

# Group housing rabbits



Wild rabbits live in social groups, consisting of 1-8 males and 1-12 females. Males defend their territory, while females defend their nests. The entire group marks both the territory and each other with their scents.

It has proven difficult to house rabbits in groups in the context of research, where there is limited space. However, you can increase the probability of success by implementing favourable housing conditions.

## Fundamental conditions

### Group composition

- Same sex and age
- Introduce before 6 weeks of age
- 6-10 animals per group
- Avoid regrouping

### Living space and shelter

- At least 0,56m<sup>2</sup> per rabbit, preferably larger
- At least one shelter or hiding place per rabbit
- At least one resting place per rabbit
- At least one visual barrier or elevated area per rabbit
- Place furnishings to avoid injuries
- Preserve scent markings when cleaning

### Feed and water

- Multiple feed and water areas, spread throughout the cage or enclosure
- Free access to roughage

### Environmental enrichment

- Must be enough for everyone, at least one per rabbit
- Variations in environmental enrichment encourages exploration and creates opportunities for choice

## When group housing is introduced

### Preparations

- Enough feed and water to avoid competition, hay stimulates rabbits to eat together
- Bring faeces and substrate to the new living area to bring all the rabbits' scents
- Offer possibility of safe contact prior to introduction
- Smear something palatable on the fur to make the rabbits have a similar smell and to encourage grooming
- Individual colour marking of the ears
- File down the claws
- Create a plan for monitoring

### Plan for monitoring

- Continuously for 1 hour at initial introduction
- 2x10 minutes for the rest of the day, more in case of aggression
- 10 minutes daily for the rest of the week, more in case of aggression
- Separate overnight if the introduction is not an immediate success

### Signs to keep an eye out for – feel free to use an ethogram

#### Positive behaviours, which indicate a successful introduction

- Grooming of each other
- Eating together
- Drinking next to each other
- Resting side by side

#### Communicative behaviours that could escalate into aggression

- One rabbit chases another
- Mounting
- Urine markings
- Plucking of fur
- Stomping

#### Behaviours that are cause for separation

- Fighting
- Biting
- Repeated chasing
- Bleeding wounds or injuries close to genitalia or eyes
- Excessive grooming
- Mounting that risks causing harm
- Recurrent defence of resources

## When group housing is not working

### Reduce negative effects from single housing

- Living area that allows for hopping and rapid changes of direction
- Possibility to have contact with conspecifics through sight and smell
- Social stimulation, for example through scent markings in a play pen
- Offer shared feeding area divided by bars as an alternative
- Monitor regularly to detect any signs of impaired physical or mental welfare

### Potential effects of social isolation

- Chronic stress
- Stereotypies
- Decreased activity
- Impaired development of the brain
- Increased heart rate
- Increased number of white blood cells
- Increased risk of illness

This poster is a short summary of the support material regarding group and single housing of rabbits.

Scan here to read the complete report:

