.

- **Tattoos**

  A green circle with a diagonal line has been tattooed in your rabbit's left ear to indicate desexing as well as a green M in the right ear to indicate microchipping.

- **Microchipping**

  An identification microchip has been implanted under your rabbit's skin. Please keep these microchip details up to date and store them safely to ensure that your rabbit is returned to you if it escapes from your property.

- **Vaccination**

  Rabbits adopted from the RSPCA SA have been vaccinated against Calicivirus disease. This vaccination protects rabbits from the disease for a period of 6 months, after which another vaccination is required. Do not let it lapse! Please ensure that you keep your pet's vaccination certificate and present it to your veterinarian when your rabbit's next vaccination is due. This is also a good opportunity to have your rabbit's teeth checked.

  Please note that vaccination against Myxomatosis is available for rabbits in England, but is not available in Australia. Guinea pigs do not require an annual vaccination.

Arriving home with your new rabbit

An animal shelter can be an unsettling experience for any animal and your new rabbit is no exception which can cause significant stress. Moving into a home with a new family and possibly established pets, is likely to cause further stress. It is important to be considerate and understanding when bringing your pet home for the first time. Give it adequate time to adjust to its new surroundings, with patience you will be rewarded with an affectionate, well-adjusted pet!

When you first take your rabbit home confine it to a small, quiet area such as the laundry or bathroom for a few days. Ensure your rabbit has access to a litter tray with fresh hay, ample food, water and bedding at all times. Allow it to slowly explore its new home in its own time.

Rabbits are prey animals and can become easily frightened when picked up, often resulting in injury to themselves or others. In particular, they do not like to be held above the ground as it simulates being caught by a predator. If it is necessary to pick up your rabbit, ensure you support its bottom and hold it close to your chest.

Some rabbits do like to be handled and cuddled but initially this should only be done by an adult. You will learn once your rabbit grows what it does and does not like. Do not let children under 10 years of age handle your rabbit without adult supervision. Allow your rabbit to gain confidence with its new surroundings and the people in its new family.

Just like the rest of us, rabbits have some behaviours that are important to know in order to protect your home and your new-found friend. Rabbits like to chew pretty much anything and they are good at it! In particular, keep them away from furniture, electrical cords and telephone lines. Alternatively, rabbit-proof your home by covering cords and wires with plastic tubing or moving these out of sight. Covering furniture with heavy slip-covers, placing smaller items out of reach. To discourage chewing of carpet, ensure it is properly tacked down and block access to any favourite chewing areas. Remove or place any indoor plants out of reach as these are often toxic to rabbits. After a few days your rabbit should be ready to explore its new permeant home.

If you already own a rabbit and you are introducing the two for the first time, do not place them together immediately.

Rabbits and children

The first few weeks and months of ownership can have a great influence on your rabbit's personality for life.
It is therefore essential that you explain carefully to your children how the new arrival should be treated. Rabbits are not toys and need much care and attention. What can be an innocent game to a child can cause great distress to an animal.
Rabbits are physically delicate creatures and feel frightened when picked up. Though unintentional, children can often hurt rabbits when they try to pick them up and in turn can be hurt when the rabbit reacts suddenly and kicks out or bites. Because stress-related illnesses are common in rabbits, it is best not to allow children under 10 years to hold or interact with your new rabbit without adult supervision.

Identifying your rabbit

Your rabbit has been microchipped prior to adoption and by this stage you will have completed ownership and contact details for this microchip. These details are provided to a nationally accessible computer database. It takes up to six to eight weeks before these details are logged onto the national database.
In the event of your rabbit or guinea pig becoming lost and being taken in by council rangers or to a veterinary clinic /animal shelter, it will be scanned for a microchip. This will provide a basis for searching the database to obtain your ownership details.
It is essential that you notify the registry of changes of ownership or contact details to ensure that your lost pet can find its way home.
Rabbits and guinea pigs do not have to be registered with local council.
Do not put a collar on your rabbit/guinea pig. A collar could easily become caught on something and cause your pet to injure its neck or get its foot entangled.

What do rabbits need?

Refer to the list below to ensure you have all the equipment and supplies needed to settle in your newly-adopted rabbit.

- **Water bowl/bottle**

  Most rabbits prefer to drink from a bowl, so it is important that you provide a ceramic water bowl for your bunny. Ceramic bowls are heavier than plastic bowls and are less likely to be tipped over, so they are the recommended option. Water bottles are also needed as a backup water source.

- **Food**

  Fresh oaten hay, leafy greens, fresh vegetables

- **Litter tray**

  A plastic tray, rectangular or triangular in shape that is easy to get in and out of.

- **Litter**

  Organic matter such as straw, hay, paper (shredded) or pellets.

- **Bedding**

  Old towels, hay, shredded paper or straw. Bedding needs to be cleaned frequently. Bedding inside a hutch should be cleaned daily.

- **Hutch**

  An outdoor hutch should be large enough for your rabbit to stretch out at least three to four body lengths and be able to stand up if it wants to, as well as a floor to prevent it from digging out. The larger the hutch, the better!

- **Gnawing stick**

  A stick from a fruit tree e.g. Lemon, nectarine, apple or pine-cone. The latter can also be used for playing or chewing.

- **Toys**

  Rabbits are playful, active and curious. They need a good variety of toys to keep them occupied (and out of trouble!) Cardboard tubes from toilet paper and paper-towel rolls are ideal, as well as cardboard boxes and hard plastic baby toys. Wooden toys help keep teeth healthy and stop them growing too long.

- **Grooming brush (small slicker) or metal-toothed comb**

  Grooming is required once a week for a short-haired coat and daily for a long-haired coat

Litter Training

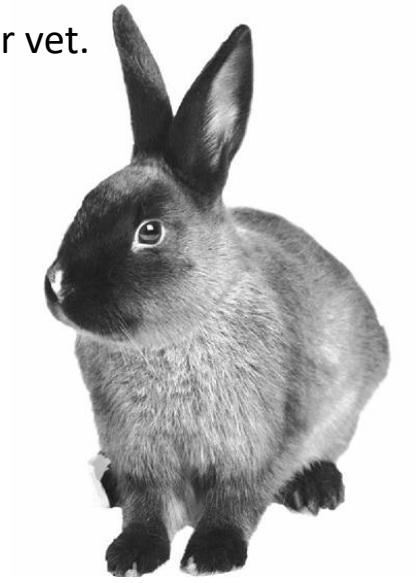
Teaching your rabbit to use a tray is useful both for cleaning purposes and as a chance to monitor your rabbit's health.

Rabbits are clean animals and like to deposit their pellets in the one spot, usually in a preferred corner. Like cats, rabbits can be easily trained to use a litter tray. Choose a place away from their food and water bowls, preferably in a corner. If however, your rabbit chooses his own location, then you will probably have to put the litter tray there. An argument with your rabbit over location probably won't achieve anything, except an agitated rabbit and a soiled floor.

Types of trays available are rectangular or triangular shape. Only use hay or paper litter e.g. shredded paper or paper pellets, not the crystal or clumping type litters.

Litter needs to be changed regularly so as to avoid rabbits getting what is known as 'urine scalding' on their sensitive skin. Cleaning the tray every 1-2 days is recommended, but if you have more than one rabbit this will need to be done at least once a day.

Do not be alarmed if the urine is sometimes orange-coloured as the colour of the urine can range from clear to cloudy, to orange/dark red. This is usually normal and may be a result of what the rabbit has eaten. However if your rabbit is unwell or you are concerned, consult your vet.



Rabbit housing

Because rabbits are susceptible to extremes of hot and cold, it is important to be aware of the temperature at all times. In the wild, rabbits huddle and cuddle deep underground in their warrens. When in a cage or hutch, they have nowhere to go to escape extremes of weather. Rabbits need daily exercise for about four hours in the open air and sunshine. Your rabbit can meet this requirement if its hutch is big enough or if let out for supervised trips in the backyard. Never leave a rabbit outside in the garden alone or without ensuring the yard is escape-proof. Rabbits are vulnerable to all sorts of predators including foxes, owls, dogs, cats and possums.



Hutches

Hutches must have enough room for the rabbit to exhibit its natural behaviours, including running, playing, standing up and stretching. The hutch must be a minimum of three square metres in size. However hutch size will vary according to breed, the number of animals housed in the same hutch, and how much time they spend in it. Exercise is an important part of keeping your rabbit healthy and its hutch should be big enough for it to run around in, stand up in and have a sheltered area from the cold. There are indoor and outdoor hutches available depending on whether your rabbit will be an indoor or outdoor pet. It is important to note that most hutches available at pet stores are far too small to be suitable. If you are skilled with hammer and nails, it is possible to make a hutch customised for your house and yard.

All hutches should be thoroughly cleaned at least once a week. A daily tidy-up of uneaten fresh food scraps, dirty hay and spot clean-ups is also recommended.

Outside hutches

It is important to provide a secure and sturdy hutch that is completely enclosed, with a floor and separate, covered sleeping area. The hutch should always be mosquito-proof (to prevent mosquitoes transmitting viruses to your rabbit) and weather-proof. Flooring should not be metal wiring as rabbits are soft-footed animals and will get their feet and nails caught. The floor of the hutch must be covered in hay, wood shavings or shredded paper to allow your rabbit to burrow. Both an inside and outside hutch should have a door large enough to fit both rabbit and litter tray through easily. A side door is also recommended as it allows the rabbit to get in and out of the hutch on its own. Rabbits can easily chew through chicken wire so this should not be used for hutches. It is recommended that wire at least 25mm x 13mm be used. Rabbits have been known to chew through a ply-wooden door in order to escape from an enclosed area. Your rabbit needs an area to go into that is concealed from the outside and the hutch must be placed in shade during the day and out of the wind at all times.

This is a great inside example of an indoor rabbit set up!



Inside hutches (or overnight hutches)

Can be smaller than outside hutches and do not need to be mosquito-proof or weather-proof, as long as the hutch is always kept indoors.

What to feed your rabbit

Rabbits are herbivores and their diet is particularly important to their overall health and wellbeing. Always ensure your rabbit has access to ample food, especially hay and fresh grass, as it has to eat and chew regularly to maintain dental health. You should feed your rabbit 80 % hay (e.g. oaten hay) or fresh grass, and 10% fresh vegetables (two packed cups of fresh green vegies per kg per day as a guide), 5% health treats such as fruit and 5% quality rabbit pellets. The golden rule to remember when selecting food for your rabbit is to keep its diet as close as possible to what it would eat in the wild. Treats for your rabbit could include apples, bananas, blueberries, carrots, grapes, mangoes, peaches, pears, strawberries, raspberries and sultanas (but only in small amounts). We strongly advise that you provide two water sources for your rabbit, just in case one gets tipped over (ceramic bowl). Fun fact: rabbits can drink as much as a dog! Observing the above-mentioned dietary guidelines will help to alleviate the risk of two of the most common health problems in rabbits: Gastric Stasis and dental problems. Rabbits' teeth grow at a staggering rate of 3mm per week and they need to wear them down by grinding with a sideways motion. A proper diet will prevent many potential health issues, however dental problems can be the result of genetics, despite the health benefits of chewing hay.



What NOT to feed your rabbit

Do NOT feed the following:

- Beans/peas
- Breads
- Iceberg lettuce
- Cabbage
- Raw beans
- Corn or corn cobs
- Rabbit mixes
- Cakes or biscuits
- Clover hays
- Sweets (lollies, chocolate)
- Nuts or seed
- 'Gourmet' or 'treat' mixes
- Avocados
- Potato peel
- Rhubarb

Why?

Rabbits are strict herbivores and the high fat and simple carbohydrate content of these foods can potentially cause fatal imbalance of the natural flora in the rabbit's intestine, contribute to severe intestinal disorders, promote obesity and at the least can cause uncomfortable diarrhoea.

How often to feed your rabbit?

Rabbits can graze for up to eight hours per day and require a constant supply of dietary fibre and hay or grass-enough to fill a standard litter tray. Always have an adequate supply of food and water available for your rabbit. Young rabbits need additional food until they are between four and six months old. Allowing your adult rabbit to become overweight however, will lower its life expectancy.

Introducing your new rabbit

Rabbits are extremely sensitive animals they tend to think of everything as a potential predator. In the wild this is completely warranted, but in a domestic setting it can be quite different. Many 'mixed families' are able to live in harmony but it is best to err on the side of caution when introducing a new rabbit to an established pet. The mere stress of a frightening experience can kill a rabbit, and the introduction of a rabbit to other pets should be done in controlled conditions. Remember, a dog's natural instinct is one of a predator and rabbits are prey animals. It is best to keep dogs away from your new rabbit's area until it feels comfortable in its new home.

Rabbits and dogs

Introducing your new rabbit to your dog requires supervision. It is important to know your dog and determine its suitability for introduction to your rabbit before bringing the two together. Bear in mind that the temperament and behaviour of your dog will make or break the relationship. If your dog is obedient, calm and in general unresponsive to cats it may prove a good candidate, whilst excitable dogs may prove problematic. Before bringing your rabbit and dog together introduce their smells by swapping their bedding, or by showing each animal a tuft of the other's fur which can be collected from a grooming brush.

Begin rabbit to dog introductions with the dog on a leash lying next to you and let the rabbit explore the area-one that they are both comfortable in will make it a less frightening experience. It is important that both animals are relaxed, and not hungry or thirsty. Try short introductions for several days and gradually build towards allowing your dog to gently approach the rabbit. Give praise and positive reinforcement if all is going well but if the dog lunges or the rabbit becomes frightened discontinue the introductions for that day. If the process is going well, you can try more intimate encounters such as sitting in an enclosed space with both animals and patting them simultaneously.

Once your dog sees your gentle treatment of your rabbit it should begin to understand that the rabbit is a member of the family and not a prey animal. You will know that you have made progress when both animals cease to show any interest in each other. At this point you can lengthen the visitations until both rabbit and dog are able to roam free in the same space with no signs of aggression or panic.

Do not leave rabbits and dogs unsupervised until you are completely confident in their acceptance of each other and of their safety. Some dogs may never be an acceptable risk alone with a rabbit and you should use your judgement in considering the rabbit's safety first and foremost.

Rabbits and cats

Both rabbits and cats are very sociable animals and can make wonderful companions for each other – it is not unusual to find cats and rabbits playing together or grooming one another. However, they are not always instinctively friendly and it may take some time and patience to ensure that your pets become comfortable with one another. Once your rabbit is comfortable in your home you can start the process by introducing their smells to each other by swapping their bedding, or by showing each animal a tuft of the other's fur which can be collected from a grooming brush.

Once they have become accustomed to each other's smells you can do an initial meeting. Since rabbits can be quite territorial this is best done in neutral territory. Initial meetings are best done through a cage so that both your rabbits and cat can safely get to know each other without being in danger of scratches or bites. Supervise these interactions once a day for at least a week before allowing the animals to interact.

When first allowing both animals to interact without their cages make sure that they both have a safe hiding place nearby, preferably their own basket or cage. It is essential that you are present for all interactions between your cat and rabbit so that you can intervene if necessary. If you have to leave the room for any reason make sure that both animals are separated. Do not leave your animals unsupervised until you are absolutely sure that they are comfortable with one another. Be prepared for this process to take many months.

Even when all your pets are very close remember to always provide a safe retreat for every animal (particularly your rabbits) Also keep in mind that the dynamic between your pets may change depending on where they are in your house or garden. If your rabbits usually reside in the garden they may become uncomfortable and defensive when brought inside and forget their closeness to your cat. Likewise, they may become territorial and aggressive when your cat enters their domain in the garden.



Bonding rabbits

Rabbits need the company of their own kind but you cannot just mix two unfamiliar rabbits without following the proper process, as this could result in adverse outcomes.

Rabbits are sociable, but they are also territorial. Therefore, rabbit introductions must be done carefully. The process of encouraging rabbits to live compatibly with one another is called bonding, mixing or pairing. This process takes time and effort, but it is essential to carry out the bonding process properly to ensure both rabbits are safe and happy.

Mixed-sex pairs usually work best, so it is advisable to get a male and female, but it is absolutely essential that rabbits are desexed safely before pairing is about to take place.

Rabbits can inflict significant damage to each other if they fight. It's vital to keep a close eye on them throughout the pairing process as, left unchecked, one or both could be seriously injured.

No 'stress bonding' methods should be used, such as introductions in very small spaces or unnecessary car journeys, because deliberately putting rabbits into a frightening situation poses risks to safety and welfare.

Rabbits form a bond for life. Once the rabbits have bonded they should not be separated, as this would cause a great deal of psychological trauma to them both. It is recommended that both rabbits are taken to the veterinarian if one needs to attend. This prevents stress and aids recovery. If the rabbits are kept apart and one comes back with a different smell or a change in health, they may reject each other and begin fighting. If this happens the introduction process will need to be carried out again.



- First, get the rabbits acquainted by sight and smell. Keep the rabbits in their own separate homes and allow them access to a large run with mesh separating them or put them in nearby enclosures, where they can sniff each other through the wire. This allows them to get used to each other's scent and company without being able to fight. To help this you can also swap their litter trays over or rub a cloth over one rabbit and then the other (to get them used to each other's scents).

- When both rabbits become relaxed in each other's company and are used to the sight and smell of each other, start putting them together for very short periods of time in strictly neutral territory where neither rabbit has been before. This must only take place under constant close supervision.

- Make sure you put lots of distractions in with them in their neutral territory, such as several piles of hay, herbs, cardboard boxes and a tunnel, as this will help them immensely. Rabbits are very territorial and any competition for resources might cause tension, so ensure that you have at least two feeding and watering stations and hiding places. At any sign of tension, separate the rabbits (using a towel to intervene to prevent injury).

- Try again the next day, gradually increasing the time the rabbits spend together. Always supervise them and separate the rabbits at the first sign of a fight. Repeat this until the rabbits are relaxed in each other's company.

- After a few days or weeks of successful interactions, when the rabbits are happy to groom each other and lie together, they can be left together unsupervised. If negative behaviour occurs, separate the rabbits and begin the introduction process again. Rabbits who repeatedly fight are unlikely to be able to bond and different companions should be sought for them.

The whole process can take from a couple of hours to a couple of months. The better the rabbits get on at their first meeting, the quicker they will bond. In addition, putting the rabbits together for very brief periods (e.g. 10 minutes) every day means that they will get used to each other far more quickly than if you do it less often.

Rabbits who are not fully bonded must be kept separately when you are not with them.

Possible health issues

Rabbits are fragile animals and their health can deteriorate quickly. It is therefore important to take your rabbit to a veterinarian at the first sign of injury, ill-health or abnormality. Diseases in rabbits are many and varied, ranging from abscesses to zoonoses.

Gastric Stasis

Gastric Stasis (sometimes called Gut Stasis) occurs when a rabbit's intestine becomes static and food does not pass through normally. There are a variety of causes including stress, dehydration and intestinal blockage. An intestinal slowdown can cause ingested hair and food to lodge anywhere along the gastrointestinal tract and fluid to be drawn out of the food-ball. The food-ball soon turns solid and a blockage can occur quickly. A rabbit suffering from Gastric Stasis will become depressed and stop eating and producing faeces.



Contact your vet immediately if this occurs. Treatment is critical as it can be a life-threatening situation.

Rabbit Calicivirus

Calicivirus (RHD) is a highly infectious and often fatal disease that affects wild and domestic European Rabbits. It does not affect other animals or humans. This disease is spread by direct contact with an infected animal, mosquito bites, and is transmitted through oral, nasal or conjunctival pathways. Urine, faeces and respiratory secretions may also spread the virus. Carriers of the virus remain infectious for up to one month (depending on climate) which is thought to play a significant role in the transmission of RHD. Typically, only adult rabbits are infected.

Symptoms include fever, squeals, and coma leading to death in 12-36 hours. In less severe cases rabbits may display uneasiness, excitement, anorexia, swollen eyelids, paralysis and/or convulsions.

A vaccine is available for RHD and must be administered every 6 months.

Myxomatosis

Myxomatosis is fatal in rabbits and is spread by fleas, skin lesions and most commonly mosquito bites. It does not affect other animals or humans. The first symptoms are the swelling of the eyelids, followed by other parts of the body including the base of the ears and genitalia. These are followed by a discharge from the eyes and nose. In most cases a secondary bacterial infection occurs, causing pneumonia and laboured breathing. A rabbit with Myxomatosis will become listless, suffer from loss of appetite and develop a fever.

Death usually occurs within 14 days. Unfortunately, there is no vaccination available in Australia and no cure.
Prevention is the only option and rabbit owners should cover hutches in mosquito netting to prevent bites and ensure prompt treatment of fleas.

Diarrhoea

Diarrhoea in adult rabbits is commonly caused by a change in diet. Always introduce unfamiliar food to a rabbit slowly. Diarrhoea can also be caused by bacteria, viruses, protozoa, antibiotic use and stress. Initial treatment should be to keep your rabbit warm and in clean surroundings with plenty of fresh water. Remove any suspect food and give ample hay. If diarrhoea continues or there is no clear cause, take your rabbit to a veterinarian immediately.

Urolithiasis (urinary stones)

Rabbits are susceptible to the formation of urinary stones along the urinary tract, causing pain and inflammation. Urinary stones are caused by high levels of calcium in a rabbit's diet, causing pain and inflammation. Urolithiasis can be detected by changes in behaviour, straining to urinate, sudden loss of litter-tray habits, or a thick 'pasty' discharge of urine. Stones can be treated medically or surgically, depending on the type of stone, size and location. Diet is a major factor in prevention. Ensure your rabbit is fed low calcium foods such as carrots, celery leaves and endive lettuce.

Dental care

One of the most common and serious problems in rabbits is dental disease and its related problems. Your rabbit's teeth need to be checked regularly. Its teeth (incisors and molars) grow constantly throughout its lifetime and are an all-too-common cause of illness in pet rabbits. Dental problems can be due to a poor diet or genetics. Always provide plenty of hay and a chewing stick or pine-cone that your rabbit can chew on, to prevent its teeth from growing too long.

The main dental problems for rabbits are:

- Incisor and molar teeth becoming overgrown, resulting in difficulty for the rabbit eating and grooming itself.
- Teeth not wearing down sufficiently as a result of incorrect diet.
- Teeth growing downward into the jaw line, causing abscesses.
- Malocclusion (misaligned or broken teeth).
- Growth of spurs on molar teeth, causing mouth and tongue ulcers.

You will need to monitor your rabbit's dental care carefully and ensure any problems are treated by a vet immediately.

Heatstroke

It is essential not to allow your rabbit to overheat. Rabbits may easily suffer from heatstroke in temperatures over 28°C. The first signs of heatstroke are respiratory distress (mouth-breathing), followed by weakness, depression, poor co-ordination and convulsions. At the first sign of heatstroke, wrap your rabbit in a damp towel (including a frozen water bottle as mentioned earlier) and take it without delay to a veterinarian.



Skin conditions

A number of skin conditions can cause irritation for your rabbit and are usually caused by parasites, fleas, mites and ringworm. A problem can be identified by loss of hair, significant scratching or scaly, red skin. Skin abscesses (cavities containing pus, surrounded by a capsule of thickened, inflamed tissue) may result from fighting or from the invasion of foreign bodies. Dermatological conditions often require veterinary advice.

Fleas and mites

It is important to groom your rabbit daily so that you can check for any sign of fleas or mites which are likely to cause skin problems. Fleas are also a common carrier of the Myxomatosis. Always consult your veterinarian before administering flea or worm treatment as many products available for cats and dogs are toxic to rabbits. If your rabbit has hair loss and what looks like dandruff it may have fleas and should be taken to see your veterinarian.

Worming

Rabbits given good care, housing and a proper diet generally do not suffer from worms. However, any vertebrate animal can get worm-type parasites and if unsure on whether to worm, consult your veterinarian.

Respiratory infections

Rabbits can suffer from infections of the upper respiratory tract, resulting in runny nose, watery eyes and sneezing. Symptoms are similar to those of the common human cold but are caused by bacterium rather than viruses. Once referred to as Pasteurella (because it was believed to be caused by the bacteria Pasteurella Multocida), it is now known to be caused by a range of bacteria and can only be treated with a course of prescribed antibiotics from your veterinarian. If left untreated an infection may develop into Pneumonia.
Symptoms will become more severe with breathing becoming loud and raspy, the rabbit in many cases pointing its nose high in the air and stretching its neck in an attempt to get more oxygen. A rabbit in this condition is critically ill and needs to be taken to a vet immediately.

Rabbit Behaviour

Most behavioural issues are easily attributable to your rabbit simply being a rabbit! Behavioural problems can often be addressed and managed through training and understanding. If you notice a sudden change in your rabbit's temperament it should be brought to the attention of your veterinarian.

Scattered droppings

Scattered droppings are a territorial sign and will sometimes occur upon entering a new home or when a new rabbit is brought into the house.

Humping

Non-desexed and recently desexed rabbits will hump, it's just natural! If they are desexed and humping your feet – consider it a sign of love!

Binkies

When a rabbit jumps into the air and twists it's head and body in opposite directions before falling back to the ground it is called a 'blinky'. They can also do a mini blinky by flicking their head.

Thumping

Rabbits may thump or stomp the ground with their hind legs when they are frightened, mad or as a warning to others that danger might be nearby.

Chinning

Rabbits have scent glands under their chin which leave a trace smell when rubbed against something this is called 'chinning'. This is their way of letting others know that 'I have been here and this is mine.

Chewing/digging

Rabbits are natural chewers and diggers. To a rabbit there is no difference between your furniture and any other piece of wood. To avoid damage, rabbit-proof your home, paying particular attention to electrical wires (hide them or move them out of reach). Toys will distract your rabbit from nibbling on the couch leg and they will love you for it!

Spraying

Non-desexed and recently desexed males will mark female rabbits and their territory. A desexed rabbit that suddenly starts urinating outside the litter tray often indicates illness.

Nipping

Rabbits are prey animals and it is important to remember this when approaching or trying to hold your rabbit. They may nip or scratch when feel threatened, they don't have secure footing, they've been startled or just wish to be left alone.

Growling, lunging, grunting & boxing

This is a sign your rabbit isn't happy. Growling, lunging, grunting and/or boxing is your rabbits way of communicating with you that they are angry at something and wish to be left alone. Ignoring these warning signs can result in nipping.

Grooming

Provided your rabbit is healthy it will self-groom, or if it is one of a bonded pair they will groom each other. Rabbits do not need to be bathed, as they are very clean animals. Bathing a rabbit will also cause distress to the animal.

There are two types of coat, short-haired and long-haired which is subject to tangles and knots. A weekly brush or comb in the direction of the fur is all that is needed for a shorthaired coat, both on top and under the rabbit. For the long-haired coat a daily brush or comb (metal-toothed) is essential, paying particular attention to the underside of the rabbit. Rabbits have thin, sensitive skin so it is important to be gentle when grooming.

Grooming is also the perfect opportunity to give your rabbit a general check-up. You can check teeth for misalignment, eyes and nose for discharge and for any unusual lumps or grass seeds that may be embedded in the fur (seeds can ultimately drill into the rabbit's skin). The seeds can be easily pulled out with your fingers or combed out. Rabbits' fur will usually moult one to four times during the year or year-round, depending on the breed of rabbit. This is a natural process- but requires additional grooming for some rabbits at this time.

Like dogs, rabbits' nails will continue to grow if not worn down naturally. The nails have a blood vein and it is extremely painful for your rabbit if this is cut. It is recommended that you take extra care when cutting your rabbit's nails and if unsure ask your veterinarian or veterinary nurse to show you how at your next appointment.

Did you know?

The physiology of rabbit digestive system is such that they are physically incapable of vomiting. This sounds like good news, but it isn't. This means they cannot purge their stomach. This leaves them at risk of intestinal blockages, choking and the inability to cleanse ingested toxins.

Guinea pig facts and figures

Lifespan (in captivity):	5-10 years	**Gestation period:**	Approx. 68 days
Male guinea pig:	Is called a boar	**Number of young:**	One to six pups
Female guinea pig:	Is called a sow	**Average body weight:**	700-1200 grams
Young guinea pig:	Is called a pup		



Did you know?

Guinea pigs are a species of rodent often referred to as cavy. Despite their common name, these animals are not in the pig family, nor are they from Guinea. Guinea pigs are especially social creatures and are happier kept in pairs.

What do guinea pigs need?

Check through the list below to ensure that you have all the necessary equipment and supplies to assist in the 'settling in' of your newly-adopted guinea pig. The RSPCA is here to assist you and can provide advice in selecting products that you will need.

- **Water bottle**
  Large drip-feed plastic bottle with metal sprout and a small ceramic bowl as they are heavier than plastic bowls and are less likely to be tipped over.
- **Food**
  Grass or grass hay, pellets, leafy greens, fresh fruit and vegetables rich in Vitamin C.
- **Hiding spots**
  Guinea pigs need hiding spots in their cage to keep them feeling safe. Cardboard boxes are suitable or you can purchase more permeant ones from a pet store.
- **Toys**
  Guinea pigs love to play! Anything they can climb on, push around or bump with their noses will be loved. They will also enjoy chew-proof balls and dangling objects.
- **Grooming brush (small slicker) or metal-toothed comb**
  Daily grooming is essential and offers you the change to give your furry friend a general health check.
- **Bedding**
  Line the bottom of the cage with a clean layer of hay or shredded paper for bedding. Bedding needs to be changed weekly or earlier if the cage smells. Do not use sawdust or wood shavings as these are likely to cause respiratory problems.
- **Hutch/cage**
  The bigger the better! A cage needs enough space for your guinea pig to move around comfortably, a covered compartment for it to feel safe and adequate flooring to protect its feet (no mesh flooring). The cage needs to be cleaned daily.

Arriving home with your new guinea pig

An animal shelter can be an unsettling experience for any animal and your new guinea pig is no exception which can cause significant stress. Moving into a home with a new family and possibly established pets, is likely to cause further stress. Be considerate and understanding when bringing your new guinea pig home by giving it adequate time to adjust to its new surroundings. With patience, you will soon have a great new companion!

It is natural for your new guinea pig to be quite shy and timid during the first few days and it will take time to build up a trusting relationship. Avoid holding and cuddling your guinea pig too much, making loud noises or lurking around (especially leaning over their cage, as this to a guinea pig appears to be predatory behaviour).

Guinea pigs are prey animals and can become easily frightened when picked up, often resulting in injury to themselves or others. If it is necessary to pick up your guinea pig, ensure you support its bottom and hold it close to your chest.
Some guinea pigs through trust and handling may become much tamer and actually stand still, allowing you to pick them up. This depends on the individual personality of the guinea pig. Children under 10 years should not handle the guinea pig unless closely supervised by an adult in case of injury to the child or guinea pig.

Guinea pigs like to chew pretty much anything and they are good at it! Keep them away from furniture, electrical cords and telephone lines (these are common targets). Alternatively, protect your home by covering cords and wires with plastic tubing or moving them out of sight, covering furniture with heavy slip-covers and placing smaller items out of reach. Tie up dangling curtain cords, block off any crevice, hole or corner where your guinea pig might get stuck and put anything that could be poisonous or harmful out of reach e.g. cleaning items and personal items and plants.

What to feed your guinea pig

Guinea pigs are strictly herbivores and their diet plays an important part in their overall wellbeing. An ideal diet consists of 85% hay (dust and mould free), 5% good quality pellets, 10% fresh leafy-green vegetables (roughly one packed cup per day) and fruit once or twice a week. Avoid feeding over-processed pet mixes which are high in grains or contain molasses. Like us, guinea pigs are unable to synthesise their own vitamin C and need high levels of it in their diet (at least 20mg). This can be provided with plenty of green vegetables as well as carrots, capsicum and broccoli. Guinea pigs are neophobic, which means they develop a strong preference for food types in the early stages of life and should therefore be fed an appropriate diet from an early age. Because of their sensitive stomach it is essential you create a healthy, stable diet and avoid any sudden changes.

Cages

A guinea pig needs at least one square metre of cage space to prevent fights over territory. Indoor housing is also recommended, so you must ensure you have enough space to house your guinea pig effectively. If outdoor housing is the only option you must also provide your guinea pig with adequate shelter that is temperature controlled, has sufficient lighting and protection from pests and weather. There must be room for the cage and it must meet housing guidelines.

Both guinea pigs and rabbits are social species so companionship is an important aspect of their care. However, it is best to avoid housing rabbits and guinea pigs together. Both species have different dietary requirements and behaviours, and guinea pigs can get some diseases from rabbits. For these reasons, we recommend not to house rabbits and guinea pigs together.

General information

Animal cruelty complaints

24-hour hotline: 1300 477 722

Alternatively, fill out our online cruelty report form.

Animals in emergencies

24-hour hotline: 1300 477 722

Donations

1300 777 221

You can also donate online.

RSPCA PetVille -Pet Supplies / Cat Boarding / Grooming

345 North East Road

Hillcrest SA 5086

Phone (08) 8266 6582

RSPCA SA Headquarters

GPO Box 2122, Adelaide, 5001

16 Nelson Street, Stepney, SA, 5069

General enquiries

1300 477 722 (during opening hours)

info@rspcasa.org.au

Animal shelters and adoptions

Lonsdale shelter

25 Meyer Road, Lonsdale

1300 477 722

Whyalla shelter

7 Cook Street, Whyalla Norrie.

(08) 8644 0172

Port Lincoln Animal Care Centre

22 Windsor Avenue, Port Lincoln

(08) 8682 3016

For opening hours or more information please visit

rspcasa.org.au

RSPCA South Australia