

Bonding rabbits

Rabbits are social animals and companionship is very important to them. When they're kept with a suitable companion, rabbits tend to feel happier, safer, calmer and are less prone to stress.

Because of this, if you don't already have rabbits, we'll suggest you adopt rabbits in bonded pairs. We'll only recommend you adopt a single rabbit if they'll be bonded with a rabbit you already have and will live as a pair or in a compatible group (unless we've been advised otherwise by a vet or a qualified animal behaviorist).



For rabbits to feel safe, calm and happy, they need the company of another rabbit they get along well with.

If you're adopting a single rabbit to bond with your existing rabbit, it's best you carry out the bonding process in your home instead of at the RSPCA branch or centre you're adopting from. This will allow your newly adopted rabbit to adjust to their new home and routines while being introduced to their potential companion. It will also protect the welfare of your existing rabbit, who'd otherwise have to go through the stress of travel and moving into new housing at the shelter.

Sadly, rabbits can suffer from injuries and severe stress if they aren't introduced to each other correctly or they're incompatible. Poor introductions can also cause rabbits to have negative associations with other rabbits, which may mean they'll struggle to bond with other rabbits in the future. This could have a significant negative impact on their welfare, so it's important you follow our step-by-step guidelines below.

Suitable rabbit companions

We generally recommend bonding a neutered ('snipped') male rabbit with a neutered ('spayed') female rabbit. This bond is usually the most straightforward and likely to result in success.

If you're a very experienced rabbit owner, then it may be possible to bond same-sex pairs, or even larger groups of rabbits. But there's a higher risk of these bonds failing, which may result in the rabbit(s) having to be returned to the shelter. Note that this doesn't apply to same-sex pairs who are already happily living together – these rabbits shouldn't be separated.

It's often best to choose rabbits that are a similar size to each other. However, if the pair are truly compatible then their size won't matter too much. A 'compatible pair of rabbits' means a pair of rabbits that are friendly towards each other – they'll groom one another, rest in contact with each other, and won't get into any regular or long fights/chases.

RABBITS SHOULDN'T BE BONDED WITH GUINEA PIGS. RABBITS AND GUINEA PIGS HAVE DIFFERENT NEEDS AND YOUR RABBIT WILL BE MUCH HAPPIER WITH THE COMPANY OF ANOTHER RABBIT.

Before you introduce your rabbits

1. Make sure both rabbits are fit and healthy.

- There are some diseases that rabbits carry without showing symptoms, so make sure you speak to your vet.
- Both rabbits should be vaccinated and free from parasites. You can find out about E. cuniculi and other common rabbit parasites.

2. Get both rabbits neutered (also known as 'spayed' for a female rabbit or 'snipped' for a male rabbit).

- A neutered male and female will be easier to bond because both rabbits will be less territorial. If the rabbits are the same sex, especially if they're males, they may both be dominant and territorial, which can lead to fights.
- A male rabbit can take up to six weeks to become sterile after he's neutered, so he mustn't be housed with a female rabbit during that time.
- A female rabbit mustn't be bonded with another rabbit straight after she's been neutered because she could get injured.

3. Prepare side-by-side housing.

- Place a suitable barrier between your rabbits' enclosures. They should still be able to see and smell one another and lie side by side.
- Make sure each rabbit will have constant access to hiding places and other areas they can go to avoid seeing each other.

4. Prepare a neutral area for introducing your rabbits.

- The neutral area should be smaller than the usual required space of 3m x 2m x 1m. It can be gradually increased in size over time.
- The area could be where you intend your rabbits to live long-term, or it could be a temporary area for them, such as a rabbit-proofed bathroom, but it must be separate from your rabbits' usual enclosures and somewhere that neither rabbit has been housed before. If this isn't possible, then make sure you deep-clean the entire area before your rabbits move in to remove any existing scents.

Rabbit-proofing a room means making sure it's free from any dangerous items or areas that could injure them, such as electric cables, painted wood or potted plants, as well as valuable items they could chew, including carpets.

- Check there's no areas that one rabbit could get backed into and trapped by another rabbit.

5. Prepare your rabbits' long-term living area.

- The size of this area needs to be at least 3m x 2m x 1m for a pair of medium-sized rabbits. Larger breeds, such as giant rabbits, and groups of more than two rabbits will need more space.
- Ideally, it should be a newly set-up space and somewhere that neither rabbit has been housed before. But if this isn't possible (e.g. you may already have an existing rabbit living in the space and are looking to adopt another rabbit to keep them company) then the entire area, including all enrichment, should be deep-cleaned to remove any scents that the resident rabbit may have left.
- Make sure it includes plenty of resources for each rabbit, including multiple hiding places, toys, tunnels, water stations, and piles of hay and herbs, to avoid competition.



Signs rabbits are bonding include them being relaxed around each other and eating side by side.

6. Get to know the signs of positive and negative interactions.

Examples of positive behaviors

- Sitting or lying side by side, particularly if resting in contact
- Grooming each other
- Seeking each other for positive interaction
- Eating next to each other
- Behaving normally around each other (e.g. eating, drinking, grooming themselves)
- Spending several hours together without any 'negative' behaviours (see right)

Examples of negative behaviors

- Chasing
- Mounting
- Fighting
- Growling
- Fur-pulling

The bonding process

1. Start with side-by-side enclosures.

- House your rabbits in their side-by-side enclosures to help them get familiar with each other from a safe distance. Make sure they each have constant access to hiding areas, enrichment (such as toys), food and water. There may be some unrest at first. Don't worry, this is normal and may last around seven days.
- As soon as your rabbits are comfortable in each other's presence, swap some of their nesting materials over, or rub a cloth over one rabbit and then the other to transfer their scent. Signs they're comfortable include lying or sitting next to each other (with the barrier between them), relaxed normal eating, drinking and grooming behaviours, or ignoring each other.



Side-by-side enclosures help rabbits to get familiar with each other from a safe distance.

2. Introduce your rabbits to the neutral area.

- When your rabbits are comfortable with the sight and smell of each other, you can introduce them for short periods in the neutral area you've prepared.
- During the first few introductions, make sure you keep the area empty of resources, such as toys, hiding places, tunnels, etc., so you can see both rabbits clearly.
- During this stage, you should supervise your rabbits at all times so you can step in if you spot any negative behaviors. Chasing and mounting are normal during introductions, but they mustn't be allowed to escalate to fighting. If your rabbits show severe or persistent aggression towards each other, then you should separate them immediately. It's better to separate your rabbits too soon and try again the next day, than risk a fight and them falling out so badly that they can't live together in the future.
- If the first few introductions go well, you can introduce resources so your rabbits can avoid one another if they want to and also enjoy themselves – the time your rabbits spend in this area should be positive. To prevent competition and fighting over resources, make sure you provide plenty of enrichment and distractions for each rabbit, including multiple hiding places, toys, tunnels, water stations and piles of hay and herbs.
- Once your rabbits are behaving comfortably around each other, you can gradually increase the time they spend together.
- Note: this stage could take just a couple of hours through to a couple of months.



An empty, neutral area allows rabbits to interact and get to know each other better.

3. Introduce your rabbits to their long-term living area.

- If the above steps are going well, and your rabbits are spending 1–2 hours together daily without any problems, then they can be introduced to their new long-term living area.
- At first, you should supervise your rabbits so you can keep a check on how they're getting along. You can leave your rabbits alone together unsupervised as soon as they're showing positive behaviours towards one another.
- In some cases, it may be necessary to go back a step and gradually build up the time your rabbits are spending together before allowing them to live together full time.



Once rabbits are behaving positively around each other, they can be introduced to their long-term living area under supervision.

Problems during bonding

- If during any of the bonding stages your rabbits show negative behaviour towards each other, you may need to separate them. If this happens, separate them gently and swiftly, wearing sturdy shoes and gloves (or using a towel/blanket) to protect yourself.
- If the squabble is minor, it might be possible to distract your rabbits with something interesting in their area, such as a tasty treat – as long as this wasn't the trigger for the disagreement! You might then be able to continue the bonding session. But, if the disagreement was more serious, it would be best to stop and try again the next day.
- If the tension between your rabbits doesn't ease off over time, and you find you have to step in to ease disagreements multiple times during every session, then it may be a sign the bond isn't forming. In which case, it may be best to look for an alternative pairing.
- You may need to get help from a qualified animal behaviourist that's experienced in rabbit behaviour; especially if one of your rabbits is failing to bond with a selection of different rabbits after you've followed the steps. For help finding a qualified animal behaviourist, visit: rspca.org.uk/findabehaviourist

Tips for maintaining a happy rabbit pairing/grouping

Once you've bonded your rabbits, you'll want to make sure you maintain the peace. The following tips will help to keep your rabbits happy.

- Two rabbits need a large amount of space and lots of areas to hide (e.g. cardboard boxes, tunnels and raised areas), so they can get away from each other if they want to.
- They each need enough resources (including shelter, hiding places, platforms, food, water, toys, etc.) to prevent competition and a dominant rabbit guarding resources.



To prevent competitive behaviour, make sure you provide lots of enrichment and hiding places for both rabbits to enjoy.

- Keep to a routine and don't change the layout of their environment unless it's essential. This will help your rabbits feel in control of their space and help prevent them getting stressed. Note: this doesn't mean you can't give them new toys and activities to enjoy – it's important your rabbits have lots of mental stimulation!
- Bonded pairs or groups should not be separated, as this can cause their bond to break down.
- Companions should travel together (i.e. to the vet or their new home) in a suitably sized carrier.
- If your rabbits have a separate exercise area, make sure bonded pairs/groups are always placed together in this area.

Things to keep in mind

- **Take your time and be patient.**
Some pairs will bond quicker than others.

- **It's natural for one rabbit to be dominant over the other but they shouldn't be aggressive.**

For example, a little bit of chasing and nipping is normal, but negative behaviours shouldn't be allowed to escalate. It's better to separate your rabbits too soon than risk an all-out fight.

- **Giving your rabbits the right kind of living environment is essential.**

They need space for exercise and mental stimulation. If their housing is too small, it will encourage fighting. The bigger the rabbit home the better.



Rabbits need plenty of space, exercise and mental stimulation to be happy and healthy.

- **Don't be afraid to go back to a previous stage and repeat.**

Sometimes that will help, sometimes it won't. But there's no point in continuing with something that isn't working – it can have a negative impact on the welfare of your rabbits at the time, as well as risk the success of future bonding attempts.

- **Stay in touch with the RSPCA branch or centre your rabbit(s) were adopted from.**

They can give you further advice or help you to return the rabbit(s) if the bonding process isn't working out.

- **Just because a bond doesn't work between two rabbits, it doesn't mean they should live alone forever.**

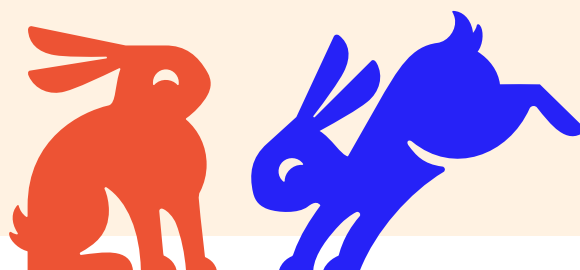
Instead, try an alternative pairing. Rabbits are highly social animals and the companionship of another rabbit is extremely important to them.

- **You may like to consider using a rabbit bonding service.**

If you do, make sure you research it thoroughly.

RSPCA.

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