Winter worries - how to care for your rabbit in the winter

Rabbits have evolved to be able to withstand the winter weather we get in the UK, but whether or not you keep your rabbit as a houserabbit or outside, they do require some special care and considerations throughout the colder months of the year, to ensure they remain happy and healthy.

What natural resources does my rabbit have?

Take a look at your rabbit and you will notice that they come equipped with a thick coat, which gets thicker in winter, and acts as an insulator to keep heat within the body. They also have well-developed fur pads on the bottom of their feet, to help protect them from the cold.

During colder weather, rabbits reduce the blood supply to the surface of the skin (such as the nose and ears), which helps reduce heat loss, as such areas are less well insulated. In the wild they would also spend more time sheltering in their burrow in inclement weather where the temperature remains more constant, so it is warmer in winter and cooler in summer. This isn't something that most outdoor rabbits have
access to, so require some extra help to stay warm in winter.

**What protection will my rabbit need?**

Although tolerant of cold weather, rabbits are susceptible to climatic conditions such as the wind, draughts, rain and damp.

During autumn, you should make sure that your rabbit's hutch is leak proof and capable of withstanding the winter weather. If it isn't you will need to make some repairs or purchase a new hutch before winter arrives. All hutches should be placed out of the wind and draughts and also positioned where the rain is unable to enter the hutch, especially during windy weather. Hutches should always be attached to a permanent run so the rabbits are able to come and go as they please. Check the run to ensure there is adequate shelter from the elements.

Extra bedding in the way of hay or straw should be added to the sleeping area of the hutch/enclosure during colder weather and all soiled/wet bedding and materials should be removed daily from the litter tray, to ensure the living area and sleeping compartment remain as dry and clean as possible.

During extreme weather, such as snow, gale force winds or extremely frosty nights, you could consider placing the hutch in a shed, unused garage, conservatory etc for added protection. However, this is not ideal as the rabbit's environmental enrichment and space to exercise is vastly reduced. It is better to insulate the area the rabbits have so they do not need moving. Hutches should never be placed in greenhouses, even in winter or in a garage occupied by a car due to the exhaust fumes.

If this isn't possible, then covering the hutch with a polythene waterproof cover, which is securely fastened may be a good idea. But when there is the slightest amount of sunshine, even in the winter months, you must never leave the plastic sheet over the hutch with the rabbit in it, as this will quickly create a greenhouse effect and heat the hutch up. Rabbits should always have a choice about where they spend their time - many rabbits are happy sitting outside in freezing temperatures and do not want to be enclosed in a hutch. Hutches should be areas that rabbits choose to spend time in, not where they are locked up in.
What extra protection will my houserabbit need?

Although it may not seem obvious, house rabbits may also have specific problems during winter. Rabbits prefer an environmental temperature of between 65-70°F (15-20°C), and when the central heating is switched on, many homes will exceed this temperature, which can make living conditions uncomfortable for the rabbit.

To minimize the likelihood of this, always ensure that there is a window open to circulate fresh air, and the rabbit's cage/bed, etc isn't positioned near to radiators or other central heating appliances.

If the rabbit spends most of its time in one room, consider turning the heating down in this room. Also, if you have an open fire, be sure that it is strictly off bounds to your rabbit and is securely guarded.

Does a companion rabbit help?

Yes!

Rabbits will snuggle together to help keep warm so this is another reason why all rabbits should have a companion.

Rabbits kept on their own, outside, during winter, will feel the cold much more than those who have a companion rabbit.

Do rabbits still need exercise during winter?

Rabbits still need exercise and attention during winter. Outside rabbits should still have access to a run and be able to choose where to spend their time. The run will need shelter from the rain, wind, etc and many rabbits like playing out in the snow too. Don't feel the need to mollycoddle rabbits during winter, by shutting them up in
hutches if the weather is cold. Provided they have ample food and water and are able to get out of any rain or wind, they will be much happier in a run than shut up in a hutch for months and months at a time.

House rabbits are generally able to exercise around the house or in at least one room so shouldn't need to go outside during winter. Sudden temperature changes (from warm to cold or cold to warm) can have adverse effects on health, so ideally house rabbits should remain inside (except for perhaps a few minutes exercise outside if desired), and outdoor rabbits should remain outside during winter.

**What should I feed my rabbit during winter?**

Rabbits kept outside will need extra food, as they will burn off more calories keeping themselves warm. However, be careful not to overfeed your rabbit during winter. Putting on a little bit of weight during winter is acceptable and may provide extra insulation, but if you notice your rabbit getting overweight, you should cut back slightly on the food ration and try and increase the amount of time they can exercise for. You should be able to feel your rabbit's ribs when you rub your hands along their chest. If there is a deep layer of fat and you have to press hard to feel the ribs, then they are likely to be overweight.

Remember that water bottles and bowls may freeze when the days or nights drop below 32°F (0°C), so these will need checking regularly to ensure that the rabbit has a constant supply of water. Commonly the water in the spout of the bottle can freeze, so be sure to check this and that the ball bearing hasn't jammed. A sock can be placed over a water bottle to help stop it from freezing, and a heat pad disc can be placed under water bowls to help stop them from freezing. Constant access to clean, fresh hay is also essential. If straw is provided as bedding, hay must also be given to eat as straw has little nutritional value.

Try and feed fresh vegetables in the morning or around mid-day, as when the temperature drops the water content in fresh food may result in the food semi or completely freezing, especially during the night. Any frozen food should be removed immediately and replaced.

House rabbits shouldn't need any extra food, but may drink more as their environmental temperature will be higher with the central heating on.
My rabbit lives outside and is ill, what should I do?

One of the most important things for a sick rabbit is warmth and if one of your rabbits falls ill during winter you will have to bring them into the house. Depending upon the time of year and what is wrong with them, they may have to stay in the house for the duration of winter, until the weather warms up in spring and they are able to return to their hutch outside. Your vet should be able to advise you on this.

What else should I consider?

During the inclement winter weather, there is the likelihood that outdoor rabbits may not get as much attention from their owner as usual. A special effort should be made to spend time with your rabbit, especially if they live on their own. If this is not possible then serious consideration should be given to getting the existing rabbit a companion.

10 things to remember...

- Place hutches out of the wind and rain.
- Check hutches are able to withstand winter weather in advance.
- Remove wet/soiled bedding daily.
- Ensure the rabbit gets exercise in winter.
- Increase food rations for outdoor rabbits but take care they do not become overweight.
- Regularly check that outdoor rabbit's water and fresh food hasn't frozen.
- Ensure indoor rabbits have fresh air circulating and aren't uncomfortably warm.
- In extreme weather consider giving outdoor rabbits extra protection.
- Make sure you still spend quality time with your rabbits.
- If your rabbit lives outside and becomes ill, they may need to be bought inside to convalesce.