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Congratulations and thank you for adopting your new pet from the RSPCA. 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 the RSPCA

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Victoria) was established in Melbourne in 1871. Since then, the RSPCA has become Australia’s leading animal welfare organisation.

Across the state, the RSPCA’s community services include the work undertaken by our Inspectorate, Animal Care, Veterinary Clinic, Education and Learning teams. The RSPCA operates nine animal welfare shelters and two community pet care centres across Victoria, providing refuge, care and a second chance to thousands of animals each year.

Our Inspectorate receives more than 10,700 animal cruelty complaints each year, rescuing vulnerable animals from abuse and neglect and prosecuting cruelty offenders through the courts. Each year, our Education and Learning team contributes to prevention strategies by educating and influencing more than 6,300 young people on the value and importance of animal welfare.

The RSPCA works to increase community awareness and education on animal welfare and advocates tirelessly for improved legislation. Legislative improvements to better protect animals have been achieved at both state and federal levels thanks to the continued lobbying of the RSPCA and support of the community.

As a not-for-profit organisation, the RSPCA relies on community support to care for ‘all creatures great and small’. More than 90% of the RSPCA’s funding is due to the generous support of the Victorian community.
When you adopted your small animal, you should have received certificates for vaccinations (except guinea pig), microchipping and desexing. Required information may have also been provided relating to surgical aftercare.

These are important documents and should be stored in a safe location as part of your new pets health record. This information is required for the future care of your new pet by your veterinarian and to obtain concessional registration available from your local council.

**Your rabbit’s or guinea pig’s details**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Breed description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colour</td>
<td>Microchip number</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Contact details**

**Your local RSPCA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Telephone</th>
<th>Address</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Your Veterinarian**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Telephone</th>
<th>Address</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**24-hour emergency clinic**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Telephone</th>
<th>Address</th>
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</thead>
</table>

**Your local council**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Telephone</th>
<th>Address</th>
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Post adoption check list

**Desexing**
Your rabbit or guinea pig has had desexing surgery.

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 take your pet back to the RSPCA immediately.

The adoption clinic will notify you as to whether there are any sutures (stitches) that will need to be removed by a veterinarian at a later date. When you get your rabbit or guinea pig home, continue to monitor it to make sure that it is behaving and eating normally. A post-operative rabbit or guinea pig should not stop eating and if it does, it is best to seek veterinary assistance.

A green mark has been tattooed in your rabbit or guinea pig’s left ear to indicate desexing.

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

**Vaccination**
Rabbits adopted from the RSPCA have been vaccinated against Calicivirus disease (see page 18 for more information about Calicivirus disease). This vaccination protects rabbits from the disease for a period of 10 to 12 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.

**Continuous health care**
If you received medication at the time of adoption, it is important to follow the instructions provided until the course of medication is complete.
Identifying your rabbit or guinea pig

Your rabbit or guinea pig 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.

You will receive (via post) notification of your pet’s inclusion on the 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.

If you have any health or behavioural concerns, please don’t hesitate to contact your RSPCA Adoption Centre for advice.
Health concerns

Your new pet has been examined by a veterinarian and no significant health issues have been identified.

However we strongly recommend that you have your new rabbit or guinea pig examined by your own veterinarian (or a veterinarian who has a particular interest in small animal care) to establish that there are no underlying health concerns.

Should you have any concerns subsequent to veterinary examination (or for any other reason) we would ask that you contact the relevant RSPCA adoption centre for advice and guidance. The RSPCA will provide free veterinary care for your rabbit or guinea pig for two weeks after adoption.

Should your small animal commence treatment with a veterinarian other than one engaged by the RSPCA, this would be at your own expense unless pre-approved by an RSPCA representative.

Many animals that are placed in adoption arrive at RSPCA shelters as strays. Consequently we may have little or no specific information regarding individual animals other than that which has been observed during their stay at the shelter, or during their behavioural assessment.

If you are experiencing difficulties with your new pet please contact your local RSPCA Adoption Centre to discuss these issues and obtain advice.
As a responsible pet owner adopting from the RSPCA, you have met the criteria:

- You are over 18 years of age.
- You have not been convicted of an offence relating to cruelty to animals and are not knowingly the subject of an RSPCA investigation.
- The animal is not being purchased as a present for another person without their knowledge.

When you sign the purchase agreement provided by the RSPCA, you agree that you understand that the purchase is in accordance with all legislative requirements.

- If you find that the animal is unacceptable (excluding accidents) because of health or other reasons that are supported by a veterinarian (within seven days of purchase) you will receive a full refund or replacement animal upon the return of the original purchase.
- Should you return the animal within three days for any reason, you will receive a refund of 75% of the total purchase price or will be offered a replacement animal with the same guarantee.
- All replacement animals are subject to the same conditions of sale.
- All other treatment after purchase including vaccinations, regular worming and flea treatment will be at your cost.
- You undertake to provide all food, water, shelter and veterinary treatment for the life of the animal.
- You undertake that the animal will not be used for food, experimental or research purposes of any description, and that you are not a dealer or an agent of a dealer.
- That details of your purchase will be supplied by RSPCA Victoria to the relevant municipality in which you reside at the time of purchase.
- You understand each Australian State and Territory has its own regulations on keeping rabbits as pets. Always check the regulations with the council for your area.
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.

Our expert team is here to help and can provide advice on selecting products:

- **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.

- **Food**
  Fresh grass or oaten hay, leafy greens, fresh vegetables (see pages 10 - 11 for more information on feeding).

- **Litter tray**
  A plastic tray, rectangular or triangular in shape.

- **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! (see pages 12 - 13 for more information on rabbit hutches).

- **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 (see page 20 for more information).

- **Flea control**
  Revolution is the only flea control product that can be used on rabbits. This is extremely important as the use of other products is potentially fatal (see page 20 for more information on flea prevention).

A shopping list is provided at the end of this booklet.
Arriving home with your new rabbit

Arriving home with your new rabbit

An animal shelter can be an unsettling experience for any animal and your new rabbit has been held in a shelter environment for ten days or more, 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, a drip bottle 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. Children under 10 years should not handle your rabbit unless closely supervised by an adult in case of injury to the child or rabbit.

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. 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 home – the hutch!

If you already own a rabbit and you are introducing the two for the first time, do not place them together immediately expecting them to be best friends. Rabbits will fight savagely if they dislike each other and newcomers need to be introduced with care. To encourage bonding choose a small, neutral area such as a bathroom or penned enclosure in which to allow your rabbits to interact. Place them side by side and distract them from chasing and fighting each other by feeding them treats. Typically, a good sign is when they begin to co-exist in their neutral space. You will know this when they start to sit closer, sleep near each other and eat together. Reciprocal grooming is the ultimate sign of successful bonding!

If you need support, please contact your local RSPCA Adoption Centre.
Rabbit information

**Desexing and surgical after-care**

You are now the owner of a desexed rabbit who will give you many years of happiness, without contributing to the over-population of rabbits in the community. Desexed rabbits are less likely to:

- Roam
- Get lost
- Spray urine
- Get hit by a car
- Fight with other rabbits
- Experience behavioural problems

- Show aggression to people and other rabbits
- Develop cancer in both male and female rabbits

It is important that you monitor your rabbits eating once it has been taken home. Your new pet may have had surgery and not eating may indicate a post surgery complication.

Please note: plastic ‘Elizabethan’ type collars are not recommended for use on rabbits as these collars prevent rabbits from eating.

**Rabbit facts and figures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lifespan (in captivity):</th>
<th>7-10 years</th>
<th>Female breeding age:</th>
<th>From approx. four months old</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male rabbit:</td>
<td>Is called a buck</td>
<td>Male breeding age:</td>
<td>From approx. five months old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female rabbit:</td>
<td>Is called a doe</td>
<td>Gestation period:</td>
<td>Approx. 29-34 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby rabbit:</td>
<td>Is called a kitten</td>
<td>Breeding lifespan:</td>
<td>Three years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Litter size:</td>
<td>13+ kittens</td>
<td>Bucks:</td>
<td>5-6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight:</td>
<td>Depends on breed: approx. 1kg for a very small Netherland Dwarf to 10 kg for a very large Flemish Giant.</td>
<td>Teeth:</td>
<td>Rabbits have 28 teeth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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 (see page 19 for more information on dental care).

You should feed your rabbit 80 - 90% hay (e.g. oaten hay) or fresh grass, and 10 - 20% fresh vegetables (two packed cups of fresh green vegies per kg per day as a guide), fruit and greens, dandelion leaves (also known as ‘flat weeds’) and/or carrot tops. Do not feed your rabbit commercial pellets or mixed grain as these are high in carbohydrates, proteins and fats and are not good for a rabbit’s digestion or teeth.

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 (see pages 17 for more information on health issues). 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.
Do not feed your rabbit any of the following:

- Alfalfa or lucerne
- Iceberg lettuce
- Cabbage
- Raw beans
- Corn or corn cobs
- Pellets and rabbit mixes
- Cakes or biscuits
- Clover hays
- Sweets (lollies, chocolate)
- Bread
- 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.

If your rabbit stops eating or defecating, seek immediate veterinary treatment as this could be a sign of life-threatening illness. Do not delay, as rabbits can deteriorate very quickly.
**Litter training and safe enclosures**

Rabbits are clean animals and like to deposit their pellets in the one spot, usually in a preferred corner. Like cats, rabbits can easily be litter trained and once a tray is provided they will often automatically use it. If your rabbit does not, move its droppings into the tray so it understands. 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 three times a week is ideal, but if you have more than one rabbit this may need to be done more frequently. As a rule, clean as necessary but keeping an eye on the tray daily is useful both as a reminder and as a chance to monitor your rabbit’s health.

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.

**Heat stroke**

Rabbits are incredibly susceptible to the weather, although they tend to cope better with cold temperatures than hot ones. It is advisable not to allow rabbits to experience temperatures lower than about 10°C or higher than 25°C. It is important to note that rabbits can experience heat stress at just 25°C. On days over 25°C, frozen water in plastic bottles can be provided for your rabbit to lie against. Sufficient air circulation and wet towels will also help regulate its temperature. Rabbits should definitely be brought into a temperature controlled environment when the temperature is below 10°C and above 29°C.

As mentioned above, rabbits are prey animals and for this reason it is ideal to keep them indoors at night. If this is not an option, the hutch must have a covered area that your rabbit can go into without being seen from the outside. Rabbits have been known to die from the pure shock or fright of simply seeing a potential predator.

**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.
Rabbit information

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.

**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.
A new rabbit in the family

When you bring your rabbit home, leave it inside for no more than a few days. It can be left in a cage, hutch, or placed in a small room but ensure it has access to ample food and water, a litter tray and bedding.

If kept in a cage or hutch it is recommended that you put a cover over to help your rabbit feel safe.

Keep your rabbit as quiet as possible, remembering that he or she has been through an operation.

While your rabbit is inside take the opportunity to introduce it to your children. Do not let children, dogs or cats frighten or chase rabbits as they are easily frightened and could suffer heart failure. 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. Handle, cuddle and groom your rabbit regularly throughout the day. Just like us, each rabbit has its own unique personality. Get to know your rabbit’s personality and its likes and dislikes. A rabbit is not like a cat or dog it will not come when you call it. Rabbits do however respond to handling and once you have earned their trust will respond in amazing ways. They are intelligent creatures and love to play and have fun!

After a few days put your rabbit into its outside hutch, which has been prepared with plenty of water, hay or fresh grass, as well as litter and a litter tray. Carry your rabbit in a cage so it is secure and then transfer it to the outside hutch. Rabbits’ ears are very sensitive. Never pick rabbits up by their ears or squeeze them.

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.

If you adopted two rabbits from the RSPCA, they are presumably a previously ‘bonded pair’ and are unlikely to fight. Treat two rabbits as one but obviously provide more food and water for them. Do not introduce another rabbit to your hutch without consulting the RSPCA veterinarian or Adoption Centre for advice on how to do so. Rabbits may appear bonded when they are immature, but once matured could change and become aggressive towards each other.

A desexed male and a female or two females are considered the best combination, but two males seldom get along.

If you want more than two rabbits, two females and a male (all desexed) is the way to go.
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 more supervision than with cats. 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 during the first month or thereafter 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
As long as your cat is not a hunter, it should get along just fine with your new rabbit. Kittens might be more difficult to introduce than adult cats as they enjoy playing and rabbits are incredibly fragile. To begin with, supervise interactions between the two and keep a spray water bottle handy to break up any fights. Eventually your cat and your new rabbit should come to tolerate and hopefully even like each other! Do keep your cat’s nails trimmed to protect your rabbit.

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.
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.

Zoonotic diseases of rabbits

Zoonotic diseases describe infectious diseases that can be transmitted from human to animal and vice versa. Some of these are:

- **Salmonella**
  A bacteria found in contaminated food and faeces.
  Rabbits with such infections should be treated appropriately and handled with care until the infection is successfully treated. A bite or scratch from a rabbit can become infected – the wound should be washed immediately with an antiseptic solution. After handling your rabbit (or any animal) ensure that you wash your hands thoroughly.

Because rabbits are prey animals, they will revert to their basic instincts and try to hide any signs of ill-health. They instinctively know that weaker animals ultimately become food in the ‘food chain’ of nature.

Apart from physical injury, signs of illness or abnormality include lethargy, not eating, nasal discharge, watery eyes, breathing problems, diarrhoea or constipation, dirty coats, behavioural changes and changes in weight.

- **Cheyletiella**
  A type of dermatitis caused by a genus of mites, resulting in transient itchy skin rash.

The following are some of the main diseases or problems that are common in rabbits, with details and prevention. Take your rabbit to a vet immediately if you notice any of the following signs or symptoms:

- **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.
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 annually (see page 3 for more information on vaccinations).

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.

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.

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.

Obesity

Obesity is due to a combination of poor diet and lack of exercise. Obese rabbits are at an increased risk of sore hocks (ankles), urine scalding and Gastric Stasis. Prevent obesity by providing a low-fat and low-sugar diet with plenty of exercise.
Possible health issues

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.

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.

Skin conditions

A number of skin conditions can cause irritation for your rabbit and are usually caused by parasites, fleas, mites and ringworms. 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 the RSPCA, your veterinarian (or a veterinarian who is experienced in rabbit care) before administering flea prevention. ‘Revolution’ is the only commercial treatment recommended for use on rabbits and a veterinarian will advise on the dosage for your rabbit. If your rabbit has hair loss and what looks like dandruff it may have fleas and should be taken to see your veterinarian.

**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 short-haired 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 moult perhaps once or twice 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.

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.
Rabbit information

Behavioural issues

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

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

**Nipping/scratching**
Rabbits are prey animals and it is important to remember this when approaching or trying to hold your rabbit. If you approach suddenly, your rabbit may assume attack and defend itself.

**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!

**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.

**Aggression**
Aggression is usually solved when rabbits are desexed but can occur afterwards in some situations e.g. If there are two male rabbits in one hutch. If you notice a sudden change in your rabbit’s temperament it should be brought to the attention of your veterinarian.
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.

- **Food**
  Grass or grass hay, pellets, leafy greens, fresh fruit and vegetables rich in Vitamin C. (See page 24 for more information on feeding).

- **Hiding spots**
  Guinea pigs need hiding spots in their cage to keep them feeling safe. Cardboard boxes and tubes from toilet paper rolls are the ideal or you can purchase more elaborate ones from pet supply stores.

- **Gnawing block**
  Guinea pigs love to gnaw.

- **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. (See page 24 for more information on housing).

A shopping list is provided at the end of this booklet.
Guinea pig information

Arriving home with your new guinea pig

An animal shelter can be an unsettling experience for any animal and your new guinea pig has been held in a shelter environment for ten days or more, 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.

If you need support, please contact your local RSPCA Adoption Centre.

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.
Desexing and surgical after-care

You are now the owner of a desexed guinea pig who will give you many years of happiness. All animals sold by the RSPCA are desexed. Desexed guinea pigs are less likely to:

- Seek out a mate and over-populate
- Experience behavioural problems
- Show aggression to people and other guinea pigs
- Develop cancer (in both male and female guinea pigs)

It is important that you monitor your guinea pigs eating once it has been taken home. Your new pet may have had surgery and not eating may indicate a post surgery complication.

Guinea pig facts and figures:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lifespan (in captivity):</th>
<th>5-10 years</th>
<th>Gestation period:</th>
<th>Approx. 68 days</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male guinea pig:</td>
<td>Is called a boar</td>
<td>Number of young:</td>
<td>One to six pups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female guinea pig:</td>
<td>Is called a sow</td>
<td>Average body weight:</td>
<td>700-1200 grams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young guinea pig:</td>
<td>Is called a pup</td>
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Guinea pig information

**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), 15% fresh, leafy-green vegetables (roughly one packed cup per day) and fruit once or twice a week. Avoid feeding over-processed pet pellets and 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 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 76cm x 91cm of cage space to remain healthy and happy. Male guinea pigs however need 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.
**FOOD** – did you know that 80% of your small animal’s diet should consist of high quality hay? Oxbow hay will give your new pet the nutrition it needs. The other 20% of your small animal’s diet should be made up of fresh green vegetables and a small amount of pellets.

**HUTCH** – if your small animal will spend time in a hutch, this will need to have enough room for the animal to exhibit natural behaviours, including running, playing, standing and stretching. The hutch must be a minimum 3m² and be insect proof. Size of the hutch should be relative to the size of the animal.

**WATER BOTTLE** – the bottle should be large enough to hold a day’s worth of water.

**FOOD BOWL** – ceramic dishes are best. Plastic bowls are unsuitable as they tip over and small animals will chew on them.

**HAY RACK OR SHALLOW TRAY** – a great way to keep feeding hay fresh and available for your small animals.

**LITTER TRAY** – essential for your small animals toileting needs.

**LITTER**
- Breeders Choice
- Max’s litter
- Straw

**BEDDING** – an igloo style bed will give your small animal a nice place to hide. Showmaster hay is great for bedding.

**CARRIER**

**TOYS** – small animals love to play! We have toys that are safe for them to chew and will keep them entertained.
**GROOMING** – the type of brush you will need will depend on your new small animal’s coat.

- Slicker brush
- Shedding comb
- Bristle brush
- Nail clippers
- Grooming mitt
- Fine tooth comb
- Zoom groom
- Furminator

**SPECIAL NEEDS / FURTHER COMMENTS:**

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RSPCA Victoria Adoption Centres

Ballarat
155A Gillies Street South
Ballarat 3350
P 03 5334 2075

Bendigo
20 Pipers Lane
Bendigo 3550
P 03 5441 2209

Burwood East
Head office
3 Burwood Highway
Burwood East 3151
P 03 9224 2222
Also includes veterinary clinic, grooming and training.

Castlemaine
24 Langslow Street
Castlemaine 3450
P 03 5472 5277

Epping
335 O’Herns Road
Epping 3076
P 03 9408 7356

Peninsula
1030 Robinsons Road
Pearcedale 3912
P 03 5978 9000
Also includes veterinary clinic.

Portland
185 Darts Road
Portland 3305
P 03 5523 4690

Wangaratta
1 Connell Street
Wangaratta 3677
P 03 5722 2874

Warrnambool
23 Braithwaite Street
Warrnambool 3280
P 03 5561 2591

RSPCA Pets Place
Ballarat
27 Albert Street
Sebastopol 3356
P 03 5335 5909
Also includes vet consults, grooming services and pet retail.

RSPCA Pets Place
Epping
560 - 650 High Street
Epping Homemaker Centre
Epping 3076
P 03 9401 0222
Also includes vet consults and pet retail.

More information
Visit rspcavic.org for more information on caring for your small animal and what to do if it is lost. There is also a large range of pet products and publications available at all Adoption Centres and Veterinary Clinics.

For specific behavioural problems, please email the RSPCA at animalbehaviour@rspcavic.org.au or phone 03 9224 2222.