Small Animal

Information Pack

Are you ready to welcome a small pet into your home?

Thousands of unwanted small pets are given up each year, so please consider adopting one from a reputable rescue centre. They will ensure your pet is vaccinated, microchipped and neutered. If you choose to buy, it is best that this is from a responsible breeder or pet shop. If you are searching online, use websites endorsed by the Pet Advertising Advisory Group. We do not recommend buying a pet via social media. For more information, please visit here.

This information pack covers **rabbits, hamsters, guinea pigs and ferrets**. For information on rats, mice, gerbils degus or chinchillas, please visit here.

Remember to seek permission from your landlord before installing any items outside.

Under the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006, pet owners are legally obliged to care for their pets by meeting their **five basic welfare needs**:

- suitable environment
- suitable diet
- ability to behave normally
- appropriate companionship
- be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

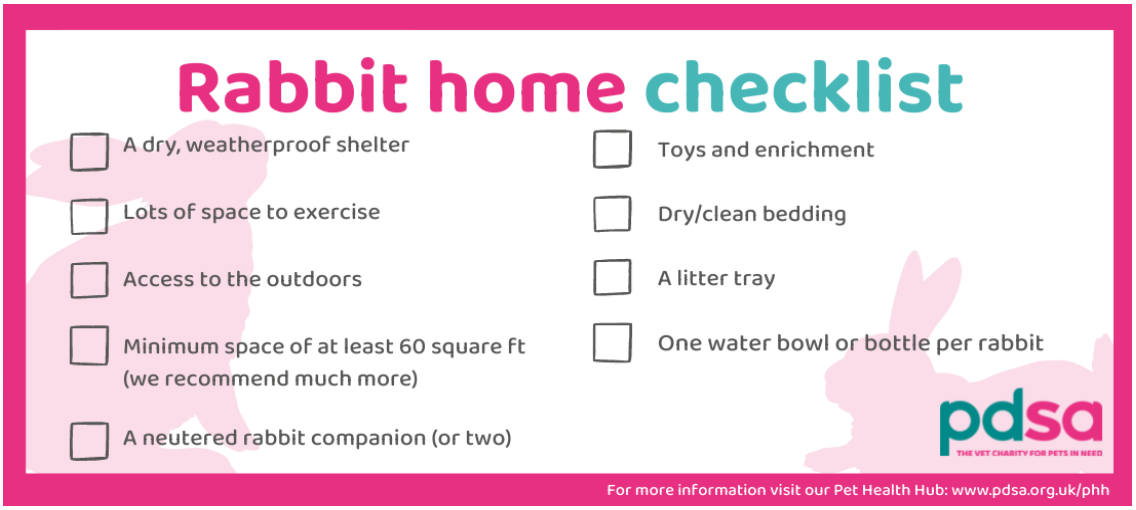
This pack provides information on how to meet these needs, and where to go for support if needed.

Rabbits

Rabbits make great pets but need lots of care and attention and can live between **8 to 12 years.** A minimum of two hours a day should be dedicated to building a bond with your rabbits.

1. Environment - creating the ideal home for your rabbits

Your rabbits' environment has a huge impact on their health and wellbeing, so the better their living space, the happier they'll be! Rabbits can live indoors or outdoors, but a hutch is not enough. Rabbits need as big a space as possible filled with enrichment so that they can exhibit natural behaviours like running, jumping, hiding and digging. They need access to all the things they require at all times, including safe hiding places in their main shelter and exercise area.



For more information on how to create the ideal home for your rabbit please visit here.

2. Diet - providing a suitable diet for your rabbits

Rabbits should have a constant supply of hay, this helps wear their teeth down and prevents them from growing too large. Make sure you also

provide them with fresh green vegetables and rabbit nuggets, as well as ensuring there is water available to drink at all times.



For more information on what your rabbit can and can't eat please visit here.

3. Behaviour - making sure your rabbits are able to behave normally

It's really important for rabbits to be able to behave like rabbits in order to stay happy and healthy. To enable this, you'll need to provide them with lots of space, the right company, a suitable diet, and plenty of mental and physical stimulation.

There are plenty of low-cost toys you can buy or make at home to battle bunny boredom. These include food forage trays, chew toys, cardboard boxes, tunnels, food filled toys and lookout toys.

Signs of a happy rabbit include:

- relaxed body
- curiosity
- happy hopping
- nose twitching

Signs of an unhappy rabbit include:

- flat ears
- tense body
- lack of nose twitching
- moving or running away
- hiding
- thumping
- chewing cage bars
- over-grooming themselves

Always take your rabbits to the vet if you notice an unexplained change in their behaviour to rule out any illnesses or medical causes.

Rabbits are very sensitive animals and often do not enjoy being picked up. Children in particular need to be shown how to interact with rabbits and should always be supervised around them. Find more information here.

For more information on understanding your rabbit please visit here.

4. Companionship - making sure your rabbits have appropriate company

Rabbits should never be kept alone as they get lonely and stressed. This can lead to illness and serious problems with their behaviour, such as aggression. As much as we love our bunnies, our human company isn't a replacement for having a rabbit friend – they have different needs and communicate in different ways.

For the happiest bunnies, we suggest keeping a neutered male with a neutered female. If you're keeping any male and female rabbits together, it's really important to get them neutered. Don't keep rabbits and guinea pigs together as they both need their own kind for company.

One of the most common reasons rabbits find themselves being rehomed is due to being incorrectly sexed, leading to accidental litters or pregnancies! Ensure your rabbit is the gender you have been told and check with your vet if you're not sure.

Introducing rabbits

If you already have a rabbit, introducing them to a new bunny buddy should be done carefully and gradually. The process of introducing rabbits to each other is called 'bonding'. Your new rabbits will need to be kept apart at first and given a chance to gradually get to know each other. Once they're happy and comfortable together - with no sign of fighting - they will be able to share a living space. Rabbits won't necessarily get on straight away, so it is important to take things slowly. Properly bonding your rabbits can take as little as a day but usually it takes a few weeks before your bunnies will be happily living together.

5. Health - making sure your rabbits are protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

It's really important to get your rabbit registered with a vet and have them checked if you notice any symptoms of illness or change in behaviour.

It's also important to have them:

Neutered – to prevent unwanted pregnancies and protect against serious illnesses

Microchipped – to help you be reunited with your rabbit if they ever escape from your home or garden

Vaccinated – to protect against Myxomatosis and Rabbit Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (RHD). They need their first vaccine at around 5-7 weeks old and then a booster every year

Follow these links to find more information on rabbit care including grooming, saying goodbye, giving health checks, litter training and exercising.

This guidance is provided for information purposes only and it should not be relied on as formal advice for your specific circumstances. Dogs Trust and PDSA accept no liability for any loss or damage caused as a result of your reliance on it.

Rodents

Hamsters

Hamsters might look small, but they're still a big responsibility and need plenty of care and attention. Hamsters can be very rewarding pets to look after, as long as they are given the right kind of care. They live for around **2 to 3 years.**

1. Environment - creating the ideal home for your hamster

You should always aim to find the biggest home possible for your hamster so they can live comfortably. The bigger the cage, the better!



Most hamster cages sold in shops aren't big enough to meet a hamster's most basic needs, so instead, try providing them with a much larger space, such as an extra-large cage or glass tank. Wherever you choose to house your hamster make sure it has the following:

- **A large, usable floor area** with plenty of space for exploring - there isn't a lot of evidence to say exactly how big a hamster cage should be but the 'Veterinary Association for Animal Welfare'(based in Germany) states a **minimum cage size of 100x50cm.** Please note this is a MINIMUM size, bigger is always better!
- **Places to climb** such as branches, ladders or shelves

- **A deep enough solid base** to accommodate a minimum of 25cm (10 inches) of suitable bedding for burrowing, sleeping and storing food
- **Nest boxes** to sleep and hide in
- **A secure lid and doors** – hamsters are fantastic escape artists!
- **Toys** to keep them entertained
- **A gnawing block** to help them wear their teeth down

Make sure your hamster's cage is positioned somewhere:

- Quiet, calm and away from anything noisy such as the TV or washing machine - noise and vibrations are stressful for hamsters.
- Kept at a steady temperature between 18-21°C and out of draughts and direct sunlight.

2. Diet - providing a suitable diet for your hamster

The ideal hamster diet will include:

- Commercial hamster pellets (not a muesli-style mix). You can buy these in pet shops
- Small amounts of fresh fruit, vegetables or herbs – do not overfeed sugary treats as this can lead to health issues such as obesity or diabetes
- Timothy hay - a special variety of hay that's full of fibre and is ideal for small pets. You can buy it in pet shops
- Occasional treats, like nuts, boiled egg or mealworms
- You hamster will also need constant access to clean, fresh water. It should be in a water bottle with a metal spout

For more information on what to feed your hamster including which vegetables, fruits and herbs are safe please visit here.

3. Behaviour - making sure your hamster is able to behave normally

Boredom is a big problem for small pets and can lead to obesity, health problems, and behavioural problems. It's important to keep your hamster active by providing them with lots of suitable toys and activities, such as:

- **Fun feeding** - scatter some food around the cage and hide hay, food or fresh greens inside paper bags, boxes or tubes, so they have an interesting treasure hunt. Your hamster will enjoy searching for their food and can also gnaw on the packaging you hide it in.
- **An exercise wheel** - make sure it's large and has no spaces between the rungs which could injure their legs. The 'Veterinary Association for Animal Welfare 'recommends wheels should be at least 20cm (8″) for Dwarf Hamsters and 30cm (12″) for Syrian Hamsters.
- Make sure their environment has **no less than 25cm (10") of suitable bedding to burrow in -** hamsters really love to dig!

4. Companionship - making sure your hamster has appropriate company

Hamsters do not need to live in pairs or groups. **In fact, most hamster species are solitary animals and prefer to live alone**. They don't get lonely or need a friend, so keeping them together can often lead to fighting, stress, and injury.

5. Health - making sure your hamster is protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

The best way to know if your hamster is healthy is to do a daily health check:

- Check their face and eyes
- Check their coat
- Check their back end
- Check their feet

By getting to know your hamster's normal behaviour and habits, you'll quickly be able to spot if anything's not right. For more information including signs of illness, please visit here.

If you notice an unexplained change in behaviour, contact your vet.

Guinea pigs

Guinea pigs require quite a bit of care in order for them to stay happy and healthy. Guinea pigs live for around **4 to 8 years**, sometimes even longer, so their care is a long-term commitment.

1. Environment - creating the ideal home for your guinea pigs

Guinea pigs can live indoors or outdoors, so long as they have enough space, access to natural light and can be kept at a comfortable temperature. They can live in a large hutch and run in the garden, a heated outhouse, a car-free garage or shed.

In temperatures under 15°C they must have access to a warm, indoor area as cold weather can make them very unwell. If temperatures rise above 24°C you'll need to help your guinea pigs stay cool by moving their living space into the shade, keeping their drinking water cold, and if it gets really hot, providing them with cooling aids such as a frozen bottle of water wrapped in a towel.

Wherever you choose to house your guinea pigs make sure they have:

- **A large hutch**-the bigger the better but **at least 1.5m x 1m**, which should include a cosy area to snuggle up in
- **A large exercise area**-the bigger the better but **at least 2m x 1m.** They need constant access to this. If outside it should be in a grassy area without too much mud and no standing water, avoid concrete or hard surfaces. If inside make sure it is on a non-slip, non-carpeted, easy to clean surface.
- **A safe and comfy lining** in their hutch such as clean dust-free wood shavings
- **Clean, dry, dust-free meadow hay,** as bedding. And separate hay for feeding.
- **Lots of tunnels, shelters and hides** in their run so they can move around confidently, explore and hide if they want to.
- **Plenty of toys and activities** to keep them entertained.

Their living space will need to be cleaned on a daily, weekly and monthly basis. If your guinea pigs don't have the right home it can lead to boredom and health problems.

2. Diet - providing a suitable diet for your guinea pigs

Guinea pigs need continuous access to grass, hay and fresh water. They also need a small daily amount of fresh vegetables and guinea pig pellets to ensure they do not suffer from Vitamin C deficiency (unlike many animals they cannot produce vitamin C themselves, so you need to provide it in their diet). Do not feed them 'muesli style' food as they often pick out the bits they like and leave the bits they don't, leading to weight gain, dental problems and stomach issues.



For more information on what to feed your hamster including which vegetables, fruits and herbs are safe please visit here. PDSA have information on how to keep your guinea pig healthy here.

3. Behaviour - making sure your guinea pigs are able to behave normally

As well as a roomy hutch, guinea pigs need lots of space to run around and explore. However, they are quite shy and in the wild spend a lot of time hiding under vegetation, so also need lots of spaces to hide in. Cardboard boxes, tubes or pipes are great for this and also lots of fun.

Guinea pigs aren't generally big fans of toys but hiding small amounts of food for them to search for can keep them entertained.

If your guinea pig's behaviour changes it could be a sign they are distressed, bored, ill or injured so speak to your vet for advice.

4. Companionship - making sure your guinea pigs have appropriate company

Guinea pigs are very friendly, sociable animals that **need to live with other guinea pigs** to stay happy and healthy. They should be kept in groups of three or more. Do not keep rabbits and guinea pigs together.

Guinea pigs can be kept in single-sex groups (all males or all females), or a mixed group, as long as the males are neutered. We recommend getting a group of guinea pigs that are already established friends. Guinea pigs rarely fight, but it's important to ensure there is enough space, food and hiding areas for everyone – this will help avoid any squabbling between them.

If you're left with a single guinea pig after a loss or already have a single guinea pig at home, you'll need to find them a friend (or two) to keep them happy. Find information on how to introduce guinea pigs here.

5. Health - making sure your guinea pigs are protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

The best way to know if your guinea pigs are healthy is to do a daily health check:

- Check their face and eyes
- Check their coat
- Check their back end
- Check their feet

By getting to know your guinea pig's normal behaviour and habits, you'll quickly be able to spot if anything's not right. For more information including signs of illness, please visit here.

Guinea pigs with long coats need regular grooming to prevent matting or other issues.

If you notice an unexplained change in behaviour, contact your vet.

Ferrets

Ferrets tend to live for **6-10 years**. They need to live in pairs or groups to prevent stress and boredom and should never live alone. Ferrets enjoy attention from their owners, and you'll need to have lots of time to spend playing and interacting with them.

1. Environment - creating the ideal home for your ferrets

Ferrets are clever, curious and like to explore. They need a very large living space, lots of things to do and plenty of playtime outside of their enclosure. They can't be left in a hutch all day, as this alone won't give your ferret the space they need to run around and play. Converted sheds, specially built ferret courts or their own room in your house make ideal enclosures. The floor space should be at least **10 square metres per pair of ferrets** but give them a bigger area if you can.

Their full enclosure should include:

- **A weatherproof, secure hutch** to sleep in that is raised off the ground and out of direct sunlight and strong winds.
- **An exercise area** big enough for them to have a good run around. Put in toys for them to play with and tubes or drainpipes for them to explore and hide in.
- **Lots of shredded paper, towels or blankets as bedding**. They also love hammocks, so you can hang these up in their enclosure.
- **Safe platforms of different heights**. Ferrets don't have brilliant eyesight so can sometimes misjudge a jump and fall off a platform or hammock. Make sure they can't fall far!
- **A solid floor.** You don't need to line their enclosure with any sawdust or bedding. If the enclosure has a wire mesh floor, cover it with something like vinyl. Ferrets can develop swollen feet and sores on the bottom of their paws if they spend too much time on mesh flooring.

You will need to clean litter trays, food/water bowls and remove any soiled bedding daily. You will need to do a full clean of their enclosure weekly. Find more information here.

2. Diet - providing a suitable diet for your ferrets

Ferrets are **obligate carnivores** – this means that they have to eat meat to stay healthy. Ferrets need to eat every few hours, so it's best to weigh out their daily allowance of food and leave it in their bowl so they can graze throughout the day.

The ideal diet for your ferret will include:

- Commercial ferret nuggets
- Occasional treats, such as boiled egg or cooked chicken
- Constant access to fresh, clean water. Water bottles with a metal spout are ideal but ferrets can also drink from bowls as long as it is heavy enough so they can't tip it over

3. Behaviour - making sure your ferrets are able to behave normally

Ferrets are lively, intelligent animals that love to play and use their brain. To keep your ferrets active and entertained, try these ideas:

- Hide some of their food in tunnels or around their enclosure so they have to search it out
- Fill a Kong toy with their regular food or with a special treat
- Use drainpipes, tubes and tunnels for playing, hiding and running through
- Provide hand ropes for climbing
- Put a toy on a string and drag it around for them to chase
- Train them to walk on a harness and lead. Always use positive reward-based training

4. Companionship - making sure your ferrets have appropriate company

Ferrets love company, whether with humans or their own kind. **They should not live alone, but with another ferret or a small group.** A group of ferrets

should contain littermates of the same sex, or neutered males and females.

Only keep a single ferret if you have been told to by a vet or animal behaviourist. If they're on their own, they should be played with regularly. Ferrets can also become friends with other household pets, like dogs and cats if you introduce them carefully, but they should always be supervised when playing together. Ferrets should not live with prey species such as rabbits or rodents.

5. Health- making sure your ferrets are protected from pain, suffering, disease and injury

If you keep male and female ferrets together, it's really important to speak to your vet about getting them **neutered**. Neutering is essential in female ferrets, unless they are kept with a vasectomised male. Unneutered female ferrets will naturally go 'into season'. They'll need to be brought out of season, or they could become seriously ill with anaemia and could even die due to blood loss. They'll need to be mated with a neutered male or be given the 'Jill jab' (an injection of hormones). If your ferret has babies, you'll need to find safe, suitable homes for them which can be challenging and stressful.

Speak to your vet about **vaccinations**, especially if you plan to take your ferret out and about with you on a lead and harness. As ferrets can get Canine Distemper, a nasty virus that's usually fatal.

Ferrets can struggle with their weight and carrying extra can cause serious health problems. You can keep your ferret's weight in check by making sure they get plenty of exercise and the right amount of food. Ferrets will put on around 40% of their body weight for the winter. If you notice your ferret gaining weight at the start of winter, don't put them on a diet. They should naturally lose the weight when spring comes.

For more information including signs of illness please visit here.

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A dog is for life ®
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Support

for small pet owners

Help with vet bills

- Your vet practice may offer monthly or yearly care plans to spread the cost of essential pet care such as flea and worming treatments and vaccinations.

Cost of living support

- **Blue Cross** have information on how to care for your small pet on a budget
- **Scottish SPCA** offer cost of living advice to help people and their pets.
- **Orkney Foodbank** may have pet food available depending on availability. See their website for more information.

Other support

- **Blue Cross** run a Pet Loss Support service so that no one has to face the pain of losing a pet alone. The service is free and confidential and can be accessed via emailing plsmail@bluecross.org.uk or calling 0800 096 6606. You can find more information here.

- **Blue Cross** will take your rabbit, guinea pig, hamster, chinchilla, degu, mice or rat into their care and find them a new loving home, in the sad event of you passing away with their Pet Peace of Mind service. Apply on their website using this form, email petpeaceofmind@bluecross.org.uk or phone 0300 777 1910.

- It is wise to have a plan should you ever become unable to care for your small pet, a family/friend might be able to help. Pet Fostering Service Scotland is a service available if you are unable to look after

your pet through illness, homelessness or domestic abuse and cannot arrange any alternative care. Please phone 0344 811 9909 to access the service or email fosterenquiry@pfss.org.uk to arrange a call back.

- Animal rescue charities could also take in your pet, which would be recommended over selling your pet online to make sure they go to a loving home.