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BUNNIES FOR YOU – by CELIA HADDON

So you want a bunny as a pet? Bunnies look so funny with their twitchy noses and long ears. They are warm and furry and look as if they would be nice to cuddle.

But are you sure that a bunny is the right pet for you? Most rabbits don't like being cuddled. Some of them don't even like being picked up. And the big rabbits can be very difficult to hold. So if you are under eight years old, they are definitely not the right animals.

If you are reading this, you are probably old enough. Keep reading because grown ups don't always know enough about rabbits. You can help your mum or dad with stuff they need to know.

Even if you are sure it's a bunny you want, you need two bunnies, not just one. Your bunny needs somebody else to talk to. You can be his friend but he also needs a bunny friend. You wouldn't like living all alone with nobody to talk your language, and neither does he.

BUNNIES NEED YOUR HELP



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Be a bunny rescuer. The best way to find bunnies is to go to a rescue shelter and adopt from them. Tell your mum about this. There are lots of poor bunnies that need somebody to love. You can help save them and make them happy again.

Sometimes they have been waiting for weeks and weeks for a home.

Better still, the rescue shelter will help you find two bunnies that are already friends and give you advice on how to keep them. They will tell you what size hutch and run are needed and may visit your home to make sure you will make a good bunny owner.

Many rescue bunnies will have been neutered so that they can't have babies. This is nice for them because they can just have fun together like good friends. Other ways to get bunnies are to have a pair of babies from a friend whose rabbit had babies.

Or you could get two from a pet shop – though that is the worst way to get bunnies. Some pet shops don't know much about the animals they sell. They may not even know how big the bunnies will grow! So try a rescue place first. If you are reading this, you may know more about pets than most grown ups. Talk to your mum about getting your bunnies neutered properly. It's the kindest thing but some grown ups don't know about it and it costs quite a lot. You can make sure they understand.

BEFORE YOU BRING HOME YOUR BUNNIES

You will need a very good hutch and a big run for your bunnies. They need a warm place to sleep at night but it would be horrid for them just to live in a small hutch with nothing to do. They need a playground where they can run and play just like you do. This is why they need a run not just a hutch.

So you will need to know how big your bunnies are going to grow, before you buy a home for them. This is why it is best to get them from a rescue shelter.

It's no good buying tiny babies and then finding out that they grow into rabbit giants who are too big for their hutch.

Tell your mum or dad that they must buy the biggest hutch and run that they can afford. Maybe your dad can make one specially. Get

them to read the Frequently Asked Questions on this website or read them to your parents.

The best bunny home is one with a hutch and run fixed together so that the bunnies can go in and out as they want. But if the run is separate, then make sure there is some shelter in it – either by a covered end or a little house

Large rabbit shed with run. Image Copyright Anne Mitchell, RWF



inside. If your mum agrees, you could keep your bunnies inside the house as house bunnies where there will be space for them to run about.

One last thing. Don't put your rabbit hutch and run at the bottom of the garden where you can't see it. You need to be able to visit your bunnies twice a day every single day, so their home needs to be near your back door. That way, you can be a true friend to them.

TREATS

Don't feed them sticky treats from the pet shops. These are fattening and bad for them. Too many sweet things are not good for humans but they are very bad for bunnies. Chocolate can kill rabbits, so can locust beans which are still sometimes sold as bunny treats.

Food treats should be small pieces of carrot, watercress, tiny pieces of apple or pears. Pet shops may sell hay cakes and nature snacks which have no sugar and make good treats.

Chews (not the sticky kind) are fun for them too. Pieces of willow, hazel, and apple trees are chewing gum for bunnies. They will also enjoy chewing old straw hats or wicker baskets. You can buy these with your pocket money from boot sales.

HOW TO FEED YOUR BUNNIES



Rabbit with hay and water bottle

the day.

Make sure there is plenty of good sweet hay in their hutch ready for them. Bunnies need to eat lots and lots of hay every single day. A little hay rack on the wall of the hutch and in the run can be helpful too. They like to munch on hay all through

Hay may seem dry and boring to humans but it is the best thing in the world for rabbits. Grass is great for bunnies too. Nice long grass from a field or from the side of a footpath is lovely for them. The grass doesn't have to be young.

Old grass is fine too. Only grass cuttings are not safe because they rot inside their tummies.

Some nice wild greens or human veggies – different ones each day if possible – will be fun for them. Greens like wild clover, cow parsley, sow thistle, knapweed, plantain, and groundsel, are good for them. You may find these in your garden or when you go for a walk. You can also feed them brambles (blackberry plants). These are very good for them and there are leaves on brambles even in winter. Bunnies seem to cope with the prickles.

Veggies are also nice for them to eat. You can give them the bits you don't want to eat yourself – broccoli, cabbage, carrot tops, carrot, celery, cauliflower and swede. Lettuce isn't good for them – though some grown ups don't know this.

What about rabbit mix or pellets? Pet shops sell a lot of this,



Image Copyright Supreme Petfoods

but your bunny should not eat too much of it. Pellets are better than mixes, but neither is as good as hay. So only feed a little of it in the morning and make sure they eat it all up. If there is any left over, you are feeding them too much.

Bunnies need clean water always.

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CLEANING THEM OUT

Every day, morning and evening, you must look at your bunnies. Feed them twice a day and change the water once a day. Each time you need to make sure that their water bottle is working properly. Clean up each day if they have made a mess of their hutch. You can put in a litter tray for bunny pee. Get your mum to read the FAQs on how to litter train your bunnies.

In hot weather, you must clean the poo out of the hutch not just once a week but every day. Bunnies can die from maggots. Flies lay their eggs on the poo and if there is a lot of poo in the hutch, it sticks to the bunnies' bottoms. Then the maggots hatch out and eat the bunny alive.

BUNNY POO AND BUNNY BOTTOMS



Image Copyright JSPCA

So look at their poo every day! Poo is important. Bunnies do two sorts of poo. One kind of poo is just dry hard droppings the size of raisins. The other sort of poo is big and soft and shiney. This is the poo that bunnies eat. Yes, they eat their own poo! They just turn and take it right out of their bottoms.

If you find this sort of poo, the big soft kind, in the hutch, it is bad news. It means your bunnies are not eating it as they ought to. You need to change your bunnies' diet. Give them much more hay and grass, and much less pellets. Most of what they eat should be hay.

PICKING UP YOUR BUNNIES

Be very gentle and patient. Don't just grab your bunnies out of their hutch. Give them time to sniff your hand. To pick up a rabbit first stroke it on the head to relax it. Then put your left hand behind its front legs and your right hand on its bottom above the tail. Scoop it up, and transfer the left hand to its head, with the thumb in front of the ears and the fingers resting over his shoulder.

Hold it with its head in the air, and its body against your chest. Your right hand should be under its bottom above its tail. Its feet are, as it were, resting on your tummy. Your left hand thumb should be in front of its ears and the fingers resting over its shoulder. If you are holding it correctly, it should be unable to kick out as all his feet are pressed against your body.

Always give the rabbit a treat as soon as you put it down, so that it knows that picking up means something nice to eat. Some rabbits will never ever enjoy cuddling, just as some cats don't. Accept your rabbit as he is.

If you have been to a rescue shelter they will have told you whether your bunnies like being picked up or not.

Phillippa with "Pimms"



If they don't like being picked up, ask your mum to help. You can use a cat carrier or a box to move them out of their hutch.

HAVING FUN WITH YOUR BUNNY

First of all, you need a place where you can sit with your bunnies without them running away. Make sure that the garden has a fence and wall before you take it into the garden. Or bring your bunnies into the house for a bit and make sure the doors are shut.

The best way to make friends is to sit on the ground and let your rabbits have a good look at you. It's hard to sit still like this. But it works best. Don't try and pet them. Let them come up to you and have a good sniff. Bunnies are very curious.

Why not make a sandpit for your bunnies? You can buy a plastic sandpit from a toy shop and fill it with sand or peat. Then watch your bunny digging like mad. Or just fill a strong cardboard box with peat and cut an entrance hole into it.

Hide and seek is a good game for bunnies. You can hide food for them underneath hay. Or, if they are in the house, hide it behind the armchairs.

King of the castle is another bunny game. Put a small plank of wood on some bricks, then add a brick each side on top of the wood to keep it steady. Your bunnies can hop under it or jump on top of it.

TOYS



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Cardboard boxes make good bunny tunnels. Put them side by side with a tunnel cut through for your bunny to explore. Or ask your local carpet shop for one of the big cardboard tubes inside rolls of carpet. Or buy a large ceramic tunnel

from a builder's merchant. You can also buy bunny tunnels in pet shops but cardboard boxes are cheaper.

You can stuff a cardboard toilet roll with hay or put some fresh grass inside an old cereal box so that your bunnies have to pull it out. Paper bags (never

plastic ones) are also good toys. Bunnies like shaking them about or even putting their head inside them.

Make them a play centre of their own out of a large cardboard box. Put lots of hay in it and a few pellets below the hay so they have to hunt for them.

TRAINING

You can train your bunnies to do tricks. This is cool stuff though it is hard work! There's a great website called Clicker bunny, <http://clickerbunny.com/>, which will tell you how to do it. If you know somebody who clicker trains their dogs, go along and see how it is done. Then adapt it for bunnies.

Show jumping or agility for bunnies is another good sport which they do in Sweden and Scandinavia. See if you can find out more about it on the web. If you do decide to do this, ask your vet to check that your bunny is fit. Old or fat bunnies won't be able to do it safely.