

THERE are an estimated 1.7 million pet rabbits in the UK, making them the third most popular pet after cats and dogs.

However, of these three, rabbits are the least likely to have their needs met, according to the PDSA Animal Wellbeing (PAW) Report 2011.

Over 11,000 dog, cat and rabbit owners were interviewed about key aspects of care and welfare last year. Owners were scored out of 100 on how well they were looking after their pets, according to the five core welfare needs (environment, diet, behaviour, companionship, health). Rabbit owners scored, on average, just 53% – much lower than cat and dog owners.

Sean Wensley, PDSA senior veterinary surgeon, said: “Sadly there is plenty of room for improvement in the way pet rabbits are cared for. Rabbits, like all pets, are thinking and feeling animals, but there currently appears to be widespread misunderstanding of their needs, and how best to meet them.”

Among the findings are:

- Over 150,000 rabbits live in hutches that are too small
- 750,000 rabbits (45%) are not getting the recommended daily amount of hay or grass. Nearly half of owners

A better deal for rabbits

Rabbits are the third most popular pet in the UK, but how are their needs being met, and what factors are driving innovation in new products? What can retailers do to improve their welfare?



Sean Wensley, PDSA senior veterinary surgeon

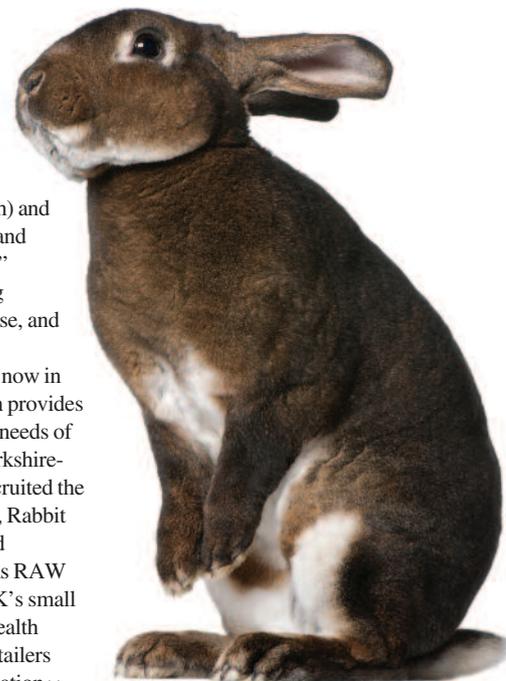
feed muesli mixes, which the PDSA says is not recommended as it is linked to dental disease

- Over a million rabbits lack mental stimulation – they need daily opportunities to dig, hide, play and run
- Over 1.1 million (67%) rabbits are kept alone, yet they need company
- 54% have never been vaccinated; 63% are not neutered; and 44% are not registered with a vet.

Sean added: “In many cases retailers could help to address these

problems through sales strategies (eg. selling an exercise run with every hutch) and by providing quality advice and guidance at the point of sale.”

Burgess Pet Care has long championed the rabbit’s cause, and its Burgess Excel Rabbit Awareness Week (RAW) is now in its sixth year. This campaign provides education about the welfare needs of rabbits, and last year the Yorkshire-based food manufacturer recruited the RSPCA, PDSA, Blue Cross, Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund (RWF) and Wood Green as RAW partners. Over half of the UK’s small animal vets ran free rabbit health check clinics; around 800 retailers and rescues centres ran education >>





<<events; and the campaign was publicised in all major national print news titles, on Radio 4, Radio 2, BBC *Children's Newsround* and *GMTV*.

Burgess Pet Care marketing manager Naomi Chatterley told *pbwnews*: "We are definitely starting to see a positive shift in public attitude towards pet rabbits and their welfare needs. The questions we are starting to get now, particularly around diet, are far more sophisticated than even just five years ago. For example, back then many owners didn't realise that the main part of a rabbit's diet should consist of grass and hay. Owners just need to take some time to understand their welfare needs, and this is where retailers are invaluable!"

Claire Hamblion, small animals and

exotics marketing manager at Supreme Petfoods, said: "As the first and sometimes only source of information about keeping a particular animal, retailers are in a prime position to educate customers on the full extent of the responsibility that they are taking on with pet ownership." In addition to offering in-store staff training on welfare and nutrition, Supreme is producing a series of rabbit welfare videos aimed at both retailers and consumers.

Promoting the welfare of rabbits also directly increases a retailer's profits. Paul Pugh, marketing director at Sharples 'N' Grant, estimates that during a rabbit's lifespan, the responsible owner will spend on average £4,000 on caging, food, treats, remedies and accessories. "With this in mind," he

Tips for retailers

- ◆ Sell hutches that meet the Retailer Charter
- ◆ Make customers aware that an exercise run is just as essential as a hutch
- ◆ Advise customers to keep rabbits in pairs. And yes, this means a male and female, and having them neutered. Owners need to be made aware of this cost.
- ◆ Ensure customers know that hay is an essential part of the diet and not just bedding!

said, "it is important that retailers are aware of the potential profit that rabbits can create."

A hutch is not enough... The Rabbit Welfare Association & Fund (RWF) has been in the news with its 'A hutch is not enough' campaign. As part of the campaign, retailers are urged to sign its Retailer Charter in which they agree to not stock hutches less than 4ft long, and to include 6ft hutches. RWF chief executive Rae Todd said: "Our recommended minimum hutch size is 6ft, but we know we have to be realistic in what changes we can make straight away, so the initial focus was on getting the really tiny hutches out of circulation."

The charity was delighted when Argos agreed to withdraw from sale a 77cm (2 1/2ft) hutch, and when talks with Tesco resulted in the retailer agreeing to only sell hutches that had been approved by the RWF.

Monster Pet Supplies has become the first on-line pet retailer to achieve accreditation from the RWF for its range of rabbit-friendly hutches and runs. Sarah Gould, product

manager, said: "To become the very first on-line pet retailer to achieve the accreditation is a real honour for us. We are committed supporters of the RWF's campaign and have worked hard with our suppliers to offer a range of hutches which enable owners to give their pet rabbits the vital space they need to exercise, explore and display their natural behaviours."

Hutch manufacturer RabbitShak has this year launched a range of hutches in line with charity's recommendations that hutches should be at least six foot long, with a two-foot depth and height – it has designed two single hutches and a hutch with an under-run, and each has attachable exercise runs. Phil Chatterburn, Rabbitshak managing director, said: "We are really pleased with our new range. There are only a few retailers currently offering RWF-compliant hutches, so we hope our RWF range will encourage more retailers to come on board and embrace our new hutches so that we



Timothy Hay is growing in popularity



Burgess Excel Complete Food Cubes, made of compressed Timothy Hay, herbs and flowers are launched this month

can continue to develop the range.”

The Hutch Company has also launched three winter rabbit hutches in 4ft, 5ft and 6ft lengths, all 2ft high and with 2ft depth. Extra-long legs ensure the floor of the hutch is well above frost and snow-covered ground.

Rae added: “The campaign is challenging deep-rooted misconceptions about rabbit care and welfare, and we have known from the start that this was never going to be a quick win. It was always planned as a long-term strategy. Many retailers are well informed, have a great range of products and have built a strong reputation locally by being honest and reliable, but we are very sad to say that there are still retailers who will sell a single rabbit in a small hutch and not make the new owners aware of any care advice.

“We speak to disgruntled rabbit owners every day who are upset that they have not been doing the right thing by their pets and have come to realise that the care and costs involved are more than they were led to believe by the retailer. This cannot be the way to build good relationships with a customer base!”

Muesli or nugget?

There has long been debate over muesli-style or nugget (pellet) foods, though the PDSA states categorically that muesli mixes are not recommended. Manufacturers like Cranswick Pet Products with its Nature’s Feast brand has a muesli offering; Burgess Pet Care is firmly in the nugget camp; while others like Supreme Petfoods have a foot in each.

Sam Marriage, head of sales and marketing at Nature’s Feast, explains: “We don’t advise owners to feed their pets exclusively on our muesli mixes. Rabbits need a diet that consists of 80% hay, along with a selection of fresh vegetables, which is exactly what we recommend.

“Muesli mixes do have a place as a supplementary food, as part of a nutritionally balanced, varied diet. In the wild, rabbits forage and graze for food,



eating a selection of grass, herbs, plants, leafy weeds and seeds. Owners can replicate this at home by providing a selection of fresh vegetables and fruit alongside a muesli mix.”

He says that the standardised shape, texture and taste of pellets make them less interesting and stimulating than muesli mixes, and that the harder textured ingredients in muesli mixes enable rabbits to keep their teeth in good order.

As for arguments that muesli mixes cause overfeeding, he counters:

“Owners can get around that with careful portion control. Like making sure that children eat all their vegetables before getting seconds, owners shouldn’t refill a rabbit’s bowl if there is any food left over.”

The arguments for single-component foods are that they eliminate selective feeding and are the easiest way to ensure an animal receives the nutrition it requires. For example, Burgess Excel Nuggets are marketed as a complementary food for rabbits high in fibre and rich in nutrients, though Burgess reminds that the pet also needs hay and fresh greens.

Rabbit food is a highly competitive sector, and a number of products have been launched recently – the majority in the nugget category – with further launches promised for PATS Sandown.

This month, for instance, sees the launch of Excel Food Cubes, an easy-to-store, portion-controlled, all-in-one food that Burgess says will cover dental, digestive and emotional needs.

Justin Heaton, head of marketing for Burgess Pet Care, said: “Once again we are incredibly excited and proud to be launching a pioneering new product to the market. As the UK’s leading veterinary brand for fibrevores, we felt obligated to create a truly healthy, 100% complete food to ensure that pets are being correctly fed. The additional beauty of this product is that it really drives home to fibrevore owners that hay IS food!”

The food cubes consist of compressed cubes of long-fibre Timothy hay for dental and digestive health, together with high-fibre nuggets which contain short fibre, supplements and prebiotics necessary for digestive health and to promote foraging, topped with flowers and herbs.

Supreme Petfood recently launched Tasty Bites – small, easy-to-digest pellets aimed at customers seeking quality nutrition at an affordable price, while its new Monoforage format food will make its trade debut at PATS Sandown. This latter boasts 34% fibre levels, being formulated with long, natural fibre particles to help mimic the natural diet of a wild rabbit

Harrington’s has recently entered the small animal market with its all-in-one, high-quality fibre nugget Optimum Guinea Pig Food and Optimum Rabbit Food. Both come with antioxidant vitamins A and E to support the animal’s immune system, calcium, and added prebiotic to aid healthy digestion. Tom Page, sales & marketing director, said: “Rabbits and guinea pigs really do enjoy our food. To make it extra tasty we have added apple and grape. These combined with our easy-to-munch nuggets appear to be the winning recipe for our small furry friends!”

Mr Johnson’s says its Advance Rabbit has seen a significant increase

in sales, partly due to the rising numbers of house rabbits as owners look to reduce odours from their pet’s urine – Advance Rabbit contains a yucca extract, which reduces ammonia odours. Marion Stinton added: “A fresh approach to foods for rabbits and small animals will be launched by Mr Johnson’s at PATS in March. This follows 18 months of study into rabbit and small animal diets, and by identifying a fresh way to support the health of small furries on a daily basis.”

Many owners also like to provide their rabbits with treats, and pocket-money prices are attractive to school-children.

Beaphar Munching Sticks and Munching Rings are tasty, healthy treats for small animals. Beaphar marketing manager Amy Hepworth said: “Such treats have grown in popularity in recent times. They are great value and due to the eye-catching packaging are very appealing to children who keep small animals. The entire Beaphar small animal treats product range has recently undergone a packaging re-style, and positive feedback and increased sales have already been achieved – particularly with mums that wish to encourage the interaction between child and pet.”

Sharples ‘N’ Grant has a range of alfalfa treats, which include the fruit-flavoured Gnaw ‘t’ Strawb, Orange and Pear and Alf ‘a’ Carrot, alongside the range of >>



Don't forget treats! These provide valuable add-on sales



SmartBedz scores points on its green credentials

<< Bag 'o' Chews and both the Minera 'I' Carrot and Banana. Mineral stones like its Himalayan mineral stone Gnaw 't' Salt promote health and vitality and generate valuable add-on sales.

To help promote the message that hay is a food, retailers are encouraged to stock hay alongside the food range. Some food manufacturers also offer a hay product, and many retailers say hay is a strong seller.

Animal Dreams is a wholesaler of pet bedding, and it reports that its new Timothy Hay offering has been well received. This is a high-fibre, low-protein hay that has been sun-dried, cured, and hand sorted.

As Burgess's Naomi says: "Retailers have a fantastic opportunity to build up great relationships with rabbit owners, which will see them coming

back time and again for help and advice. After all, rabbits that are properly cared for are living to over 10 years old!" ■



Verm-X for rabbits, for natural intestinal hygiene control

The independent – a unique advantage

Amy Hepworth, Beaphar marketing manager, says independents are uniquely placed to offer a breadth of range and specialist products that large grocery chains tend to avoid. "In order to retain footfall, retailers with the support of manufacturers should be doing everything possible to entice customers in with advertising special offers, providing a wide selection of products to suit different budgets, pets and circumstances, not to mention providing great customer care.

"Retailers need to work with suppliers to create interest and a specific need to visit their store. Whether it is having small animals in the shop that children (and adults) enjoy looking at; providing a specialist product range such as small animal medicines or specialist foods; or providing that extra personal touch when it comes to customer service."

Among the specialist products is Beaphar Fly Strike. As a result of increased education and advertising, rabbit owners are more aware that they can buy such products at their local pet store.

Burgess Pet Care marketing manager Naomi Chatterley says there are increasing trends in terms of accessories and healthcare for small animals, in particular in relation to behavioural toys that link feeding with promoting natural behaviour and other value added products. With this in mind, Excel has launched a new bedding product – Excel Ultra Absorbent Bedding is also 100% natural and biodegradable. She said: "Consumers will find it a great



Specialist product for the independent

value-for-money product and it will ultimately drive further loyalty and brand recognition across the whole Excel range."

Nigel Bateson at SmartBedz notes there is steady growth towards environmental products. "From our research, eco-friendly products are preferred to conventional alternatives, with health and wellbeing of both pets and owners cited as deciding criteria. Performance and value for money are the ultimate determining factors."

Litter product SmartBedz combines convenience with high performance and environmental concerns. It is made from straw, which is chopped, ground and pelleted, making it effective at absorbing urine and stopping smells, so has found a niche among the growing pool of house rabbit owners. "As it is entirely made from straw, SmartBedz can be composted, and degrades swiftly compared to wood, paper products and traditional litter materials such as whole straw and shavings," he added.

Retailers should also stock a good range of accessories which can help keep rabbits entertained. For example, in its Small 'n' Furry brand, Sharples 'N' Grant has a range of products including Nutty Stick Ball, Nature Ball with Bell, Sisal Carrot, Toss 'n' Chew Carrot, Fruit 'n' Nuts and its best-selling Corn 'n' Rattle.

There is now also a Verm-X variant for rabbits, so these small furrries can enjoy the powerful natural intestinal hygiene control formulation packed within a high-fibre treat. The nuggets are also designed to be gnawed to aid healthy and strong teeth.