

A HUTCH IS NOT ENOUGH – HOW DO YOU KEEP YOUR BUNNY?

Have you got a single bunny spending most of its time in a hutch? Or a single bunny that you lift into a run most days? If so, please read on for some tips on making life better for the bunny and easier for you.

Rabbits need to run, jump, stretch up, dig and forage – it's cruel to keep a rabbit alone and in a hutch.

It can be difficult to get correct advice when you are getting a bunny - the Pet Shop, Garden Centre or Breeder may have told you that rabbits fight and need to be kept alone, and they may have stocked a basic range of hutches, so you bought what was there and believed that it was suitable.

The Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund (RWAFF) believe that 'a hutch is not enough' – so if you need any advice or suggestions on your individual circumstances, then please send an e-mail with a photo of your current set up and a paragraph about your bunny and your daily routine to hq@rabbitwelfare.co.uk and we'll be happy to give you personal advice.

Rabbits are social animals and need the company of their own kind, they experience stress if they have a lack of contact and research has shown that they value a companion as much as they do food. You wouldn't expect them to live without food! Understandably, owners don't like to think that their rabbit is unhappy, so it's hard to accept that they may be lonely, and we hear many justifications from owners about their rabbit being happy alone, like 'he eats, he must be happy'. But it is a fact that rabbits are more content when they have a companion – take a look at rabbits in the wild, they are always in groups, so you should get at least one friend for your bun. Before you can get a companion to your existing bunny you will need to have enough space for them, and have everything ready, so we'll guide you through, and we'll do our best to use what you already have.

Please read Dexter's story – he starts off alone in a hutch, but ends with a much improved life living with his girlfriend Sookie, in a set up that benefits them, meets their needs and makes life easy for their owners. We hope it is a useful as a step by step guide if you have a 'Dexter' in your garden.

So here is Dexter, isn't he adorable? You can see why his owner fell in love with him in the pet shop and bought him and the hutch there and then. He lives at the end of the garden, alone, so he isn't neutered and lives in a hutch that is typically available in many pet shops. He already has a good diet based on hay, greens and a small amount of a premium brand extruded pellet, and is already vaccinated.



Dexter is lifted from his hutch and into his run most days but he still spends most of his time in the hutch. The hutch is 4ft long, so whilst he is in the hutch his movement is restricted. A hutch should only be a shelter, not the main (and certainly not the sole) accommodation. So although being lifted to the run is better than being stuck in his hutch all of the time, it means that he is relying on his owner let him out, so he can't always exercise when he would like; did you know that rabbits are 'crepuscular' so they are most active dusk and dawn – this means they prefer to run around very early in the morning, probably before their owners are up and putting them into a run, and again on an evening, possibly once they have already been put to bed for the night.

Here is Dexter's owner lifting him into the run – although he was bought for a little girl, it is ofcourse always the adults responsibility to look after any animal, and children shouldn't handle their rabbit unsupervised.



Bye Dexter! Have a nice day.



So, Dexter can eat the grass today, and gets a change of scenery. The problem here is that he has very little shelter or shade, no toys, and left with nothing to do he'll be bored and frustrated; he may try to dig out and escape. As already mentioned, he has no companionship apart from the brief contact with his owner, which mainly involves him being transported to and from his hutch, which will probably also be stressful for him and it is only contact of around 10 minutes per day. It's not much of a life is it? Although it's nice and sunny when his owner has put him out, it will rain in 2 hours time, while everyone is at work, and he'll get wet. So, to improve life for Dexter we can start by making it possible to get from his run to his hutch when he wants to.

STEP ONE – ENABLE YOUR RABBIT TO GET FROM HUTCH TO RUN ON HIS OWN

For under £40, you can get a 'link kit' from Runaround (www.runaround.co.uk) it fits to any hutch and run and will take approx 15 minutes to fit. Not only does this benefit Dexter, it benefits his owner; no more hairs on clothes before he goes to work.



Wild rabbits would use tunnels, and it takes Dexter under 2 minutes to build his confidence and give it a go – now he can exercise, shelter and rest when he wants, and this tunnel has also increased his exercise area and enriched his environment.



Here he goes!



And here he comes! The tunnel fits to the hutch by a plastic 'clover leaf' and to the run the other side with a mesh joining panel – all his owner had to do was cut a 4 inch hole in the hutch door and the run (which can be easily blocked up again)



And back to his run again. The tunnel is flexible so it can be moved easily onto fresh grass. (NB If you are worried about your rabbit digging out you could get a skirt for the run;



Or put it on paving stones.

Now, when he interacts with his owner he isn't being grabbed, so he can now begin to associate contact with his owner as positive. His owner will still need to check his bottom daily for fly strike and make an effort to give him some companionship every day.

The hutch is really too small for 1 rabbit - and as our goal is to end up with 2 rabbits in a suitable environment where they can **run, dig, stretch up, jump and forage**, his owner should consider getting a larger hutch. (NB if you already have 2 rabbits living in a hutch and run like this, they will both be able to use this link system if they are of a similar size)

This is a good start. The same would apply if Dexter had lived in a double storey hutch with an 'under run' , so let's start again:



At first glance this looks better, because he has 2 levels and you'd think twice the room. However, the gap on the top floor and the ramp on the bottom mean that he has lost space on both floors, his bedding will fall down the hole and even though he has a 'run area' underneath he can probably only do 2 hops in here. 2 hops isn't a life for a bunny, so again, using the 'runaround system' we can join his hutch to his run.



Again this took only 15 minutes and cost around £30. (Skirt can be used to prevent his digging out, or the run could be placed on paving stones, but grass is the natural diet for rabbits and it's great to be able to let him eat grass. Not only is it free, it's good for his teeth and his general health, and as grass is designed to be nibbled it can help your lawn!

Step 2 – GET YOUR RABBIT NEUTERED

Dexter's owner has done some research, found a good rabbit vet locally and has booked him in to be castrated.

In the mean time, he's improving on his existing accommodation so that he can get a friend for Dexter. So still using the existing hutch and run, this has really improved Dexter's environment and he's nearly ready to meet Sookie.

STEP 3 – ENSURE YOUR RABBIT HAS ROOM FOR A FRIEND



Another run and a box has been added to double Dexter's exercise area and make it more suitable for 2 rabbits. In time, more can be added, or a bigger run can be bought.

This looks big enough now!

STEP 4 – GET ANOTHER RABBIT

The easiest way to introduce another rabbit is to go to a rescue centre, where they are likely to already be neutered and vaccinated, and if you take your rabbit with you it's possible to try a few rabbits to see who gets on best with your bunny.

Don't ever put a new bunny in your existing bunny's area as they could fight. Introductions must be made on neutral territory.



Dexter now has a friend – Sookie - and some toys in the run, so things have improved for him 100%

(NB the runaround system is modular, so the same components can be organised differently to take up less room in the garden, and it's possible to change the format to keep the rabbits amused and give them fresh grass, another idea is shown below, still using the existing hutch and run) The hutch and run is all at the back of the garden, so isn't encroaching much on the lawn and there is still room for the children, or dogs to run about. (Dogs should be supervised if they are likely to frighten the rabbits)





WHAT IF I HAVENT GOT A RABBIT YET?

If you are reading this before you get a hutch, or a rabbit then great you can get it right straight away. The RWAf recommend a 6 x 2 x 2 foot hutch with an attached 8ft run as a minimum, and a pair of neutered rabbits (or a compatible group if you have enough space).

Why a 6 ft hutch? It's commonly accepted that rabbits should be able to take 3 hops in their hutch, for an average breed this is 6ft – as demonstrated by Treacle below!







Also, we can have days on end of wet weather in the UK, which will confine your rabbits to their shelter. So a 6ft hutch allows the bunnies to shelter, move about, and eat their hay and food, stretch out and be comfortable when they choose to be in their hutch. This should be the minimum, many people use a garden shed

A hutch needs to be at least 2 feet deep, not only for space for the rabbits, but also because in driving rain any hutch can become wet inside the mesh front, and the rabbits shouldn't be forced to sit in the elements or in a damp hutch. It needs to be 2ft high at least, so that the rabbits can stretch up, which is one of their natural behaviours. (NB if you have a giant rabbit it will need to be larger than this)

We are encouraging retailers to stock 6ft hutches via our 'retail charter'

This is what a 6ft hutch and 8ft run looks like.



The rabbits can come in and out of the hutch, exercise, play, and rest as they please. They can do what they want, when they want. As the hutch and run are permanently sited there are paving stones around the outside to prevent the rabbits from digging out, and any predators from digging in, but the middle section is turf so that they have a soft surface. There is room for them to run around and for toys, they have digging areas, tunnels, and chew toys such as willow tunnels. The run has a sturdy roof for security and this is essential to prevent the rabbits from jumping out and also to prevent predators entering their run.



Or if your garden is suited to having the run away from the hutch, you could attach them via a runaround tunnel system, which gives more areas for your bunnies to play – a den pipe is a firm favourite with most bunnies as they love to run under and jump in the pipe.



A large run allows you to give the rabbits a variety of toys, and you can alter them to keep them interested and occupied. †



Another view of the 6ft hutch and 8ft run, with the tunnel system linking them. The run is on gravel and is dig proof, but rabbits do need to dig so there is a digging pot in there, and an old hanging basket full of hay acting as a large hayrack, as well as a selection of toys. The tunnels give the rabbits the chance to eat grass, and the whole thing is at the back of the garden so it doesn't take up room in the middle of the lawn – there is still room for the children or dogs to run about and the fence and shrubs give the rabbits some shelter.



Bunnies love to explore new toys



If you have a 6ft hutch as base, you can let your imagination go wild with the runaround system



Rabbits love a circuit, this will keep them on the move and stimulated. There are plenty of places to hide, they can run, jump and dig, and eat the grass. Only the most dedicated bunny owners will sacrifice their main or only lawn for this, but they will get hours of pleasure watching their bunnies play and enjoy themselves – which is much more fun for everyone than having a rabbit stuck in a hutch.



Weeeeeeee – they can really get up some speed!



And try to break the land speed record perhaps?



And stretch



This is a smaller lawn that is sheltered by the house so doesn't get a lot of sun – so it was no problem to turn this over to the rabbits. This is a matrix system with a mix of tunnels, runs and cubes, with a 6ft hutch as a base. This gives the rabbits plenty of room to explore and do what rabbits need to do; run, jump, stretch and dig. This is the same sq footage as the recommended minimum run size of 8ft x 4ft, but gives the rabbits 36ft length of running area, and places to jump and dig. They can forage on the grass and the high tunnel gives them the room to stretch.



Jumping out of the den pipe

We hope this has given you some inspiration, and most importantly, the message that 'a hutch is not enough'