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Alex graduated from the University of Sydney in 1991.

He achieved Membership of the Avian Health Chapter of the Australian College of Veterinary Scientists in 1996. In November 1996 he opened the first and only Sydney all bird and exotic pet practice. The Clinic moved to 1 Hunter St, Waterloo in 2003 and sees approximately 80% birds, and 20% fish, reptiles and other exotic pets. Alex is the current President of the Australian Veterinary Association Avian Group.

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## Health Care

A vaccination against Calicivirus (a disease spread by mosquitoes that can cause sudden death) is required at 8-10 weeks of age, a

booster at 12-14 weeks and again with a regular health check every 9-12 months for life. Not even indoor rabbits are safe without a vaccination. As overgrown cheek (back) teeth leading to the inability to eat is a common, life-threatening problem, the teeth need to be examined at this annual vaccination. Your rabbit vet will use a special instrument to examine the cheek teeth.

Desexing is recommended for female rabbits at 5-6 months of age to help prevent unwanted litters and the development of uterine cancer which occurs in 50-80% of rabbits over 4 years of age. Desexing is also recommended at 4-6 months for male rabbits to reduce aggression, territorial behaviour (including inappropriate soiling) and bullying.

## SOME TIPS ON CARING FOR YOUR PET RABBIT



*It is hard to find simple information on how to keep your pet rabbit healthy. Here are a few tips on feeding, health care and housing for your rabbit.*

### Feeding

Many of the problems seen in rabbits are related to their diet. Poor diet leads to dental issues as well as urinary and digestive tract problems. Rabbits are herbivores (plant eaters) and require a diet high in fibre. The high fibre diet allows them to grind their teeth on the food (keeping the teeth healthy) and is necessary for a healthy digestive tract. Rabbits should be fed a diet of 80% grass, good quality wheat, timothy, meadow or oat hay. Vegetables that should comprise approximately 20% of the diet include broccoli, endive, beet and carrot leaves, brussel sprouts, Asian greens, chicory, kale, parsley, dandelion, coriander, basil, dill and mint. Celery and lettuce should only be fed in limited amounts as they are of little nutritional value. The commercially available oat hay or timothy hay pelleted foods should only be used for up to a maximum 10% of the diet. Avoid cereals, grains, nuts, seeds, fruit, corn, capsicum, beans and peas as well as the commonly available lucerne pellets and 'muesli' mix rabbit foods. These should only be fed as an occasional treat or not at all. Many treat foods are high in calcium or have a poor calcium to phosphorus ratio (e.g. lucerne hay, pellets and seed mixes) and may lead to dental problems as well as urinary tract problems including bladder stones. The above diet is for adult rabbits. For younger rabbits (under 4-6 months), you may vary the above to include some lucerne hay and pellets, as these are higher in calcium for growing bones.

To help prevent overgrown, misshapen teeth and to provide behavioural enrichment, additional toys made of hay or occasionally wood may be provided to chew on.



### Housing

Rabbits can be kept indoors or outdoors provided they are protected from the extremes of heat and cold. The good news is that rabbits can be trained to use a litter box and so make an ideal indoor pet. If you do keep your rabbits indoors, they should still have access to unfiltered sunlight on a regular basis and given the opportunity to exercise. Try to give them daily supervised periods in the garden.

Be careful with rabbits in summer as they are extremely sensitive to heatstroke as they can neither pant nor sweat. It is best to avoid temperatures above 26°C. Keep your rabbit's room or hutch between 18-22°C.

Rabbits are prone to foot trauma if placed on hard or wire surfaces. If your rabbit is living in a hutch, ensure that the floor is made of solid material such as plexiglass or wood with a thick layer of regularly changed paper, straw or hay. Finally, make sure your outdoor rabbit has a concealed area as this is important for your rabbit to feel secure.