

RABBIT WINTER CARE ADVICE



Wild and most domestic breeds of rabbits have warm fur coats and most breeds have thick fur pads on the bottoms of their feet; these are natural adaptations to help them survive cold conditions. Wild rabbits live in underground burrows, where the temperature is kept relatively constant. However, domestic rabbits kept outside do not have the protection of a burrow, so are exposed to low temperatures, rain, wind, snow and draughts. In addition to climatic conditions, winter poses a number of challenges for domestic rabbits including less readily available grass and leafy greens to eat, potentially less human contact, less access to an exercise area and changes to their routine.

So domestic rabbits may need some help to keep them warm in the chilly winter months. Follow our care tips to help your rabbits stay healthy and happy this winter...

LOW TEMPERATURES

Rabbits can cope with the cold fairly well, but not if they are housed in damp or draughty conditions. Being cold and wet can lead to your rabbit becoming ill and could be fatal if action is not taken. Older rabbits can suffer from painful arthritis, so need to be kept warm and dry. Rabbits that are thin, young or do not have a thick winter coat may also need special attention to ensure they keep warm and dry.

A temperature of between 10-20°C is recommended as ideal for domestic rabbits, though they can cope with lower temperatures, but tend to suffer from too much heat. If the temperature starts to reach freezing, you may wish to consider moving your rabbits' home indoors or into an outhouse, shed or unused garage. If you do, you must ensure they still have plenty of space to exercise freely and are not going to be confined simply to a hutch with no exercise area. If you decide to leave your rabbits in their outside accommodation you must provide them with ways of keeping warm, such as lots of extra bedding, and ensure their home is protected from adverse weather conditions.

A COSY HOME

If your rabbits live outside, it is very important to ensure that their home is protected from extremes of weather and temperature and is escape-proof and predator-proof. Your rabbits' home should be waterproof, draught-proof, damp-proof, dry and well-ventilated. Regularly check that your rabbits' home achieves these criteria and make any necessary repairs or modifications well before the cold winter months arrive. Check inside your rabbits' home for damp or water-marks that may indicate that water is getting in. If your rabbits are housed in a hutch, a sloped roof is preferable as it allows water to drain away. Your rabbits' home should also be raised off the ground by at least 4 inches, to prevent the base becoming



damp and rotten. The outside of hutches and sheds will need to be treated regularly with pet safe wood preservative to ensure they are water-proof.

Your rabbits' home should be placed in a sheltered position, facing away from the prevailing wind and rain. Covers designed to insulate and weather-proof hutches are available commercially or can be made from an old blanket or piece of carpet. These covers can be used to cover most of the hutch at night; a small area should be left exposed to ensure adequate ventilation. During the day, the front of the hutch should be left uncovered for ventilation. Mesh doors can be partially covered with clear Perspex or plastic, to help protect your rabbits from rain and wind, whilst allowing them to see out.



Moving your rabbits' home into a shed, outhouse or unused garage is a good way to help them keep warm. Never house or exercise rabbits in a garage that is in use, as vehicle exhaust fumes are harmful to rabbits. If your rabbits' run is placed in a shed/outhouse/unused garage, or your rabbits are allowed out to exercise freely in this area, ensure it is hazard-free; this includes checking that the floor is clean and free from paint or chemical spills. If housing your rabbits in a shed, insulation can be added to the walls of the shed to help to retain heat better (ensure the insulation is not accessible to your rabbits or that it is safe for them to chew if they can reach it).



The RSPCA does not advise that rabbits are housed in greenhouses due to the extreme changes in temperature that can occur. Caution must be taken if rabbits are housed in conservatories – the area must be a suitable temperature (i.e. heating may be required) in the winter and sufficiently cool and well ventilated in the summer.

See page 4 for advice on bringing your rabbits into your home and minimising the stress of the transition.



PROVIDING WARMTH

Provide your rabbits with lots of additional bedding during the winter months. They need plenty to snuggle into. Suitable bedding materials include dust-free hay and straw, on top of layers of newspaper, which absorb moisture and provide insulation. Ensure hay and straw are stored somewhere dry; if hay or straw becomes damp or mouldy throw it away, as eating this could cause your rabbits to become ill. If the weather looks poor and may prevent you from getting to the shops, ensure that you have brought a stock of hay for your rabbits to eat and sleep in. Do not store hay too long as it may lose some of its nutritional value.



Microwavable heat pads designed for rabbits are available commercially, and should be considered if your rabbits are kept outside, particularly if they are old,



young, thin or have not yet grown a thick winter coat. Do not provide your rabbits with blankets as rabbits have a tendency to chew them which could result in an intestinal blockage.



If your rabbits are kept in a shed, outhouse or unused garage, you may wish to consider providing a heater to help raise the temperature. However, ensure your rabbits cannot get too close to the heater and that any electrical wires are covered or kept out of your rabbits' reach. Rabbits can suffer from heat stress and become very ill if exposed to high temperatures, so always ensure your rabbits' home is well insulated before considering using a heater. If using a heater or radiator near rabbits, ensure that the temperature of the environment is monitored to prevent your rabbits from overheating.

KEEPING CLEAN

It is important to keep your rabbits' home clean, as your rabbits are likely to spend longer in their hutch/cage during the winter months. Also be aware that wet bedding will freeze on cold nights, which could lead to your rabbits becoming ill. Therefore clean the toilet area daily and clean your rabbits' whole home regularly, at least once a week. Replacing a small amount of used, un-soiled bedding in your rabbits' home will help maintain your rabbits' familiar scent and reduce stress.



SLEEPING AREA

Ensure your rabbits have a cosy, sheltered area to hide in and sleep. Provide extra bedding, making sure there is still enough space for them all to sleep together if they choose to. In your rabbits' home there should be provision for the rabbits to sleep together or separately, as they choose, whatever the time of year. Do not assume that they always sleep together and make sure there is somewhere warm for each of them. You can make an additional sleeping area within a hutch by providing a cardboard box with entrance holes cut into it, filled with hay. Ensure the box is large enough for all your rabbits to lie in together if they choose to and make sure your rabbits still have space to exercise within their home.



EXERCISE AND COMPANIONSHIP

Daily exercise is still essential during the winter. Make sure your rabbit has opportunities to exercise every day to stay fit and healthy. Rabbits are most active in the morning and late afternoon. This is when they are most likely to benefit from access to exercise areas and be most sociable.



There are lots of ways to allow your rabbits to exercise during the winter, some suggestions are below:



- If your rabbits have an exercise area that is separate from their hutch or sleeping area, you must provide a dry, sheltered area within the run for them to hide and shelter in, all year round. In the winter, this must have bedding to keep them warm. There should be at least as many hiding places as there are rabbits. You should also cover part of the run with plastic sheeting or tarpaulin, to give some protection from rain and wind.
- If your rabbits get wet from being outside in the rain or snow, rub them dry with a towel and ensure they have plenty of warm bedding to rest in when returned to their home. If the grass is very wet, consider moving your rabbits' exercise area onto a paved area or into an outhouse or unused garage.
- An indoor pen or free access to a 'bunny-proofed' room in your home may help to ensure that your indoor rabbits get enough exercise, stimulation and companionship each day. Be very cautious about bringing outdoor rabbits inside for short periods as they may have difficulty in adjusting to the temperature change from outside to inside.
- If you keep your rabbits indoors, try to provide access to an outside exercise area on fine days. Indoor rabbits will not have developed a thick winter coat, so as well as ensuring there are shelters filled with bedding in the exercise area, do not put them outside if it is very cold and monitor how long they are outside for.

All exercise areas should contain hiding places where your rabbits can escape if they feel afraid. There should be as many hiding places as there are rabbits. You should also provide your rabbits with safe toys to play with and chew, to prevent them from becoming bored.

Rabbits should have regular opportunities to play with other friendly rabbits. If your rabbit enjoys interacting with people, this should continue regularly during the winter. If your rabbit has to be kept on his/her own for some reason, you must provide him/her with companionship by interacting with him/her every day.

BRINGING YOUR RABBITS INDOORS

If your rabbits are old, thin or young and have not built up a thick winter coat you may want to consider moving their home indoors. If you are considering bringing your outside rabbits indoors for the winter, it is important to minimise the stress of the transition for your rabbits. The indoor environment will be very different to your rabbits' outside home and there will be lots of changes for them to get used to, such as new sights, sounds and potentially changes to their routine and housing.



You should introduce your rabbits to their new indoor home gradually, by bringing them indoors for increasingly longer periods each day during the summer and autumn so that they can settle in and explore their new surroundings. Place your rabbits' home in a quiet, calm part of the house where they will not be disturbed. Putting familiar smelling items in the new environment (such as toys, used but unsoiled bedding, water bottle) can help make your rabbits feel at ease.



Ensure that your rabbits' home is placed away from draughts. If you have central heating, ensure that your rabbits' home is placed away from radiators and does not get too warm as rabbits can suffer from heat stress and become very ill if exposed to high temperatures. Help your rabbits to adjust to the change from natural daylight hours to artificial light by gradually increasing the length of time the lights are on in the evenings. Ensure they have a darkened sleeping area that they can go to whenever they wish. Cover any electrical wires with protective tubing as rabbits may chew wires, and block off areas that are hazardous or that you do not wish your rabbits to have access to.



Rabbits are intelligent and can be litter-trained. Provide a litter tray filled with hay and a non-clumping, non-expanding type of litter such as straw or shredded newspaper. Placing some of your rabbits' soiled bedding in the tray will encourage them to use the tray.



Bringing your rabbits into your home can be a great way to ensure your rabbits get lots of attention and human companionship, and that any health problems are quickly spotted. Spend time with your rabbits every day and let them approach you. As with outside rabbits, provide toys such as cardboard boxes with entrance holes cut out, cardboard toilet tubes filled with hay and vegetables, and boxes filled with hay or shredded paper, to encourage your rabbits to exercise and explore.



When returning rabbits to their outside home after winter, wait until the daily temperatures are higher and gradually increase the amount of time your rabbits spend outside. Keep your rabbits in their indoor home at night if temperatures are low. You may wish to consider making the transition more gradual by first placing their home in a shed, outhouse or unused garage before finally placing their home back outside.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ROUTINE

Although it may be tempting to visit your rabbits less in winter if they are kept outside, it is very important to ensure that you continue to meet all their welfare needs and keep their routine as normal as possible. This means keeping their daily feeding and exercise times consistent and ensuring that you spend time interacting



with your rabbits every day. Ensure you continue to health check your rabbits daily and groom them regularly.

PROVIDING WATER

Your rabbits must have access to clean, fresh drinking water at all times; without water to drink a rabbit can become seriously ill. Rabbits may drink more in the winter if their access to a grassy run or leafy green foodstuffs is limited, as they will be unable to obtain so much moisture from grass or leafy greens.



You should check your rabbits' water supply at least twice a day in winter, to make sure the water has not frozen. If water is provided in a drinking bottle, always check that the ball at the end of the spout is turning and squeeze the bottle to ensure that water is flowing through the spout. It is a good idea to keep a spare bottle indoors, so that if the water in the bottle in use is frozen, you can easily exchange that bottle for the spare bottle, meaning that your rabbits do not have to wait for the water to melt to have access to it. Bottle covers are available commercially that help prevent water from freezing in the winter and help stop algae from growing in the summer. If you use a bottle cover, always check that the water in the bottle is not frozen and that the water level is high, as some covers do not have a visible strip. You may also wish to provide a bowl of water in addition to a bottle, to ensure there is a large supply of water available.



PROVIDING A HEALTHY DIET

Feeding your rabbits a healthy diet will help them prepare for winter and promote good coat growth to help them keep warm. Good quality, sweet-smelling hay should make up the majority of your rabbits' diet and should be available at all times. In winter your rabbits are likely to have less opportunity to forage in the garden for grass and leafy greens, so it is important to provide safe, fresh leafy greens every day. Grass seeds can be grown in trays and given to rabbits, so that grass can still be included in their diet. Never feed greens or vegetables that are frosty or frozen, these could harm your rabbits. Do not be tempted to over-feed your rabbits and only offer fruit and root vegetables like carrots, in small amounts as a treat. House rabbits kept in warm ambient temperatures may require less energy than outdoor rabbits, depending on their level of activity. Your vet will be able to give for dietary advice specific to your individual rabbit(s).



STAYING HEALTHY

Check your rabbit(s) for signs of illness or injury every day, and make sure this is done by someone else if you are away. Rabbits are not good at showing outward signs of pain so may be suffering a great deal before anything is noticed. A change in the way a rabbit normally behaves can be an early sign that he/she is ill or in pain.





If a rabbit is not eating or is more quiet than usual he/she is highly likely to be ill or in pain. Check that your rabbit is eating every day and that he/she is passing plenty of dry droppings. If your rabbit's eating or drinking habits change or the number of droppings gets less or stops, talk to your vet straight away as he/she could be seriously ill. Consult a vet immediately if you suspect that your rabbit is in pain, ill or injured.



Take your rabbit for a routine health check at your vets at least once each year and ensure that he/she is up-to-date with his/her vaccinations against myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD).

Rabbits do not hibernate. If your rabbit appears sleepy, lethargic or limp, he/she may be unwell. Seek veterinary attention immediately.

If your rabbits do get wet from being outside in the rain or snow, or from getting damp, rub them dry with a towel and ensure they have plenty of warm bedding to rest in when returned to their home.



WINTER CHECKLIST

To help you ensure your rabbits are prepared for the winter, consider the answers to these questions. Further advice on each issue is given above.

- Has your rabbits' housing been checked and any necessary repairs or modifications made? Is the housing waterproof, draught-proof, damp-proof? Is it escape-proof and predator-proof?
- Consider the age and health status of your rabbit – this may affect where your rabbit should be housed and how he/she should be cared for during the winter.
- Has your rabbit had a recent health check with the vet? (i.e. in the last year, or more recently if he/she is old, ill or under/overweight?)
- Is your rabbit eating and drinking normally? Is he/her producing normal-looking droppings regularly? Is your rabbit behaving normally? If the answer to any of these questions is no, seek veterinary advice urgently as your rabbit could be seriously ill.
- Is water always available? Is the supply checked at least twice a day? Have steps been taken to ensure the water supply does not freeze?
- Are fresh hay and leafy greens provided every day? Are all leafy greens washed, safe for rabbits to eat and free from frost?
- Is sufficient bedding provided? Could a heat pad be provided?





- Does a further enclosed sleeping area (such as a cardboard box with entrance holes cut into it, filled with hay) need to be provided?
- Are your rabbits still getting opportunities to exercise every day? If not, how could exercise opportunities be provided?
- Are your rabbits getting the opportunity to play with other friendly rabbits and/or people regularly? If not, consider ways that opportunities could be provided.
- If your rabbits have been moved inside your home (or into an outhouse, shed or unused garage), have actions been taken to minimise the stress of the move?
- If your rabbits have been moved inside your home (or into an outhouse, shed or unused garage), have hazards been identified and minimised?
- If you are going away during the winter, have you arranged for your rabbits to be cared for by a responsible person in your absence?

If you are in any doubt about meeting your rabbits' welfare needs during the winter, speak to your vet.

USEFUL LINKS:

- [Rabbits' welfare needs](http://www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits) : www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits
- [Find a vet](http://www.rspca.org.uk/in-action/whatwedo/vetcare/findavet) : www.rspca.org.uk/in-action/whatwedo/vetcare/findavet

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