



COMMON BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS IN RABBITS

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Rabbit owners, on average, are less likely than dog owners to seek help for problem behaviours in their pet. Similarly, certain types of rabbit owner may be more or less likely to seek help. So, how commonly do problem behaviours in rabbits occur? And how does this affect their owners? We can look in the PDSA Animal Wellbeing reports to find out more - this scheme is the UK's largest annual assessment of pet wellbeing. Each year, the PDSA works with the market research company, YouGov, to survey nationally representative samples of pet dog, cat, and rabbit owners, providing insight into animal welfare issues, estimating pet population numbers, and understanding how people care for their pets.

How are rabbits commonly kept?

For context, the 2022 PAW report found that there are 1 million rabbits in the UK - 2% of UK adults own a rabbit. 46% of rabbits live alone, 18% are fed on muesli mix, 58% are neutered, and there are about equal numbers living outdoors and indoors. 20% of rabbit owners said that owning their pet made them stressed, 40% said that owning a pet is hard work, and 91% said that owning a pet made them happy.

The 2020 PDSA PAW report (the most recent one that reported specifically on rabbit behavioural problems) stated that 56% of rabbit owners say that their rabbit displays at least one behaviour they'd like to change. Significantly more owners of rabbits living in inadequate housing (30%) wanted to change at least one behaviour when compared to the owners of rabbits living in more ideal environments (15%). 22% said their rabbit was bored, 20% said their rabbit was lonely, and 15% said their rabbit was stressed.

What are the most commonly reported behavioural problems in rabbits?

Behaviour	Percentage reporting this behaviour
Digging up ground and/or carpets	16%
Thumping back feet	15%
Chewing furniture etc.	14%
Biting bars of run/hutch repeatedly	9%
Hiding	9%
Biting owner	9%
Growling at owner	8%
Boxing owner	5%

Of these, digging and chewing inappropriate objects suggest that the rabbits' requirements for these behaviours aren't being met with appropriate objects, and that the owners don't understand what they need to do to reduce the behaviours. Providing plenty of hay, grass, and branches of fruit trees should reduce the rabbits' motivation to chew other things.

However, owners need to be aware that these behaviours, although unwanted, are based on the desire to express totally normal behaviours. The unnatural and inadequate environments in which they are being kept does not allow for that.

Thumping the hind feet, repeatedly biting at the bars of the run or hutch, and hiding are behaviours that indicate the rabbit feels fearful or stressed, so it likely indicates poor welfare. The rabbits need to have a larger, more interesting environment with predictable, pleasurable interactions with humans.



Digging and chewing carpet or the ground was the most commonly reported behavioural problems in rabbits

Finally, the last three behaviours indicate that the relationship between the rabbit and owner is poor. This is stressful for the rabbit and also reduces the owner's motivation to provide what the rabbit needs. The rabbits need to have frequent, predictable, pleasurable interactions with humans who respond to the rabbit's behavioural indicators of emotion. In addition to these aggressive behaviours, 28% of rabbits struggle when being lifted. This is not surprising, given that rabbits instinctively dislike being picked up because they are a prey species. The PAW report suggests that "further work is needed to help owners train their rabbits to accept handling" - although in many cases, finding ways to reduce handling will improve the rabbits' welfare more.

How do owner attitudes and behaviours affect the behaviours of their rabbits?

The 2016 PAW report analysed the characteristics and beliefs of owners who reported problem behaviours in their rabbit. It found that owners who said that they **would like to change behaviours in their rabbit** were more likely to:

1. Feel that owning a pet is harder work and more expensive than expected
2. Feel that owning a pet makes them stressed
3. Be feeding rabbit muesli as a main type of food or at least once a month
4. Give treats because it makes their rabbit happy
5. Have tried a weight loss diet with their rabbit
6. Feel uninformed about a rabbit's ability to express normal behaviour.



Thumping of the back feet was another common behaviour reported by rabbit owners



Chewing items, although unwanted, is based on the desire to express totally normal behaviour

The survey also found that owners who **didn't want to change behaviours in their rabbits** were more likely to:

1. Feel informed about their rabbits' needs to express normal behaviour
2. Disagree that owning a pet makes them stressed or is harder work than they expected
3. Spend more time researching acquiring a pet than any other household purchase
4. Own older rabbits.

This last point is interesting, as a higher average age of rabbits in the sample implies that that group is living longer and is, therefore, more likely to be having its health and husbandry needs met appropriately.

Conclusion

It seems that owners who are more informed about rabbits are less likely to dislike an aspect of their rabbit's behaviour. This is unsurprising - human beings, in many instances, react poorly to the unexpected. However, in that PAW report, the percentage of owners who would like to change an aspect of their rabbits' behaviour was lower than the percentage of rabbits kept in poor conditions (52% of rabbits lived alone, 22% lived in hutches that are too small, on average, the rabbits spent twelve hours per day in the hutch, and 26% did not have any interaction with humans on a daily basis - a significant problem if the rabbit is kept on its own). This implies that there is a subset of owners who don't recognise their rabbits' "abnormal" behaviours - perhaps because they don't understand that they are displacement behaviours based on the desire to express normal behaviours.

The PAW reports have been released every year since 2011 and have documented a general improvement in how rabbits are kept - many fewer owners are routinely feeding muesli mixes, and the number of rabbits kept on their own is slightly lower. However, it's clear that there is still a long way to go. While rabbits are not kept in ways that provide good welfare, they will continue to show behavioural problems. Hopefully, as rabbit care continues to improve, we'll see the incidence of behavioural problems in rabbits decreasing.