

Rabbit Awareness Week, which runs from June 1-9, is the ideal time for retailers to help educate customers about caring for their rabbits. The Pet Food Manufacturers' Association has pulled together its top tips based on a rabbit's five welfare needs



What owners need to know about rabbits

RABBITS ARE very sociable and like dogs and cats, they are regularly thought of as one of the family. With the right care, a rabbit can live between eight and 12 years; some may live longer.

The five welfare needs apply to all animals:

- The need for a suitable environment
- The need for a suitable diet
- The need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns
- The need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals
- The need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease.

ENVIRONMENT

Rabbits need a large hutch/enclosure and plenty of space with access to grass where they can exercise every day. Some rabbits also enjoy being indoors.

Rabbits are mostly active at dawn and dusk, which means they like to sleep during the day. Owners should try to replicate their natural environment by ensuring the sleeping area is dark and cosy. They will also hide here if they are feeling anxious.

It's also important owners get the temperature right – the enclosure shouldn't be in direct sunlight and during the colder weather, they must have plenty of bedding to keep warm.

Rabbits generally choose a specific area as their toileting space, but they can be trained to use a certain area or litter tray. Enclosures should be cleaned daily.

DIET

Poor diet has numerous repercussions, so it's important to provide your customers with the right dietary advice.

The importance of fibre in the form of good quality hay or grass in a rabbit's diet cannot be underestimated. Hay is essential for their teeth, digestive system and foraging keeps them occupied.

A rabbit's diet should consist of:

- A portion of hay roughly the size of their body a day
- Commercially prepared rabbit food to ensure the rabbit receives all the vitamins and minerals they need – see the package for feeding guidelines. Remind owners that lifestage products are also available

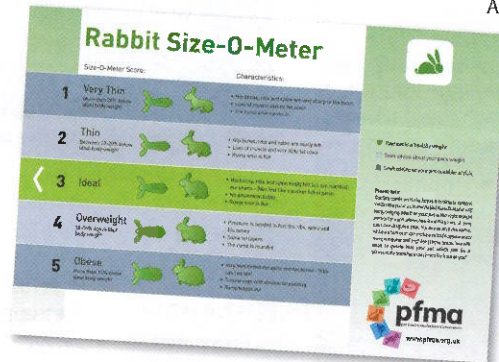


- A small handful of fresh leafy greens as they are good for teeth and provide variety
- Root vegetables, including carrots, or treats to be given occasionally.

Rabbits need constant access to fresh, clean water in a bowl or metal tipped feeding bottle. Suggest

owners try both to decide what works best for their rabbit as many prefer

Retailers can show the Rabbit Size-O-Meter to owners to help them keep their pets at a healthy shape



bowls. Water vessels should be checked, cleaned and water replenished daily.

BEHAVIOUR

Rabbits naturally graze and forage for their food. Owners can encourage this natural behaviour by ensuring they frequently have some time outside, and by scattering and concealing food in cardboard boxes and tubes. Rabbit toys are useful for exercise and mental stimulation.

COMPANY

Rabbits are very social animals and can get lonely without a companion. Ideally, they should be kept in pairs after neutering.

Owners should gently handle their rabbits as often as possible so they can get used to human contact. Daily contact can prevent timid or aggressive behaviour, but make sure their bottoms are supported when handling to avoid hurting their backs.

Advise owners to get down on the floor to be on the same level as their bunny and let bunny come to them.

Rabbits are a prey species, so reaching down to them can unnerve them as they may think they are being attacked by a predator.

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Advise owners to check their rabbits are healthy and happy

by monitoring any changes in eating, drinking, toilet habits and his / her behaviour or appearance.

A common problem area is their teeth and it's important to make sure they are in good shape. Rabbit's teeth grow all the time, which is why they need to chew on lots of hay. ■



WHAT CAN YOU DISPLAY TO HELP OWNERS?

Inside this issue of pbwnews, you will find an A3 folded poster with the 'All about Hay' image on

one side and the Rabbit Size-O-Meter on the reverse to help you educate owners on rabbit care.