

Winter care tips for rabbits and guinea pigs kept outside

Winter isn't a good time of year for many rabbits and guinea pigs. Sadly, some people don't want to go out in the dark/cold/wet/wind to clean out the hutch, feed the rabbit, and spend some time giving it a cuddle and a quick health check. So they get neglected, water bottles get iced up making it impossible for the rabbit to get a vital drink, hutches end up stinking and soaking, and rabbit's fall ill and could even die.

Here are some important things to think about:

- Make sure you cover up your rabbit's hutch at night, make it draught and waterproof. Rabbits can cope with the cold fairly well, but not damp and draughts. If the hutch is attached to a run, buy a **waterproof cover** to keep the run area dry during the winter. If you don't want to buy one, use the idea and make some of your own. Some bunny owners pin/staple polythene to the sides and roof of the runs to give their buns some shelter from the weather

- **Change the bedding** frequently as wet bedding can freeze solid.

- Get a **spare water bottle** (they don't cost a fortune) so that when one gets frozen up, you can swap it over quickly without having to wait until the original bottle defrosts. It's a good idea to put a bowl of water in the run for backup too. The water inside the metal nozzle of the bottle freezes quickly and often before the water inside the actual bottle does. There's a **bottle snug** available to buy. If you decide to make a bottle snug of your own, you can use bubblewrap to wrap around it (providing you resist the urge to pop all the bubbles first!!!) and stick an old sock over the lot with just the nozzle sticking out, but you **MUST** make sure that your rabbit can't chew the sock and bubblewrap. You can do this by inserting a piece of thick card between the bottle and the mesh.

- Older rabbits can suffer dreadfully from **arthritis** so make sure they are snug and warm.

- Another idea to make a **warm sleeping area** - find a cardboard box a couple of inches smaller than the sleeping area, make a door in the cardboard box to match up with the door to the sleeping area, put newspaper on the floor of the hutch, put the box in (making sure the doors match up), pack the cavity around the outside of the box with newspaper or hay (remembering to do the top of the box), this acts as insulation. If your rabbit urinates in the sleeping area, get a litter tray which fits inside the cardboard box, this will help by making it easier for you to clean out and it'll make the box last longer.

- Put a **thick layer of newspaper** on the base of the sleeping area, this helps to insulate, then loosely fill the bedding area with more hay and/or straw (but not packed in so tightly that the bun can't get in!), this helps to keep the rabbit warm.

- If you can, **move the hutch indoors** to a shed or unused garage. Please **DO NOT** move your rabbit hutch into the garage if you use it to store your car in overnight, the fumes could easily kill your rabbit.

- Keep an old towel handy to dry your rabbit just in case it unexpectedly gets caught in the rain/snow.

- Some rabbits love to run about and dig in the snow! Make sure you **dry them off** when they're finished having their fun.