

# BVA, BVZS and BSAVA policy position on housing pet rabbits in compatible pairs or groups

## Executive summary

BVA, BVZS and BSAVA recommend the housing of pet rabbits in compatible pairs or groups.<sup>1</sup> Provision of companionship, through both opposite sex and same-sex pairing, greatly increases positive health and welfare outcomes for rabbits, who have evolved to live socially with others of their species.

We recommend that where pet rabbits of the opposite sex are kept together in compatible pairs or groups, both rabbits should be neutered. Neutering the male reduces undesirable sexual mounting behaviour and hormonally related aggression, and neutering the female rabbit will not only prevent pregnancies but can also have potential health benefits by protecting the female from uterine lesions.<sup>2,3,4,5</sup> Neutering should be performed with adequate analgesia should be given to an animal pre- and post-operatively.

For male rabbits, young rabbits can be neutered as soon as their testicles descend (10-12 weeks) and female rabbits can be neutered from 4-6 months of age. As neutering is not a trivial procedure, we would advise that owners discuss the health and welfare benefits and risks for the individual animal in question with their veterinary surgeon.

There should be greater awareness of the health and welfare benefits of companionship for pet rabbits<sup>6</sup> and that pet rabbits should be housed in compatible pairs. Stakeholders in rabbit health and welfare ie. the veterinary profession, owners, breeders, vendors, animal welfare organisations and the UK governments, should therefore work together to achieve improved provision of companionship for pet rabbits. Our specific recommendations as to how to achieve this are set out below:

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<sup>1</sup> See 'Compatible pairs or groups' section of full position for further information on compatible pairings and groupings of rabbits.

<sup>2</sup> RWAf. Neutering-Castration or Spaying. Available at: <https://rabbitwelfare.co.uk/rabbit-health/neutering/>

<sup>3</sup> BVA, BVZS and BSAVA acknowledge that neutering is not a trivial procedure but the welfare implications of neutering are outweighed by the benefits. The decision as to whether to neuter the individual animal for medical or behavioural reasons needs to take into account factors such as species, gender, breed and age of the animal as well as current and future health status. There is no evidence that neutering a male rabbit provides greater benefit to the individual by leaving it entire. The opposite is true in females. Neutering should be performed with adequate anaesthesia and analgesia should be given to an animal pre-emptively and post-operatively. Veterinary advice should always be sought regarding the risks and benefits in individual cases. There are now a number of options regarding the timing and methods of neutering and these options should be discussed between the owner and veterinary surgeon when making decisions for an individual animal. The RWAf provide more information on neutering-castrating and spaying rabbits on their website.

<sup>4</sup> Bradbury, G., Dickens, G. (2017) Neutering of pet rabbits Veterinary Record 180, 77-78. Available at: <https://veterinaryrecord.bmj.com/content/180/3/77.1>

<sup>5</sup> Lee HW, Machin H, Adami C. Peri-anaesthetic mortality and nonfatal gastrointestinal complications in pet rabbits: a retrospective study on 210 cases. Vet Anaesth Analg. 2018 Jul;45(4):520-528. doi: 10.1016/j.vaa.2018.01.010. Epub 2018 Feb 27. PubMed PMID: 29759902.

<sup>6</sup> Edgar, JL., Mullan, SM. (2011) Knowledge and attitudes of 52 UK pet rabbit owners at the point of sale Veterinary Record 168, 353. Available at: <https://veterinaryrecord.bmj.com/content/168/13/353.short>

**Recommendation 1:** BVA, BVZS and BSAVA recommend the housing of pet rabbits in compatible pairs or groups<sup>7</sup>.

**Recommendation 2:** Pet rabbits should not be housed with guinea pigs. If a rabbit is currently housed with a guinea pig, this should not be changed until one of the animals dies and a hiding place that is only accessible to the guinea pig must be provided.

**Recommendation 3:** Where pet rabbits of the opposite sex are kept in compatible pairs or groups, both rabbits should be neutered. However, as neutering is not a trivial procedure, we would advise that owners discuss the health and welfare benefits and risks for the individual animal in question with their veterinary surgeon.

**Recommendation 4:** If a companion dies, the remaining solitary rabbit should either be bonded to a new (preferably adopted) rabbit, kept with restricted access to another rabbit with visual, olfactory, auditory and tactile contact, or, as a last resort, kept as a solitary rabbit for the rest of its life. This choice will depend on the age, health and welfare of the current rabbit, as well as the availability of rabbits locally. All solitary rabbits must be provided with suitable enrichment. In making a decision, expert veterinary guidance should be sought.

**Recommendation 5:** All rabbits should be carefully monitored and expert veterinary advice regarding management and housing should be sought if rabbits start to demonstrate signs of aggression, stress or ill-health.

**Recommendation 6:** The provision of companionship and adequate space is equally as important for house rabbits as for outdoor pet rabbits. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that indoor spaces may require modification to safeguard rabbit health and welfare and should be 'rabbit-proofed'.

**Recommendation 7:** Industry voluntary codes of practice should encourage vendors to sell pet rabbits in compatible pairs or groups

**Recommendation 8:** Vendors of pet rabbits and rabbit housing should ensure that hutches for sale can sufficiently house two or more rabbits and meet the minimum recommended measurements for suitable shelter to facilitate provision of companionship at point of purchase.

**Recommendation 9:** Across the UK, reviewed animal vending legislation should be supported by pet rabbit welfare codes of practice to encourage the provision of companionship for pet rabbits and the purchasing of pet rabbits, are in compatible pairs or groups.

**Recommendation 10:** In parts of the UK where animal vending legislation is currently under review, the provision of animal welfare information to prospective owners, including appropriate housing and socialisation, should become a licensing requirement where criteria are based on expert advice and input.

**Recommendation 11:** In parts of the UK where animal vending legislation is currently under review, licensing requirements should ensure that vendors must record why pet rabbits are sold individually as opposed to in neutered, compatible pairs or groups eg. to create a compatible pair with an existing single rabbit or where a rabbit is considered too young for neutering.

**Recommendation 12:** Vendors must inform purchasers of best practice and, if purchasing a single rabbit, that this is only acceptable in certain circumstances (as outlined above) for health and welfare reasons, which should be clearly defined in any animal vending legislation supporting guidance. Vendors should also check that prospective owners have a supporting care plan in place for the single housed rabbit.

**Recommendation 13:** UK Governments should include appropriately detailed information about how to provide a suitable environment for pet rabbits, both indoors and outdoors, in Government Codes of Practice and welfare guidance.

**Recommendation 14:** As much space as possible should be provided for pet rabbit housing and enclosure, both indoors and outdoors. It is widely recognised that the minimum

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to recognise that there may be situations where it is not appropriate to pair or group rabbits, see 'Compatible pairs or groups' section of full position for further information on compatible pairings and groupings of rabbits.

recommended size for a suitable shelter for 2 small or medium breed rabbits is 6ft x 2ft x 2ft (180cm x 60cm x 60cm) and an 8ft run, with the minimum total area required for 2 average-sized rabbits being 10ft (3m) x 6ft (180cm) x 3ft (90cm) high.<sup>8910</sup> However it is important to recognise that required space will differ depending on the size and number of rabbits, if there is uncertainty as to how much space should be provided, expert veterinary advice should be sought.

**Recommendation 15:** Veterinary surgeons should enable the housing of pet rabbits in compatible pairs through their own clinical practice and decision-making eg. through risk-based neutering of rabbits to support the housing of rabbits in opposite sex pairs (or same sex pairs under certain circumstances) and the keeping of rabbits in compatible pairs or groups when they are admitted for procedures. As part of this, rabbits should be housed away from predatory species and good biosecurity should be maintained.

**Recommendation 16:** RCVS Practice Standards Scheme should include reference to veterinary surgeons enabling the housing of pet rabbits in compatible pairs or groups through their own clinical practice and decision-making.

**Recommendation 17:** Rabbit medicine and husbandry should be better integrated into the veterinary curriculum and teaching streams to better equip primary care practitioners to confidently manage pet rabbit health and welfare and educate prospective owners about the importance of housing pet rabbits in compatible pairs or groups.

**Recommendation 18:** Veterinary practices should educate prospective owners about the importance of companionship for pet rabbit health and welfare through the provision of pre-purchase consultations.

**Recommendation 19:** Veterinary associations should continue to work collaboratively with rabbit health and welfare stakeholders on national campaigns to improve awareness of the importance of housing pet rabbits in compatible pairs or groups.

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<sup>8</sup> PDSA, Creating the ideal home for your rabbits. Available at: <https://www.pdsa.org.uk/taking-care-of-your-pet/looking-after-your-pet/rabbits/creating-the-ideal-home-for-your-rabbits>

<sup>9</sup> RWAf. Why a hutch is not enough. Available at: <https://rabbitwelfare.co.uk/rabbit-housing/why-hutch-not-enough/>

<sup>10</sup> Scottish Government, 2018. Pet Rabbit Welfare Guidance. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/Resource/0053/00533983.pdf>