



Getting ready for your
RSPCA rescue rabbits

Your rabbits' details

Name(s):

Age(s):

A little bit about them:

What food they are being fed:

Your notes:

Your RSPCA contact details:

RSPCA animal centre:

Telephone number:

Useful contacts

Vet

Pet insurance (policy and phone numbers)

Rabbit behaviourist:

Rabbit sitter:

- RSPCA rabbit care advice:
www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits
- Find a vet: findavet.rcvs.org.uk
- Animal Behaviour and Training Council:
www.abtcouncil.org.uk
- Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund:
rabbitwelfare.co.uk

Don't forget: if you move house or change phone number, you need to update your contact details for your rabbit's microchip. Your rabbits will have been microchipped by the RSPCA.

Contents

Thank you	5	Learning to live together:	15
The Animal Welfare Act 2006	5	Play time	16
Preparing for your RSPCA rescue rabbits:	6	Introducing new experiences	16
What to buy	6	Meeting new people	16
Creating a hazard-free home	8	Meeting children	16
Essential shopping checklist	8	Training your rabbits:	17
Setting up your rabbits' accommodation:	9	Top training tips	17
Outdoor rabbits	9	Why more than one rabbit?	18
Indoor rabbits	9	Introductions are important	18
Living with other animals	10	Managing resources	18
Preparing your family	10	The bonding process	20
Bringing your rescue rabbits home:	11	Getting to know your rabbits and understanding their behaviour:	21
The journey home	11	Preventing and managing behaviour problems	21
Helping your rescue rabbits settle into their new home	11	Your rabbits' body language	22
Setting up rabbit-friendly accommodation	12	What to do if you're having problems	23
Diet	14	Keeping your rabbits fit and healthy:	24
		Finding a vet	24
		Watch out	25
		Warning	26



Emma Jacobs/RSPCA Photolibrary



Don't forget to:

- Register with a local vet. All vets have different levels of experience in dealing with rabbits. Some vets are 'rabbit savvy' and may have more experience in treating rabbits. A list of rabbit savvy vets can be found on the Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund (RWAF) website – rabbitwelfare.co.uk/rabbit-friendly-vets
- Make sure your rabbits' accommodation is free from hazards.
- Arrange pet insurance.

Thank you for choosing to adopt rabbits who have been rescued by the RSPCA.

The next stage of the process is to help you get ready to welcome your new rabbits into your family.

We will arrange for one of our Adoption Support Volunteers to visit you and your family at your home. They will discuss with you any specific needs that your rabbits have, and suggest any adjustments to your house, garden or lifestyle that may be needed to help you and your rescue rabbits settle into a safe, secure and happy life together.

Introducing new rabbits to your home will be exciting, rewarding and, at times, challenging. It may take quite a while for your new rabbits to settle into life with you, but don't worry – everyone encounters some tricky bits with their new rabbits and remember you are not alone – we are here to support you.

Each of the rabbits in our care comes with a story. Some may have been a victim of cruelty, others are unwanted or abandoned, and some may never have experienced life in a loving, family home – until now. Your rabbits may not be perfect, but they will be perfect for you.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to get in touch with the RSPCA centre you've been dealing with.

RSPCA Rehoming Team

Alison Stalwood/RSPCA Photolibrary, Bravissimo/Shutterstock.com



The Animal Welfare Act 2006

All animal owners are required by law, under the Animal Welfare Act, to care for animals properly by meeting their five welfare needs.

These are:



a suitable place to live



a healthy diet, including clean, fresh water



the ability to behave normally



appropriate company



protection from pain, suffering, injury and disease.

Rabbits are naturally sociable and should be kept with at least one other friendly rabbit. A rabbit left on their own can develop abnormal behaviour and may suffer if left without company and nothing to do for long periods of time.

Preparing for your RSPCA rescue rabbits:

If you're first time rabbit owners, here's a guide on what to buy, and what you'll need to think about before your RSPCA rescue rabbits come home. We can advise on what's best to suit the needs of your rabbits.

What to buy

- **Food**

You should continue with the diet that your rabbits have been fed at the RSPCA centre as sudden changes in diet can lead to stomach upsets. Find out more about the importance of feeding your rabbits the correct diet on page 14.

- **Food and water bowls**

Your rabbits will need access to fresh, clean drinking water at all times and you should continue to provide this for them in the way they are used to. Rabbits can drink from a bottle or a bowl but many prefer a bowl. If you use a bottle always make sure they have access to a bowl as well. Nuggets and safe, washed leafy greens can be given in a bowl but can also be scattered throughout their enclosure to help encourage natural foraging behaviours.

- **Accommodation**

Your rabbits will need a large, secure living enclosure comprising of a shelter and a permanently attached area in which to exercise. They should have constant access to all areas of their accommodation so they have choice and control over their environment and they can perform the behaviours they want to, when they want to. It is especially important that rabbits have access to their exercise area at times when they are most naturally active, which are dawn, dusk and overnight.

- **Bedding**

Your rabbits will need sufficient bedding to keep them comfortable and warm, especially if they are kept outdoors. They will also need plenty of extra bedding in the winter months to snuggle into. Bedding needs to be safe for them to eat, such as hay that is free from dust and shredded paper. If you choose to provide your rabbits with straw as bedding, make sure it is soft straw such as barley straw and always make sure they have constant access to good quality hay to eat. Straw is different from hay and does not contain the same level of nutrition, so it's crucial to the health of your rabbits that they always have access to hay to eat.

- **Somewhere to hide**

As well as a secure shelter that contains lots of bedding material, your rabbits will also need hiding places. You can buy specific rabbit hiding places or can make them using cardboard boxes. Find out more about the importance of hiding places on page 13.

- **Toys**

Rabbits are very intelligent and active animals and safe toys are important to help keep them busy. Toys don't have to be expensive and you can make your own from things like paper and cardboard. Different rabbits enjoy different types of toys, so try providing a variety of items until you find out which ones your rabbits like best.

- **Litter tray and litter**

Rabbits tend to choose one area to use as a toilet and providing litter trays in this area can be helpful for cleaning. Use high-sided litter trays that are larger than your rabbits to give them plenty of space to toilet in and help avoid them missing the tray when they urinate. Plastic dog beds can make good litter trays. Whatever you use as litter trays, always make sure your rabbits can easily enter and exit them. Each rabbit should have their own tray lined with something absorbent e.g. newspaper, paper based non-clumping,

non-expanding litter and covered with hay or shredded paper. Rabbits often enjoy eating while toileting. Placing a hay rack over the litter tray can help encourage them to eat more hay.

● Digging box

Many rabbits enjoy digging so they need to be provided with somewhere to do this. If your rabbits aren't housed on grass, you can create a 'digging box' using a large plant pot or litter tray filled with earth, a cardboard box filled with shredded paper or a sandpit filled with child-friendly sand.

● Carrier

Make sure you have a carrier for when you pick up your new rabbits from the RSPCA. It should be sturdy, secure and large enough for your rabbits to sit, turn around and lie down naturally. Being a prey species, rabbits can be easily scared. Complete wire carriers may cause your rabbits to feel more vulnerable, so try to avoid these. However, if you do use one, it is a good idea to cover it with a towel to help reduce stress, but make sure your rabbits can't reach the material as you don't want them chewing it.

Bonded rabbits should be transported together. Therefore, your carrier will need to be large enough for your rabbits to travel in comfortably. A carrier that has a door on the front and on the top is a good choice. Rabbits can be trained to enter the carrier via the front door which helps reduce stress as they haven't been picked up and put inside. If you haven't trained your rabbits to do this, the 'top loading' aspect of the carrier is the easiest and most stress-free option for getting your rabbits in and out. Putting some familiar smelling bedding material into the carrier can help them feel at ease while travelling to their new home. As rabbits need a constant supply of food, they should have plenty of hay and water in their carrier whenever they are travelling. Make sure their water can't spill as this could cause your rabbits to become wet and potentially cold.



Philip Toscano, Andrew Forstyth, Alison Stolwood/ RSPCA Photolibrary

Creating a hazard-free home

Rabbits are inquisitive and like to investigate their surroundings, which can sometimes lead them into danger.

Make sure their enclosure and any areas they will have access to in your home and garden are safe for your rabbits. Rodent poisons and glyphosate herbicide (weed killer) products are poisonous to rabbits, so make sure they are locked securely away or safely disposed of before your new RSPCA rescue rabbits arrive.

Make sure any poisonous plants are kept out of your rabbits' reach and that there is no risk of any petals, leaves or other foliage falling into their enclosure.

There are lots of plants that are poisonous to rabbits – some of the more common ones include:

- ivy
- rhubarb
- foxglove
- clematis
- lilies
- lily of the valley
- poppies
- privet
- ragwort
- rhododendron.

While rabbits can and should eat grass, they should never be given lawnmower clippings as these will make them poorly.

If you choose to keep your rabbits indoors make sure you have put all electrical cables out of areas that they are able to reach and make sure they can't get anywhere dangerous such as near the oven or behind the fridge in your kitchen.

All rabbit accommodation needs to be safe and secure, but this is especially important for rabbits that are housed outside as you don't want them to escape or allow predators to enter. For enclosures using mesh, ensure this is strong (materials such as chicken wire are not suitable). You may also want to consider burying mesh sides and/or a base and covering this over with turf or using paving stones/flags around the perimeter to help prevent your rabbits digging out or predators digging in. Whether you house your rabbits indoors or outside, you should regularly check all enclosures to ensure they are secure and take steps to repair any damage or replace the housing if necessary.



Andrew Forsyth/RSPCA Photolibrary

Essential shopping checklist

- Large, secure living enclosure comprising of a shelter and permanently attached exercise run.
- Food – hay, good quality high fibre nuggets, leafy green vegetables. Hay should be good quality, free from dust, sweet smelling and slightly green with long strands. Adult rabbits need mainly grass hay such as Timothy or meadow hay.
- Water bottles and bowls.
- Food dishes.
- Toys.
- Grooming brush suitable for rabbits (rabbits have delicate skin which can be easily damaged by brushes designed for other species).
- Carrier.
- Litter trays.
- Hiding places.
- Bedding material.
- Hay racks.

Setting up your rabbits' accommodation:

Some owners choose to keep their rabbits indoors and others house their rabbits outside. Wherever you decide to keep your rabbits it is important that all the areas they can access are safe, secure and free from any hazards.

Before you bring your new rabbits home you need to have decided where you want to site their accommodation and set it up ready for them to move into. Housing needs to be located in a sheltered area that is protected from extremes of temperature, wind, rain and direct sunlight.

For those who are adopting an RSPCA rabbit to live with their current rabbit, they will either have been bonded at the animal centre or you will have to bond them in your home. If you are bonding in your own home you will need to set up two separate side-by-side enclosures for your rabbits while they get used to each other. Find out more about bonding rabbits on page 20.

If you are adopting a pair of rabbits from the RSPCA you will need to set their accommodation up from scratch.

Outdoor rabbits

A well matched pair of medium-sized rabbits require a living area where they can exercise and rest of at least 3m x 2m, and 1m high (groups of three or more rabbits and large/giant breeds will need larger accommodation). It can be difficult to buy purpose-built accommodation measuring these dimensions, however, there is no reason why you can't build your own! Many people are now using children's playhouses or sheds as rest areas and attaching them to a large, secure area where their rabbits can exercise freely. Or they are putting a shelter within a traditional exercise 'run'.

If you can't meet these dimensions then this won't necessarily preclude you from adopting rabbits from the RSPCA. However, you will need to ensure that the space you are able to provide will meet all your rabbits' welfare needs.

Indoor rabbits

If you choose to keep your rabbits indoors you will still need to provide them with a safe, secure enclosure comprising of a shelter and area to exercise. A shelter could be a large adapted dog pen/crate attached to a large secure exercise area or it could be located within a 'rabbit proofed' room in your house. Baby gates can also be used to prevent your rabbits accessing areas in your home where you don't want them to go.

Flooring should be non-slip. Rabbits can slip on shiny/polished laminate flooring or tiles which they can find stressful and can lead to injury. If you do have this type of flooring, put some non-slip mats or carpet tiles down for your rabbits so they can safely move around. Make sure you keep an eye on these for any signs of chewing and replace them as necessary. You will need to 'rabbit proof' the areas they have access to including covering electrical cables and wiring or putting them out of reach, blocking off any potential dangerous areas and sticking down any raised edges on your wallpaper.

Irrespective of where you decide to keep your rabbits or the size of their accommodation, they should still have the opportunity to exercise outside of their enclosure regularly. Any time your rabbits are outside of their enclosure they will need to be carefully supervised to make sure they don't have any accidents. Be mindful of any plants (both intact and fallen foliage) that your rabbits could access and eat, as not all plants are safe for rabbits and many can be poisonous.



Becky Murray, Alison Stolwood x 2/RSPCA Photolibrary



Living with other animals

Rabbits are a prey species and most will be frightened by the presence of dogs or cats in the household. Similarly, cats and dogs may try to predate upon your rabbits and become frustrated if they are unable to do so. Therefore, it is in the best interest for all these animals to be kept away from each other. If rabbits are introduced to dogs and/or cats in a positive manner when both species are young, they can learn to get along, but even then care should be taken when they are together and they should always be supervised.

More information on introducing your rabbit to another rabbit can be found on page 20 and at: www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits/company

Preparing your family

Rabbits have been traditionally thought of as being good pets for children, however they have complex needs and they are not easy to look after well. Children can be engaged to help look after your rabbits but they will need supervision from an adult. Rabbits may be injured if handled incorrectly and therefore young children should not be permitted to pick them up – instead they should interact with them at ground level as injuries can be caused to both. It is a good idea for children to sit on the ground and wait for your rabbits to come up to them. This can be encouraged with the use of your rabbits' favourite healthy treat. If your rabbits don't want to come over to the children or they hop away, don't allow children to follow them as this will be stressful for your rabbits and may make future interactions more difficult.

Bringing your rescue rabbits home:

No doubt you will be feeling excited – and maybe a little bit anxious – about bringing your rescue rabbits home and this is likely to be how your new rabbits feel too as they begin a new life with you. Here are a few tips to help keep those early days as stress-free as possible.

The journey home

Scent is very important to rabbits and they can find new scents upsetting. On top of this many rabbits find travelling very stressful. To help reduce the stress associated with travelling, it is a good idea to put something that smells familiar to them into their carrier. This can be some used but unsoiled bedding material from their enclosure. Once you arrive home you can transfer this bedding into their new accommodation to help keep some scents familiar to them.

Bonded rabbits should be transported together. This is reassuring for them and also ensures that the same scents are transferred to all the rabbits which can help avoid problems associated with reintroducing rabbits after they have spent time apart.

Helping your rescue rabbits settle into their new home

It will naturally take your rabbits a while to settle into their new surroundings, in the same way that it will take time for you to get to know them. Here are some tips to help you during the first few days.

- **Keep things consistent**

Set out a good routine from the beginning – this will help your rabbits settle in by knowing what's going to happen and when. Organise food and handling around the same time each day. Some days you will need to be flexible, but try to keep to the routine as much as possible. Rabbits are crepuscular, meaning they are most active at dawn, dusk and overnight. If possible, try to interact with your rabbits early in the morning or the evening when they are naturally awake and allow them to rest during the day.

- **Take things slowly**

Getting new rabbits can be very exciting. You'll probably want to spend lots of time with them and show them off to friends. Be patient – leaving the RSPCA and going to a new home can be quite overwhelming so it is best to take things slowly.

First, give your rabbits time to settle into their new accommodation. It's fine to go and see your new rabbits but try to keep these times short and calm to start with. Some rabbits become very scared when first introduced to a new environment and might spend a lot of time hiding. Don't worry, this is a completely natural rabbit behaviour. If you take things calmly and slowly their confidence will grow.

Once your rabbits have had time to settle and seem comfortable in their accommodation they should be ready to meet you and other members of the household properly. Either sit calmly in their housing or just outside it and allow your new rescue rabbits to approach you. Talk gently to them and offer them a few healthy treats. If your rabbits appear worried or back off, give them some space and keep the session short. You have years to bond with each other so you don't need to rush it.



Andrew Forsyth/RSPCA Photolibrary

Setting up rabbit-friendly accommodation

● Housing

Rabbits are active, inquisitive animals and need lots of space to perform all their natural behaviours such as running, jumping, digging, playing and exploring. It is recommended that a pair of medium-sized rabbits should be housed in an area measuring at least 3m x 2m x 1m (L x W x H) which incorporates an integral shelter measuring at least 1m x 2m x 0.75m (L x W x H) and a large space for them to exercise. Rabbits should have permanent access to all areas of their housing to allow them to perform the behaviours they want to, when they want to. Your rabbits should either have two entrance/exit points between their shelter and exercise area or one large access point. This helps ensure that all rabbits can access all areas of their housing and aren't prevented from doing so by a more dominant rabbit.

If you are unable to provide your rabbits with housing of these dimensions, then it is especially important that you are providing them with quality space that encourages them to behave naturally.



- 1 Our living shelter needs to be dry and protected from the wind and rain.
- 2 We eat lots and lots of hay and grass – using a rack above floor level helps our hay to stay clean.
- 3 We always need clean water to drink so, every morning and evening, please check we have a fresh supply.
- 4 We want to feel safe – we love having places to hide away and platforms to jump up on so we can check out what's going on around us.
- 5 We need to have some shade on a sunny day.
- 6 We love eating a handful of different leafy greens every day – cabbage, kale and mint are some of our favourites!
- 7 We need each other for company but we also need you – please spend time with us so you know we have everything we need to stay healthy and happy!
- 8 We need to have enough space to run around and we need to have lots of things to do – we'll get plenty of exercise and entertainment if we have a variety of safe toys, tunnels and cardboard boxes to play with.
- 9 We love to dig – a pit filled with child-friendly sand or earth is ideal.

● Hiding places

Hiding is one of the ways rabbits cope when they are feeling worried or stressed – it helps them feel more secure and safe. The more hiding places the better; there should be at least one for every rabbit, ideally with an additional extra one.

You should have at least one hiding place that both/all your rabbits can rest inside together. Always make sure each hiding place has two points of entry/exit as this prevents one rabbit blocking access or trapping the other inside.

Remember, hiding places don't need to cost much. You can make a great hiding place by cutting an entrance and exit hole (big enough for your rabbit!) into a cardboard box.

● Platforms

Being able to get up high is another important behaviour for rabbits. Having a good view of their surroundings can help them to feel safe and secure. An upturned cardboard box can double up as both a platform and a hiding place – just ensure it is strong enough to hold the weight of your rabbits. Rabbits need to stand up fully on their hind legs. Therefore ensure your rabbits' ears will not touch the roof of their enclosure when they stand on their platforms.

Platforms can help build up the physical fitness of your rabbits as jumping on and off such structures can help keep their weight healthy and their bones strong. Rabbits that have come from a restricted environment with little or no opportunity to exercise and jump onto objects are more likely to have poor bone strength and be at greater risk of fractures. In these situations initially provide your rabbits with low platforms and gradually increase their height as your rabbits get fitter and their bone strength improves. Your RSPCA centre or vet will be able to advise you on this.

● Litter trays

Rabbits tend to choose one area to use as a toilet and will often return to this spot. This makes litter training them relatively easy if you wait to discover which area they choose and start placing a litter tray there. If you decide to give your rabbits access to a litter tray, make sure they each have their own tray (ideally with an additional one too). They can be lined with newspaper and covered with hay, shredded paper and/or paper based non-clumping, non-expanding litter. Rabbits enjoy eating while they are toileting so filling a rack with hay and placing it above their litter trays can encourage them to eat more hay.

● Cleaning

You'll need to clean your rabbits' litter trays or toilet areas every day. You will also need to clean their entire housing regularly – at least once a week. Cleaning is potentially stressful for rabbits so after cleaning, a small amount of their used, unsoiled bedding should be placed back into the toilet area and shelter as this will smell familiar to your rabbits and help to reduce the stress caused by cleaning. Only use non-toxic cleaning products and their housing should be dry before the rabbits are returned into it.

● Bedding

Your rabbits will need plenty of bedding material in their shelter to keep them snug and warm. Any bedding needs to be safe for them to eat – materials such as hay that is free from dust and shredded paper can be used.



Alison Stalwood/RSPCA Photolibrary

Diet

● Food

Rabbits need continuous access to good quality hay that is free from dust and/or grass to eat. Each of your rabbits needs at least a bundle of hay that is as big as they are every day. Rabbits will also enjoy access to growing grass to graze on. Not all owners have the facilities to provide this, but you can plant grass in trays and offer it to your rabbits, or handpick some grass for them to eat. Never give your rabbits the clippings from the lawnmower as these can make them very poorly. If your rabbits haven't been fed grass previously, introduce small amounts very slowly as a sudden change from their usual diet can make them ill too.

Rabbits don't naturally eat cereals, root vegetables or fruits. Many people believe that items such as apples and carrots can be fed regularly as a main source of food. However, these are actually high in sugar and overindulgence can lead to health problems, so if given, should only be in very small amounts as an occasional treat. Healthier treats include herbs such as basil, coriander and mint which your rabbits will also enjoy.

Give your rabbits an adult-sized handful of safe washed leafy green vegetables, herbs or weeds daily. They can be provided with a variety of different types such as cabbage, kale, dandelions, parsley and mint. Try to aim for five or six different types each day, but always introduce any new greens slowly to help avoid potential tummy upsets. Spend some time finding out which plants are safe to feed your rabbits. If you decide to forage for your rabbits, make sure you are able to correctly identify anything you are feeding them and make sure it's safe for them to eat. Avoid foraging from areas which may have been contaminated with chemicals or from the side of roads which have been exposed to exhaust fumes. If you are unsure of which plants are safe to feed to your rabbits, consult your vet for advice.

In addition to hay and/or grass and leafy greens, your rabbits can also be given a small, measured daily portion of good quality commercial rabbit nuggets – choose ones that contain high levels of fibre as rabbits require large amounts of fibre in their diets. 25g of nuggets per kilogramme of your rabbit's body weight per day is a good guide to the amount they require. Don't be tempted to give your rabbits muesli-style foods as these can cause health issues such as dental and digestive problems.

Just like us, rabbits can easily become overweight if they eat more calories than they use up. Being overweight can lead to health issues such as diabetes, heart disease, respiratory distress, high blood pressure and cancers. Check on a regular basis that your rabbits are the right size and weight.

Rabbits' teeth grow continuously throughout their lives and need to be kept at the correct length and shape by eating grass, hay and leafy green plants. Dental problems are not uncommon in rabbits, but feeding your rabbits foods which are highly abrasive helps to wear down their continually growing teeth. If rabbits don't eat the right sort of foods this can lead to overgrown or misaligned teeth which can cause pain and suffering.

Rabbits produce two types of droppings – hard dry pellets, and softer moist pellets that they eat directly from their bottom. This is essential for your rabbits' health. Rabbits have evolved to eat a nutrient poor diet and this behaviour helps them get as much goodness as possible from their food. You should never see these soft pellets stuck to your rabbit or in their enclosure. If you do, it could be an indication that they are unwell and you should seek veterinary advice. Rabbits need a constant throughput of food through their guts. If they stop eating, even for just a few hours, contact your vet straightaway.

● Water

You should provide your rabbits with continuous access to fresh clean water in a way they are used to – the RSPCA centre will be able to advise you on this. Many rabbits prefer to drink water from a bowl, so if you do use a bottle it is also a good idea to give your rabbits a bowl as well. Make sure you regularly clean the bowl/bottle and don't let algae build up in the warmer weather. Similarly, in winter check their water supply at least twice a day to ensure it hasn't frozen. If you provide a water bottle, make sure water is able to flow through the spout and it is neither blocked or leaking.

Learning to live together:

Over the next few weeks you'll start to discover your new pet's true personality and what they are like in the home. You will also learn about how they like to play, what their favourite toy is and where they like to rest.

Your rabbits will not appreciate a squishy cuddle and most rabbits don't really like to be picked up and held. As they are a prey species, the only time they are naturally picked up is when they have been caught by a predator. Being picked up can be frightening for your rabbits and therefore you should try to interact with them at ground level whenever you can. Offering them a healthy treat while you are sitting on the ground can encourage them to come to you.

One of a rabbit's last defence mechanisms against predation is called 'tonic immobility'. This state can also be induced in pet rabbits by lying them on their backs. This is a highly stressful position for a rabbit to be in, and while they may appear to seem relaxed and still, they are actually very distressed, so never be tempted to lie your rabbits on their back.



Alison Stalwood/RSPCA Photolibrary

Play time

Rabbits are active animals and many, even as adults, enjoy playing. They are naturally active during dawn, dusk and overnight – spending the daytime resting and sleeping. So providing your rabbits with constant access to their exercise area allows them to explore and play at times of their choosing. Within this area there should be plenty of enrichment such as toys, tunnels, hiding places, platforms and somewhere to dig. Once your rabbits have settled and are eating normally, it can be a good idea to put some of their nuggets or vegetables into a puzzle feeder or food toy such as a treat ball. Toys don't have to be expensive and you can even make your own. Toilet roll tubes or egg boxes stuffed with hay and a healthy treat can be entertaining for rabbits as they throw them about to access the food.

Introducing new experiences

There may be things that your rabbits have never experienced before, or they may have had a bad experience, which can make them feel anxious. Help them by making sure any new experiences or people are positive. The key is to help them feel safe.

You can do this by:

- always remaining calm
- making introductions a gradual process
- using healthy treats to create a positive association
- always allowing your rabbits to move away from anything they are worried about.

Meeting new people

Some rabbits really enjoy human company and will be happy and comfortable meeting new people. However, all rabbits are different and some may be a little worried or nervous around new people. Watching your rabbits closely can help you understand how they are feeling.

If your rabbits seem to be scared or worried when meeting new people, it's important to make sure they can move away at any time and aren't pressured to say hello. New people should give your rabbits space and allow them to approach in their own time. Once your rabbits are ready to approach, you may want to ask the new person to offer them a healthy treat or just offer their hand for your rabbits to smell.

Avoid exposing your rabbits to lots of people all at once. Even if your rabbits appear happy to meet new people it is important to take things slowly and avoid overwhelming them.

Meeting children

In general, rabbits can find children hard to understand as they behave in a very different way to adults. They are loud, unpredictable and many show their feelings using lots of physical contact such as hugs and kisses. For many rabbits this type of behaviour can be threatening, particularly for rabbits who were not introduced to children when they were kittens. Here are some important tips on keeping children safe and rabbits happy:

- If your children are very young, it is best not to leave them alone with your new rescue rabbits.
- Children need to be shown how to be gentle with rabbits. Teach them the right way to handle your rabbits and the importance of not holding them too tightly or pulling their ears, whiskers or any other body part.
- Children should be taught to sit quietly and calmly on the floor waiting for your rabbits to approach them, where they can be given a healthy treat and gently stroked.
- Rabbits need lots of rest during the day, so children – and adults – should never force your rabbits to play, or disturb them while they are sleeping or eating. If your rabbits move away from you or hide, they may be stressed and should be left alone.

Training your rabbits:

Rabbits may not need to learn how to 'sit' or walk nicely on a lead like dogs, but there are some really useful behaviours you can teach your pet rabbits.

You could train your rabbits to use their litter tray (see page 6) or come when called. Rabbits should also be trained to feel comfortable getting in and out of their carrier – this can make travelling and visits to the vet much less stressful for you and your rabbits.

Training should be fun for both you and your rabbits – it can help build relationships and is a great way to enjoy each other's company. Learning new behaviours is also an excellent form of physical and mental exercise for your rabbits.

All training should be reward based. Giving your rabbits something they really like, such as food, when they show a particular behaviour means they are more likely to do it again. It's important to find out what your rabbits really like and what their favourite things are. Some rabbits find a chin or head stroke very rewarding while others love a particular food, like mint or coriander. Have fun getting to know what your rabbits like and find out what motivates them the most.

The better the reward, the more your rabbits will enjoy training and learning.

Please don't shout at your rabbits or tell them off for any mistakes they make – this doesn't help them to learn and is very likely to damage your relationship as it can make them afraid of you. If mistakes are made during training, or your rabbit is showing a behaviour that you don't want – ignore it.

Top training tips

- Give your rabbits time to settle into their new home before starting any training.
- Practice makes perfect and training can take time.
- Break training up into short but regular sessions.
- Train somewhere where your rabbits feel comfortable.
- Train at a time when your rabbits are active and awake.
- Reward your rabbits with something they really love.



Khamonthas Pinthaiyakul/Shutterstock.com

Why more than one rabbit?

Rabbits are very social animals and pet rabbits should be kept with at least one other friendly rabbit. You may be adopting rabbits for the first time or after a period of not having rabbits so we will match you with an already bonded pair.

Alternatively, you may be wishing to adopt one rabbit to live with an existing rabbit you already own. Whatever your situation, we will do our best to match you with a rabbit who will fit into your family. It is important to remember that not all rabbits will become friends and, if you already own a rabbit, please follow our advice to ensure all your rabbits live as happily together as possible.

Introductions are important

If you are not adopting an already bonded pair of rabbits you are probably adopting an RSPCA rabbit to live with your existing rabbit. Some of our RSPCA centres have the facilities to house your rabbit on site while they are bonding with the rabbit you are hoping to adopt. However, not all of our RSPCA centres are able to offer this service but they can guide you through the bonding process in your own home. You should speak with the RSPCA centre and talk through your options.

If you are going to take an RSPCA rabbit into your home to bond with your existing rabbit, follow our advice to help the process go as smoothly as possible. Don't be tempted to skip the step-by-step process – taking time and making introductions gradually is the best way to go. Staff at the RSPCA centre will be happy to give you more advice on the process and answer any questions you may have. If at any time during the bonding process you need help, please do chat this through with them.

Before bringing your RSPCA rabbit home it is important that you have everything ready to allow you to begin the bonding process. This includes familiarising yourself with the signs of positive and negative behaviours as this will help you notice if the bonding process is going well or not.

Positive:	Negative:
Sitting/lying side by side (even when the barrier is in between them).	Chasing each other.
Grooming each other.	Mounting the face or rear end.
Positive interactions, e.g. binkying (leaping and twisting), 'flopping' on the floor, washing and eating in close proximity to each other (even when the barrier is in between them).	Lunging and/or fighting.
Behaving normally around one another.	Growling.

Managing resources

Your rabbits' 'resources' are all the essential items they need, including water, food, hiding places, bedding material, litter trays, tunnels and toys. Each rabbit needs to be able to access all the resources they need without being prevented from doing so by another rabbit. Therefore, resources need to be plentiful – ideally at least one more resource than there are rabbits. For example, if you have two rabbits, you should ideally have three hiding places. Resources should also be spread throughout the enclosure so each rabbit can access them easily.



The bonding process

You will need to prepare suitable interim accommodation to move your RSPCA rabbit into. This area needs to include all the 'resources' your rabbit will need, including their water, food, hiding places, litter tray, toys and an area for resting with plenty of bedding material. This area should be located next to your existing rabbit's accommodation with a barrier between the two that still allows them to see and smell each other as well as enabling them to lie side by side. Take care to ensure they are not able to bite each other through the barrier. Both rabbits need to be provided with constant access to hiding places so they are able to hide away whenever they want to and avoid visual contact with each other. For additional privacy, and to help your rabbits feel more secure, you can screen part of the barrier, for example, using a piece of cardboard.

You will also need to have a 'neutral' area prepared for use later in the bonding process. This area needs to be new to both rabbits and one that neither of them have been in before. It is best to avoid trying to bond your rabbits in places such as a bathroom or kitchen. Often these rooms have scents from cleaning products or toiletries which can appear strong to rabbits, and tiled floors can be slippery. These types of environments can cause your rabbits to become fearful which can affect the bonding process and may lead to you thinking they are getting along when they actually aren't.

The bonding process begins by housing the rabbits close to one another, i.e. with each rabbit being housed in separate areas of their side-by-side housing. To help your rabbits form positive associations of each other when they are near the barrier you can place some of their daily food intake of leafy greens close to it. There may initially be some unrest which may last about a week and this is perfectly normal.

Once this has settled down and they seem comfortable in each other's presence you can take some of their bedding material and swap it over, or rub a cloth gently over one rabbit and then the other. Shy or timid rabbits may find this unnerving – if they back away from you or run away when you try to do this, it is better to miss this step out as you don't want to stress them further. Both of these actions transfer the scent of the rabbits to each other so they start to smell familiar. Once they have settled and are comfortable with the sight and smell of each other, you are ready to take the next step, which is for them to be introduced in the neutral area for short periods of time under close supervision.

During this stage you may see some negative behaviours – again these are perfectly normal during introductions but don't allow them to escalate. If they show severe or persistent aggression or try to mount each other's heads, they need to be separated immediately, but be very careful as you don't want to get injured yourself.

For the first few introductions keep the neutral area empty of any objects so you can keep a close eye on both rabbits. If the introductions continue to go well, you can start introducing toys, hiding places etc into the area, but always ensure there are enough for both rabbits. If things are continuing to go well, you can gradually increase the amount of time they are spending together so eventually they are together for supervised periods of time every day.

Once your rabbits are spending one to two hours together every day without any problems, it is time to introduce them to their intended living area. Always make sure they are supervised initially so you can keep an eye on them.



Alison Stalwood, Andrew Forsyth/RSPCA Photolibrary

Getting to know your rabbits and understanding their behaviour:

Rabbits' communication methods are subtle relying on scents (which we are unable to detect) and body language. They use different parts of their body, including their eyes and ears to signal how they are feeling.

Just like you, your rabbits can experience a range of emotions including happiness, anxiety, fear and anger. It's important to understand which emotions your rabbits are feeling so that you can take any action necessary to make sure they are happy and healthy. Use our guide on page 22 and share it with your friends and family so you can all recognise important body language signals and get to know how your rabbits are feeling.

It's not always obvious how a rabbit is feeling – for example, a worried rabbit might spend a lot of time hiding. Spend time watching each of your rabbits in order to learn what is normal behaviour for them.

Preventing and managing behaviour problems

As your rabbits settle into their new life and routine, you may start to experience some problems or see some behaviours which you didn't expect and are worried about.

It's a good idea to step back and think about things from a rabbit's perspective, as this can often help you understand why rabbits behave in a particular way. It will also help you find ways to prevent problem behaviours as well as manage and improve them.

There are many ways in which rabbit and human behaviour differs and we sometimes need to try and hold back on some of our human-like behaviours to have a better relationship with our rabbits. For example, as humans, we tend to want to greet friends and family with a big hug, but rabbits are prey species and can find being picked up and hugged very stressful and can even get injured if they struggle to escape. Many will often be much happier if you interact with them on ground level, letting them hop over to you in their own time, and when they do, giving them a gentle stroke on their head and/or face.

Although we see them as pets, our rabbits today still behave in similar ways to wild rabbits. It's helpful to remember this when trying to understand your rabbits' behaviours and any expectations you might have about how you want them to behave.

Some problematic behaviours occur through boredom where rabbits are not provided with enough to keep them occupied or when they don't have an outlet to perform their natural behaviours. Without things like toys to play with, places to hide and areas in which to dig, rabbits can become bored and unhappy. They may then start displaying behaviours such as chewing their housing, over-grooming or biting their water bottle. They may also chew/bite their bottle when they are struggling to access water so make sure you check each day that water can easily flow through the nozzle.

How we think about rabbits can also influence their behaviour. For many people, rabbits are a significant member of their family and can be treated very much like people. There is nothing wrong with this as long as we remember that rabbits are rabbits and not little people or even cats or small dogs.

Just like us, rabbits are mammals and can experience a variety of emotions. However, they are unable to process them in the same ways in which we do. For example, they can't plan ahead or think about what happened yesterday; they don't do things to deliberately make us angry – such as going to the toilet outside of their litter tray – and they don't know that hopping into the vegetable patch and eating your lovingly grown vegetables is wrong. This means that upsetting them by shouting and telling them off can often make problems worse and potentially cause more problems. It is much better for us and them to understand how they think and feel. This makes it easier for us to communicate with them without damaging our relationship.

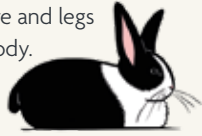
Recognise and understand your rabbits' body language

A happy rabbit

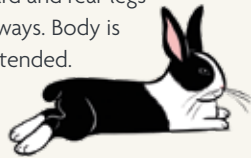
These rabbits are relaxed and happy.

Rabbits 1–3 below show ears close together, facing slightly backwards and pointing outwards. Eyes may be partially closed.

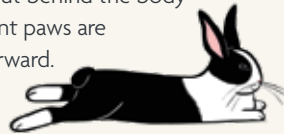
- 1 Rabbit is lying down, with a relaxed body posture and legs tucked under the body.



- 2 Rabbit is lying down, with front paws pointing forward and rear legs stuck out sideways. Body is relaxed and extended.



- 3 Rabbit is lying down with a fully extended, relaxed body. Back legs are stretched out behind the body and the front paws are pointing forward.



- 4 Rabbit jumps into the air with all four paws off the ground and twists in mid-air before landing (binkying).



Alison Stalwood/RSPCA Photolibrary



A worried rabbit

These rabbits are telling you that they are uncomfortable and don't want you near them.

- 1 Rabbit is in a crouched position, muscles are tense, head held flat to the ground, ears wide apart and flattened against the back, pupils dilated.



- 2 Rabbits who are worried or anxious may hide.



An angry or very unhappy rabbit

These rabbits are not happy and want you to stay away or go away.

- 1 Rabbit turns and moves away flicking the back feet. Ears may be held against the back.



- 2 Rabbit is sitting up on back legs with front paws raised displaying boxing behaviour. Ears pointed upwards and facing outwards, rabbit may be growling.



- 3 Rabbit is standing tense, with back legs thumping on the ground. Tail raised, ears pointing upwards and slightly turned outwards, facial muscles are tense and pupils dilated.



- 4 Rabbit is standing tense with body down and weight towards the back, head tilted upwards, mouth open and teeth visible. Ears held back and lowered, tail raised, pupils dilated.



Fearful or anxious behaviour generally means a rabbit is unhappy in certain situations. This can be a result of poor breeding, experiences during their learning period as a kitten or before coming into RSPCA care. If your rabbit regularly shows fear or is frightened of things, then they may not be enjoying life to the full and it is important to seek expert help. In the same way, rabbits who show aggressive behaviours may be in pain or feel threatened and are unhappy.

If you are worried about how your adopted rabbit(s) is behaving, please get in touch with the RSPCA animal centre. We will work with you to help understand why your rabbit(s) is behaving in a certain way and offer advice to help manage the problem. In some cases, we may refer you for more specialist advice, especially if we are worried about how your rabbit(s) is feeling and think they may not be enjoying life to the full.

What to do if you're having problems

- If you do experience problems and would like some help, please contact the RSPCA animal centre where you adopted your rabbit(s).
- If you are still concerned about your rabbits' behaviour, it's a good idea to get them checked over by a vet to rule out any illnesses or injury that may be causing the problem. The vet can then refer you to a Clinical Animal Behaviourist (CAB) for further help. Be careful though – anyone can call themselves an animal behaviourist, so do check that the one you use is qualified, experienced, knowledgeable and will protect your rabbits' welfare.

You can find a CAB on the following website:

- Animal Behaviour and Training Council (www.abtcouncil.org.uk)



Keeping your rabbits fit and healthy:

Finding a vet

Your rabbits will need to visit the vet at least twice a year for their vaccinations and a health check. Speak to your vet to see if they offer a health care plan for your pets, which allows you to spread the cost of preventative veterinary treatments such as regular health checks and vaccinations, while ensuring your pets remain fit and healthy.

Your rabbits should be registered with a vet. Although rabbits have been kept as pets for many years, veterinary training does not cover these species in as much detail as cats and dogs. While all vets can treat your rabbits if they are poorly and provide preventative treatment and advice, some have gained further knowledge and training and have greater experience when dealing with rabbits than others. The Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund website has a list of 'rabbit savvy' vets (rabbitwelfare.co.uk/rabbit-friendly-vets) and you may want to consider registering with one of these practices if they are local to you.

Before registering your rabbits with any practice, it is a good idea to ask a few questions about their protocols about what happens when you visit with your rabbits. For example, as a prey species rabbits can find the presence of animals such as cats and dogs stressful. Therefore, it is worth asking if they have separate waiting and hospital areas that ensure your rabbits can be kept apart from cats/dogs. There may be a vet at the practice that particularly enjoys seeing rabbits. If so, you may want to specify which vet you would like to see your rabbits for their routine appointments. It is also a good idea to ask if your rabbits will receive a thorough dental examination during their check ups to help notice any potential problems.

● Vaccinations

The RSPCA centre will have made sure your new RSPCA rabbits are up to date with their vaccinations. Rabbits are usually vaccinated against myxomatosis and Rabbit (Viral) Haemorrhagic Disease (R(V)HD). Recently a new strain of this disease, R(V)HD2, has become widespread in the UK and vaccinations against this are now also available. The RSPCA will confirm exactly which vaccinations your new rabbits have had and when their boosters are due.

Whether you decide to keep your rabbits indoors or outside, it's important to keep them protected and up to date with their vaccinations as these diseases can be fatal. They can be spread in a variety of ways, including via insects, so vaccination is the best way to keep your rabbits safe. Speak to your vet for more advice.

● Teeth

Every rabbit that comes into our care will receive a health check. Any immediate issues will be treated based on the advice of a veterinary surgeon. We recommend speaking to your own vet about how you can ensure your rabbits' teeth are in a healthy condition and how this can be maintained in the long term.

Unlike us, rabbits' teeth grow continuously throughout their lives and need wearing down and keeping at the correct length and shape. Providing your rabbits with the correct diet of grass and/or hay, as well as leafy green vegetables will naturally help them do this and keep their teeth healthy. Even if feeding the correct diet, your rabbits may still develop dental problems. Therefore, it is important that you check their teeth regularly (we suggest doing this on a weekly basis) to ensure they are correctly aligned and are not overgrown, as well as taking your rabbits to the vet for regular health checks.

When you check your rabbits' teeth you will only be able to see their front teeth (incisors). Rabbits can also experience problems with their back teeth (molars) so it is important these are checked by your vet when your rabbits have their health checks. Vet should use an instrument known as an 'otoscope' to allow them to view the back of your rabbits' mouths, although in some cases sedation/anaesthesia is required for a full assessment should there be any concerns. It is also worth noting that some breeds of rabbit, for example, the Netherland dwarf and lionhead, are more prone to dental issues because of the way they have been bred to look.

● Flystrike

Flystrike occurs when flies lay their eggs on an animal. When the maggots hatch they begin to eat the flesh of that animal and this can quickly lead to toxic shock and death. So in warmer weather it is very important that you check your rabbits at least twice a day for any sign of flystrike; and remember that even clean, well-kept rabbits can suffer from flystrike too.

When checking your rabbits, look for any signs of illness or injury; checking all over their body, especially around their rear end and tail area. Rabbits who are ill or unable to clean themselves properly or eat their caecotrophs (soft faecal pellets) are more at risk of flystrike. If you are at all concerned that your rabbits may be suffering from flystrike, contact your vet immediately. For more information about flystrike, visit: www.rspca.org.uk/flystrike

● Gut stasis

Rabbits have a specialised digestive system and require a constant throughput of food through their gut to keep it moving and help them remain healthy. Sometimes the gut can stop moving and this is known as 'gut stasis'.

Gut stasis can occur for a number of reasons such as when rabbits are in pain or stressed, as well as a result of reduced water intake, poor diet or a lack of exercise. Symptoms of gut stasis include rabbits being quieter than usual or sitting hunched over, a reduced food and water intake and a reduction in the number and size of faecal pellets. If you notice any of these symptoms you should treat this as an emergency and speak to your vet immediately. Feeding your rabbits the correct diet, ensuring they have plenty to do in their enclosure, monitoring their behaviour every day and taking them for regular health checks at the vet can all help to reduce the risk of gut stasis.

Watch out

Rabbits can suffer from a range of diseases and other illnesses, but individual rabbits show pain and suffering in different ways. A change in the way your rabbit behaves can be a sign that they are distressed, bored, ill or injured.

As prey species, rabbits don't show many outward signs of being poorly until they are really quite ill. Therefore, once your rabbits have settled into your home you should take time to get to know how they usually behave. That way you will be able to spot any subtle changes in their behaviour which can indicate they are not well. Possible changes include a change in toileting and/or eating habits, increased hiding or avoidance.

If you are worried about the health of your rabbits, if they are displaying any symptoms of ill-health or you spot any changes in their behaviour, please contact your vet.

Top tip – look into taking out pet insurance as it can help you cope with unexpected vet bills for illness or injury.

Watch our video on how to health check your rabbits at: www.rspca.org.uk/rabbithealthchecks



shutterstock.com

Unlike cats and dogs, rabbits don't need routine worming but there is a parasite, *E. cuniculi*, which can be very serious so speak to your vet about this, especially if you are considering bonding a rescue rabbit with your own. Routine flea prevention is not usually required, but they can get fleas and other skin parasites so speak to your vet about treatment as not all products aimed at other species are safe for rabbits and can be toxic. Speak to your vet if you notice black dots in the coat, excessive scurf in the coat or skin irritation as these are all indications of skin parasites.

● Summer care advice

It is important that your rabbits are kept cool in the summer. Make sure there are always areas of shade available to them, and remember, that as the sun moves during the day so do areas of shade – somewhere shaded in the morning may be in direct sunlight in the afternoon.

Rabbits will drink more in warmer weather so ensure their bowls/bottles are topped up. Another tip to help keep your rabbits cool is to freeze a semi-full plastic bottle of water and wrap it in a towel for them to lie against. Leave this in their exercise area rather than their shelter in case it leaks.

● Winter care advice

If you house your rabbits outdoors, many can cope with the cold fairly well. However, you will need to make sure you provide them with plenty of extra bedding materials such as hay that is free from dust to snuggle into and help them keep warm. You may also want to consider moving their enclosure into an outhouse, shed or unused garage but make sure they still have plenty of space to exercise.

Think about bringing your rabbits indoors over the winter, especially if they are older, young, underweight or haven't built up a thick winter coat. If you are thinking about doing this you should plan ahead to minimise the stress of transitioning them from the outdoor to indoor environment. Introduce your rabbits to their indoor home gradually by bringing them inside for increasingly longer periods each day during the autumn so they can settle and explore their new surroundings.

We have produced a detailed factsheet on caring for rabbits in winter, which can be found at: www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/seasonal/winter/pets

● Grooming

Grooming can be a great way to bond with your rabbits and an opportunity to keep an eye on how healthy your rabbits are. Grooming should be introduced slowly, using rewards to make your rabbits feel comfortable. Be gentle and calm, giving occasional healthy treats to make the whole experience positive. Let your rabbits be in control – if they've had enough, stop. If you are having any problems grooming your rabbits, please speak to the RSPCA or your vet.

If you are at all worried about the health of your rabbits, if they are displaying any symptoms of ill-health or you spot any changes in their behaviour, please contact your vet.

Warning

While rabbits have evolved to eat grasses and other plants, some everyday items are poisonous to them, such as:

- onions, garlic, chives and spring onions
- rhubarb
- avocado
- potatoes and the plant, tomato plants
- chocolate – while not a plant, chocolate is also poisonous to rabbits.

Visit: www.rspca.org.uk/poisoning for advice on how to prevent poisoning and what to do if your rabbits are poisoned.

All of us at the RSPCA wish you and your new friends a fun and happy life together. We are very grateful to you for giving them the loving home they deserve, and, by rehoming one of our rabbits, making a place for another rabbit to get the care they urgently need. Please do keep in touch; our rehoming team loves receiving photos and stories of the adventures you have together.





Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

Wilberforce Way, Southwater, Horsham, West Sussex RH13 9RS

Telephone: 0300 1234 999 www.rspca.org.uk

facebook.com/RSPCA twitter.com/RSPCA_official

The RSPCA helps animals in England and Wales. Registered charity no. 219099.

The RSPCA only exists with the support of public donations. Copyright © 2021 RSPCA.

All rights reserved. This material must not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the RSPCA.

Cover photo: MestoSveta/Shutterstock.com P30 06.21