

Owners Newsletter Winter 2023



Outdoor Rabbits in Cold Weather.

Here are our top tips for keeping rabbits warm this winter.

In the wild, rabbits live in underground warrens where the temperature does not vary much (around 10°C) between winter and summer.

Pet rabbits don't have this luxury so owners must make sure their rabbits have permanent access to a sleeping area that is kept constantly sufficiently warm, dry and draught free. And of course, they must have a companion because sharing body warmth is a vital part of a rabbit's winter toolkit.



Bedding

The sleeping area should be lined with newspaper and filled with bedding. There are lots of good bedding materials on the market now, such as Megazorb and Auboise. Straw should be used as bedding rather than hay because it is warmer and is a bedding material rather than food. Make sure you get soft, dust-extracted bedding straw so that you minimise the risk of eye injuries and avoid a dusty environment. You will, of course, still need to give your rabbits plenty of fresh hay to eat.

Insulation

It makes a huge difference if the sleeping area is permanently insulated. Cavity wall insulation for your rabbits... Line the inside of the sleeping area with plywood and leave a gap between the ply and the walls/floor which can be filled with roof insulation. This will mean that your bunnies will be protected for many winters to come, but don't forget that they will still need plenty of good, fresh bedding.

Bunny buddy bodies

We cannot stress enough the importance of a rabbit companion – it means they each have the equivalent of a furry hot water bottle next to them that will stay warm all night!

Keep the elements out

The whole enclosure should be located where it is protected from wind and rain wherever possible. Tarps can be found inexpensively at most garden centres and are great both as a windbreak and to keep the rain off. It is best to buy tarps with eyelets so they can be fastened securely in place with cable ties.

Out and about

Rabbits are a hardy bunch, as long as they have a constantly warm sleeping area they are more than happy to brave the winter months. It is important that they retain access to their exercise area during winter. They need to be able to carry out their natural behaviours such as foraging, running, digging and jumping all year round. Rabbits should never be permanently confined to a hutch.

Keep it constant and avoid extremes

Underground warrens are around 10 degrees Celsius, and vitally, this temperature remains constant. Owners of pet rabbits should aim for something similar. A shift from cold to hot or hot to cold can be extremely harmful for your rabbits.

A well-insulated, draught-free sleeping area, full of good bedding and with the body-warmth of a companion should be enough in most conditions. However, sometimes when there is an extreme drop in temperature, extra steps must be taken. Heat pads, for example, are great for warming up the living area when temperatures drop to very low levels but take care. If your rabbits find it too hot in their sleeping area then they will leave it and may become too cold outside. If possible, give your rabbits a choice: provide two sleeping areas and put a heat pad in only one of them.





time in their sleeping area and it can become soiled very quickly.

When a rabbit is unwell

If your rabbits are showing signs of illness you must of course seek veterinary attention immediately

If your rabbits are receiving treatment or are recovering from surgery then ask your vet for advice on keeping them outside for the time-being. In most cases they should continue to be kept in their normal environment (as long as they have the conditions described above), particularly as it is important to maintain the bond with their partner, but your vet will be able to advise on your specific case.

If your rabbits have patches of fur missing, perhaps due to a recent operation, or have poor body condition then they will be more exposed to the cold so extra care must be taken.

Single rabbits

Rabbits are sociable animals and it is cruel to keep them alone. If you do have a single rabbit then please, after having it spayed/castrated, contact your local rescue to find a partner for your bun. In the meantime, extra care must be taken to make sure the sleeping area is warm enough because the rabbit will not have the benefit of another body to protect it from the cold.

Bringing outdoor rabbits inside

As discussed above, if you have provided a good setup for your rabbits, they should be fine for the whole winter, but there are times when you may feel they would be better off indoors either in extreme weather conditions or when fireworks are being let off, which as we know is no longer limited to 5th November.

The temperature where they are being kept indoors must not be too high, which can cause rabbits to overheat initially as well as lose their protective winter coat which would cause them to suffer when they go back outside.

Be aware that, as prey animals, rabbits find unfamiliar environments, sights, sounds and smells stressful so try and normalise their temporary indoor home as much as possible. Keep them somewhere quiet, avoid cooking anything with a strong smell nearby and it's a good idea to bring some of the enrichment items from their outdoor enclosure. Ensure that the area is rabbit-proofed, slippery floors are covered, and the rabbits have sufficient space.

Don't skip the clean-outs

Even though it's cold, dark and wet out there, rabbits must be cleaned out regularly. They are likely to be spending more



Here at the RWA&F we love rabbits and are a great source of reliable advice. If you have rabbits you will love Rabbiting On magazine! Visit our website for more information.

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