



# MACRITCHIE VETERINARY PRACTICE

Beechwood Veterinary Centre  
139 Glasgow Road, Baillieston  
Glasgow G69 6TA  
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Open: Mon-Fri 8.30am to 7pm,  
Sat 8.30am-1.30pm

Low Waters Veterinary Centre  
84 Portland Place  
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Tel. 01698 283400  
Open: Mon-Fri 8.30am to 7pm  
Sat 9am-11am

Consultations by appointment  
24-hour emergency service

## FACTSHEET: RABBITS

*Rabbits are social animals that live in large groups in the wild. Pet rabbits can be kept in the home or outdoors. They can make excellent house pets, but you must protect your electrical wiring, and allow them regular access to the garden for exercise, food and sunlight. If kept outside, rabbits should have regular daily access to the garden.*

*Rabbits are very social animals and it is nice for them to have companionship from another rabbit, but in the wild only a female and a male live together. Two males together will fight as will two un-neutered females. If you plan to get more than one rabbit it is important to think carefully about which sex to get and whether to have them neutered. Castration and spaying are strongly recommended from the age of four months, otherwise you could soon be overrun!*

*Note that rabbits are more susceptible to heat than to cold, and can easily die from heat stroke in their hutch on a hot day.*

### Handling rabbits

Whenever you pick up your rabbit make sure to support the hind legs. These legs are so strong that if the rabbit kicks in the air and there is nothing to give support then spine damage can result. Never pick a rabbit up by their ears!

### Vaccinations

#### Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD)

A disease was first imported into the UK in 1992, and because of its rapid spread, it was a Notifiable Disease. Transmission is airborne and can kill rabbits a long way from an outbreak area. VHD causes blood clots in the lungs, severe nose bleeds, and often an agonising death in 1-2 days. Vaccination is available and gives good protection from a single annual injection. This vaccination can be given from 10 weeks of age and is safe for pregnant females. Allow at least two weeks between this and the Myxomatosis vaccine (see below). At present not often found in Scotland.

#### Myxomatosis

This disease was deliberately introduced into many countries in an attempt to control the rabbit population — and it was very effective. Although wild rabbits are gradually becoming more resistant, many sadly still die a horrible death each year. The disease is spread by biting insects such as the flea and it has a peak incidence during the summer months when there are the largest number of these insects around. The vaccination can be given from 6 weeks of age and we recommend vaccinating every 12 months, unless there is an outbreak nearby, in which case every 6 months may be more appropriate. Allow at least two weeks between this and the VHD vaccine.

### Feeding

Many of the problems seen in pet rabbits is diet related. The healthiest diet would be what wild rabbits eat — low-growing vegetation, grass, weeds and what they can reach from trees and bushes, even including tree bark! Grass and hay contain calcium which is vital for strong bones and good teeth.

A rabbit's teeth continue to grow throughout life, so they need to be in constant use to prevent them becoming overgrown. Overgrown molars tend to dig into the sides of the mouth causing a rabbit to start dribbling and stop eating.

Many rabbits suffer from 'malocclusion'. This is when the teeth don't meet properly and as a result they may need burring down at the regularly throughout a rabbit's life... sometimes every 3-4 weeks!

There is a lot of evidence that problems like this start early on in life and are preventable. If a young rabbit is fed a correct food when it is weaned then this will help the teeth to grow normally so that they are strong and correctly positioned in the jaw. A young rabbit needs to have plenty of jaw exercise chewing and grinding coarse plant material to allow the teeth to form correctly as the rabbit grows.

Rabbits need a good diet to keep their bowel in good working order. If a rabbit is fed a diet too low in fibre then it's gut bacteria and bowel will not be able to function

properly. Resultant problems are obesity and diarrhoea which can make them prone to 'fly-strike' in the summer. Fly-strike is a disease where flies lay eggs on the rabbit and these then hatch into maggots. Preventative treatments are available.

### Coprophagia

This means eating faeces — which is exactly what rabbits do! At night, they eat soft faeces directly from the anus. These then pass through the gut again and the rabbit extracts much more nourishment the second time. When a rabbit fails to do this, the sticky faeces start to accumulate around the backside of the rabbit. The commonest reasons for a rabbit not eating its faeces are that its diet is too low in fibre, or they are too fat to reach!

### Diet

Young rabbits should be fed on hay plus either breeder pellets which contain about 18% protein, or 'Russell Rabbit Junior' (or similar), which has a reasonable protein and fibre level. They can also be given fresh grass and weeds and once vaccinated for myxomatosis your rabbit can go outside to graze.

All changes to your rabbits diet must be done gradually. An adult rabbit is designed to eat nothing but grass and hay with a few bits of other vegetables and greenery on the side. The correct calcium levels in grass are vital as is the grinding action of the back teeth when chewing it. Brittle bones and over-grown teeth are almost always associated with feeding too much rabbit mix and not enough of their natural diet.

Ideally your rabbit should be living outside on the lawn so that it can select the types of grass it likes. If it just isn't possible to let your rabbit out then collect some blades of grass yourself — these must be fresh. Mower clippings and lots of lettuce are no good for rabbits because they will cause your bunny to swell up with gas! Keep your rabbit off the flower borders as some plants are poisonous and make any change in diet over two weeks to give your rabbit the chance to adapt. If you need to supplement hay and grass in the winter, or to give your rabbit a treat, then provide pelleted food (such as 'Supa Rabbit') rather than rabbit mix.

Some rabbit mixes have various ingredients, and often the pellets aren't eaten. Don't just clean out the bowl and start again... leave the left-overs until they are eaten, since they often contain supplements not found in the other ingredients.

### Exercise

Exercise and grass are both vital to produce a rabbit with strong healthy bones. A wild rabbit hopping about outside will have bones more than twice as strong as one kept in the hutch. Encourage your rabbit to play by suspending a carrot from the roof of the cage or by placing some boards in the hutch so it has to leap over them to get to the food. Some will happily play with a ball, chasing it around. This also offers good exercise.