

Getting your rabbits into shape



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Introduction

Just like people, pets need to eat the right diet and get enough exercise to stay fit and healthy. But as many of us know, it's not always easy!

In this handy guide, you'll find lots of information on feeding and exercise to help you keep your rabbits healthy and happy. And if your rabbits are carrying a few extra pounds, there's also advice on how you can help them lose weight and get back into shape.



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How do I know if my rabbits are a healthy shape?

Why are we talking about shape?

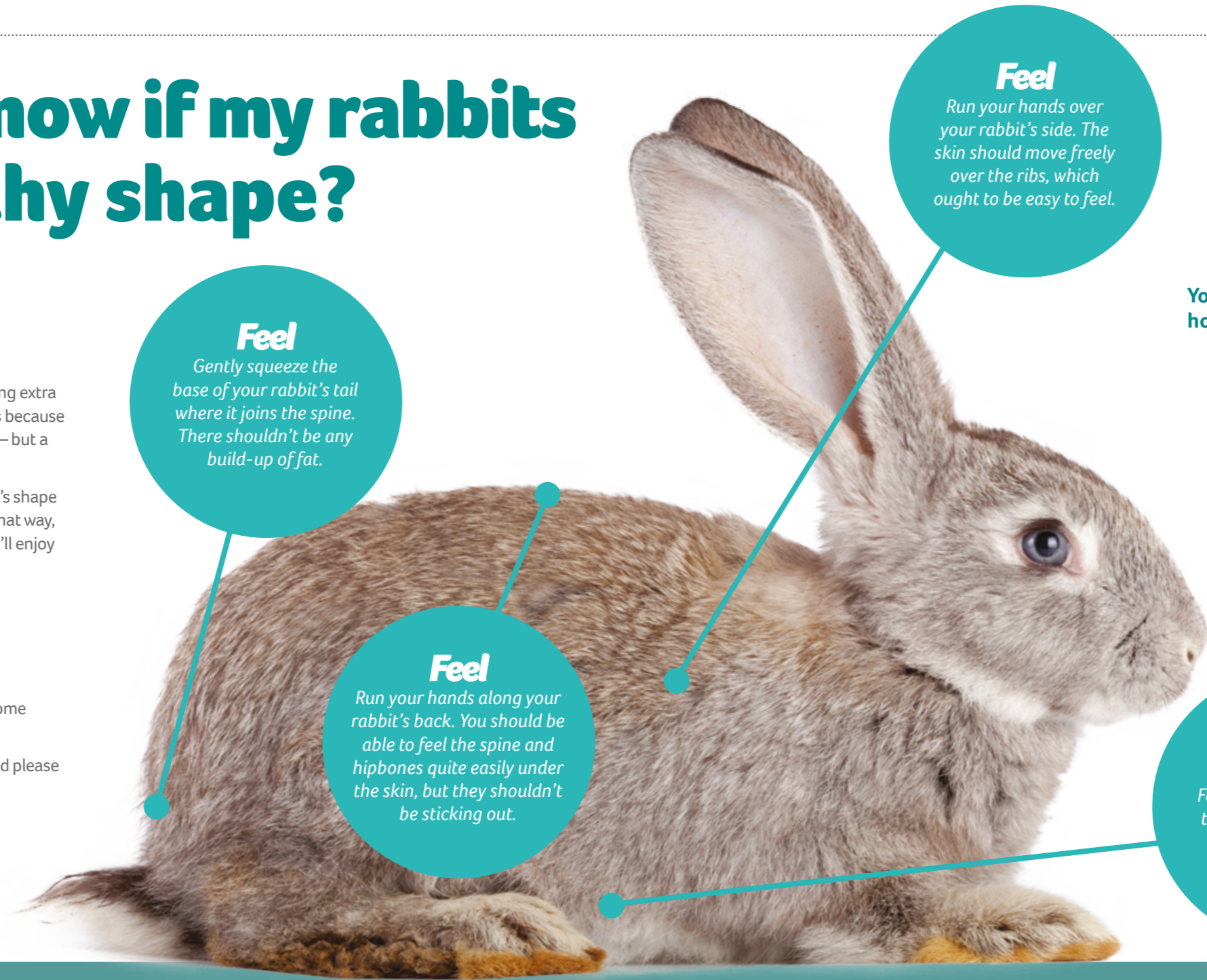
A rabbit's shape is a better way to tell if they're carrying extra weight rather than relying on the scales alone. That's because the ideal weight is different for every type and breed – but a healthy shape is the same for all rabbits.

It's good to get into the habit of checking your rabbit's shape every few weeks, starting when they're very young. That way, you'll know what's normal for your rabbits – and they'll enjoy the extra attention!

How to check for a healthy shape

All you have to do is 'look and feel'. We've included some pictures to help you.

When you've finished, give your rabbit a big hug – and please remember to wash your hands!



Feel

Gently squeeze the base of your rabbit's tail where it joins the spine. There shouldn't be any build-up of fat.

Feel

Run your hands over your rabbit's side. The skin should move freely over the ribs, which ought to be easy to feel.

Your vet or vet nurse can show you how to check your rabbit's shape.

Look

Look at your rabbit from the side, and from above. You should be able to see a waist: if not, your rabbit may be a bit overweight.

Feel

Run your hands along your rabbit's back. You should be able to feel the spine and hipbones quite easily under the skin, but they shouldn't be sticking out.

Feel

Feel under your rabbit's tummy. It should go in, not bulge out.

BODY CONDITION SCORE

THE FIVE WELFARE NEEDS



1 VERY THIN

- Muscle loss
- Rump area curves in
- Ribs and other bones sharp to the touch



2 IDEAL

- No abdominal bulge
- Rump area flat
- Ribs and other bones felt but not seen



3 OBESE

- Pronounced fat layers
- Rump area bulges
- Ribs and other bones no longer felt



Diet

Rabbits come in many shapes and sizes. The type and amount of food they need depends on their breed, species, age, health and lifestyle. Your rabbit needs fresh water to drink at all times.

What should I feed my rabbits?

Rabbits need a diet that's as close as possible to their natural food. In the wild, they spend more than half their time feeding. Hay, grass and root vegetables are ideal foods for rabbits. They take time to eat and contain a lot of fibre, which is good for your rabbit's digestion, and helps wear down their teeth, which keep growing for their whole life. Having hay to eat also stops them from getting bored.

How often should I feed my rabbits?

Our vets advise that rabbits should be fed:

- At least their body size amount of hay each day. This is very important for healthy teeth and digestion.
- A handful of fresh vegetables, morning and evening. Although rabbits love carrots, they contain a lot of sugar, which is bad for your rabbits' teeth. Carrots are OK now and again, but you can feed the green leafy tops as often as you like!
- A tablespoon of commercial rabbit nuggets (not muesli-type mix) once a day for rabbits under 3.5kg, and twice a day for rabbits over 3.5kg.

It's important not to make sudden changes to your rabbits' diet, as this can make them go off their food completely. If you're not sure what to feed, ask your vet or vet nurse, and they'll be happy to help you.

It sounds obvious, but pets that eat too much get fat! If you feed your rabbit a lot of treats as well as their normal food, most of the extra calories will turn into fat. Rabbits don't need treats to know you love them: playing and spending time with you are what they enjoy most of all.



What it means if your rabbits are overweight ...



For rabbits, being overweight makes it harder for them to move about. This can cause a whole host of health problems. The fur can get worn away on the backs of their legs, making the skin sore. If they can't turn round to clean their bottom properly, they can get fly strike. This is where flies lay eggs in the dirty fur, which hatch out into maggots. Female rabbits that are overweight may also find it difficult to breed.

Pets put on weight simply by eating more food than they need. Luckily, in most cases, the answer is simple, too: it just takes time, and a bit of effort, to get them back into shape.

... and what you can do to help

Start by going to see your vet. Helping your rabbits to lose weight has to be done carefully. If they lose weight too quickly, it can cause liver problems. Many practices run a diet club for pets, which might also be useful.

You'll also need to weigh your rabbit, so you have a 'starting point' for their weight loss programme. This is quite easy: first, weigh yourself, then pick up the rabbit and weigh yourself again. The difference between the two is the weight of the rabbit. If your rabbit is too small to get an accurate weight, your vet will be able to do this for you using special scales.

Another top tip is to keep a food diary for a week, and take it with you when you go to see your vet. This can help you spot where your rabbit is getting the extra calories, and makes it easier to cut them out without a special diet.



As well as diet, exercise is very important in helping your rabbits lose weight. Your vet can advise on the kinds of exercise, and how much your rabbits need.

YOUR RABBITS' FOOD DIARY

Day	Time	Why did you feed this food?	What you fed and how much

Helping your rabbits to lose weight may take time and effort, but it's worth it. Stick with the plan, and your rabbits can look forward to a longer, healthier and happier life.

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Exercise

Pets rely on us to keep them fit and healthy. Many rabbits live in small hutches, and don't get much exercise. Because they get bored, they tend to overeat, and get fat. This can cause heart problems and arthritis: bored rabbits also groom themselves too much, and get hairballs.

As an owner, there are some simple things you can do to keep your rabbits fit, healthy and happy.



Give your rabbits some things to play with. Rabbits are very inquisitive and enjoy exploring. They will play happily with **plastic tubes, cardboard boxes** and **logs** (without wood treatment) which also make good hiding places; rabbits get scared easily.

It's also a good idea to have a **range of suitable toys**, and give your rabbits different ones to play with each week to keep them interested.

Give your rabbits the chance to dig. **Rabbits love digging.** A seed tray filled with potting compost lets them do what comes naturally, without burrowing holes all over your garden!



Make an outdoor exercise run. **Rabbits like to hop around, play, rummage in the grass** and **graze.** The bigger you can make the run, the better, but make sure you bury the wire at least 40cm into the ground, so your rabbits can't burrow out and escape.



*Spending time outside also means they get the sunlight they need to make **vitamin D**, which helps them absorb important calcium from their diet.*



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