Keeping rabbits is a fabulous hobby – enormously rewarding and enjoyable. There is nothing like friendly twitches of the nose to remind you that rabbits make fantastic pets. As Britain's third favourite pet you won’t be alone and there are hundreds of rabbit shows throughout the country where you can see other rabbits, ask questions or even compete yourself.

Which breed?

There are over 60 breeds of rabbit and 500 varieties recognised by the British Rabbit Council. To help you decide on the breed, we suggest that you think about who the rabbit is for and what they will expect from it. For example, long coated breeds such as the Angora, Cashmere Lop or Swiss Fox may look like ‘fluffy bunnies’ but they need regular grooming.

Buying a rabbit

Where possible, ask to see the mother of the litter as this will give you a guide to the size your rabbit will grow to when mature. Also, if the mother is healthy, happy and friendly, the babies should have a good start and stand a better chance of making a good pet.

Check that the baby rabbit’s eyes and nose are clean and that it is breathing easily and has a clean bottom with no signs of diarrhoea. Never buy a baby rabbit that should still be with its mother and siblings. When you collect your rabbit find out which food he was fed on and continue this for the first few days to avoid digestive upsets. If you wish to change your rabbit to a different food, do so by gradually mixing the old food with the new over a course of a week.

Is a rabbit for you?

Rabbits are intelligent, friendly and make great companions; however they do require a regular commitment:

1. Rabbits can live up to 10 years plus (depending on the size or breed)
2. Like all animals, a rabbit will make demands upon your time.
3. Rabbits need daily food and fresh water, grooming and company.
4. The hutch and pen will need regular cleaning (in all weathers).
5. There will be costs associated with equipment and then ongoing feed, bedding and veterinary bills.
6. Like us, they can become grumpy or irritable if they are uncomfortable or unhappy.
7. You will need someone to look after the rabbit when you go on holiday.

The Five Freedoms

1. Freedom from hunger and thirst by providing fresh water and the right amount of food to keep them fit
2. Freedom from discomfort by making sure that rabbits have the right kind of environment including shelter and somewhere comfortable to rest
3. Freedom from pain, injury and disease by preventing them from getting ill and by making sure animals are diagnosed and treated rapidly
4. Freedom to behave normally by making sure rabbits have enough space and proper facilities.
5. Freedom from fear and distress by making sure their conditions and treatment avoid mental suffering

Contact British Rabbit Council for more details,
The British Rabbit Council, Purefoy House, 7 Kirkgate, Newark, Notts. NG24 1AD
Phone 01636 676042  Email: info@thebrc.org  Web Site: www.thebrc.org
Showing Rabbits

Why show your rabbit?
Both you and your rabbit can have a lot of fun showing. You will get a good social life, friends with the same enthusiasm for rabbits and contact with experts who know the rabbit facts (like behaviour, feeding, moult, breeding) that vets never come across.

And as long as your rabbit is introduced gently to showing it will soon become accustomed. Shows for rabbits are like school for us – a very few dislike shows, most are comfortable and many rabbits love all the attention and excitement.

Rabbit shows
Rabbit showing, or exhibiting as it is known, is very popular – over 1,000 events are held in this country. There are several types of show, from five-star championship shows to events offering four, three, two and one star challenge certificates. The events diary (and there are around one thousand rabbit shows a year) can be found in the BRC’s website www.brc.org, or in the rabbit magazine Fur & Feather, Elder House, Chattisham, IP8 3QE or www.furandfeather.co.uk

At these shows the judge compares each rabbit against the standard (the BRC standard of perfection for each breed). This covers every aspect of the rabbit including its health and temperament. Rabbits which conform most closely to the BRC standard will be the winners. All 1-5 star show exhibitors must be members of the British Rabbit Council and registered ring owners. Everyone can show off their rabbit as there are also fun pet shows (judged on cleanliness, health and temperament) competing for BRC diplomas and rosettes.

Pet shows
Any rabbit, purebred or not, can be shown as a pet, even if it has an identification ring on its leg. However if you show it in the pet classes, your rabbit cannot also go in the BRC classes. Pets are divided up into classes such as “boy’s” and “girl’s” (the owner) or “buck” and “doe” (the rabbit). Some shows also have classes for “adult’s pet” – this means the pet owner is an adult.

Pet rabbits are judged on health, condition, grooming and temperament. A pet should be friendly, clean and fit, but doesn’t have to be a recognised breed or colour.

Rabbit Housing
Although there are very few rules and regulations concerning the keeping of domestic rabbits, it is as well to be aware of any problems that can occur.

Rabbits are social creatures and their home should be clean and tidy. Good hygiene is essential. Rabbit hutches and runs should be kept clean and dry, with fresh bedding every day and water bottles regularly. The hutch should be scrubbed thoroughly with an appropriate disinfectant (rabbit friendly ones available from pet shops) once a month whilst the rabbit is either in a spare hutch or the run. When the hutch is dry, replace the bedding. Make sure that you have rinsed everything thoroughly before you replace a rabbit in its hutch.

Rabbits should have their bedding changed completely at least once a week. Rabbits like to use one or more corners as their toilet area so you will need to clean out these areas more frequently, perhaps every third day. Clean and wash the food bowls and water bottles regularly. The hutch should be scrubbed thoroughly with an appropriate disinfectant (rabbit friendly ones available from pet shops) once a month whilst the rabbit is either in a spare hutch or the run. When the hutch is dry, replace the bedding. Make sure that you have rinsed everything thoroughly before you replace a rabbit in its hutch.

Feeding your rabbit
Rabbits have a very unusual digestive system that requires a large amount of fibre to keep it functioning well, this also keeps the rabbit’s teeth worn down. There are many good quality pellet or muesli mixes available and these should be fed with quality dried hay so that your rabbit can graze and forage. Water should be supplied in a bowl or bottle refilled every day.

Vaccinations and health care
Find a rabbit-friendly vet and register your pet. All rabbits should have annual vaccinations against myxomatosis and VHD. Rabbits that are overweight or have messy bottoms are susceptible to fly-strike. Your rabbit’s nails will have to be trimmed and your vet will do this for you, or nail cutters are available from pet shops or your veterinary surgery. Rabbits can be insured against veterinary treatment costs.

Rabbit Nutrition
by Virginia Richardson MRCVS  (Coney Publications)
Colour photographs. 48 pages. 1st edition 1999. Written by a top rabbit and cavy vet, this guide to edible wild plants, cultivated plants and vegetables, poisonous plants and including a chapter on medical conditions with dietary considerations should be part of every rabbit lover’s book collection. Especially useful are Fiona Webber’s full colour illustrations of wild and cultivated plants. Recommended by vets. £6.00 from F&F