



Facilitation guide

Smiley face

FOCUS: Basic welfare needs and sentience

TYPE: Visual, auditory and kinaesthetic

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS: You can run this activity with just one person, or in a small group.

HOW LONG IT WILL TAKE: The activities will take about 20 to 40 minutes altogether.

WHAT YOU WILL NEED:

Activity sheets

Animals

What we need

Remembering the five freedoms

Factsheets

Remembering the five freedoms (answers)

The five freedoms

Facilitators' notes

Animals' basic needs: Cats, Dogs, Rabbits, Laying hens, Sheep, Swans, Hedgehogs

Equipment

- *One sheet of large/flipchart paper*
- *Two felt pens in different colours*
- *Scissors*

Aims and objectives

- This activity is just one part of a range of resources addressing the needs of young people who have been involved, or who are at risk of being involved, in cruelty to animals. Our assessment tool [Developing a suitable intervention programme](#) (Word 17KB) will help you create individualised intervention programmes from these resources.
- In this activity, the young person will discover that animals and humans have the same basic needs.

It's essential to do this activity before doing the activity **Feelings** in this section. The **Smiley face** activity is important in helping young people develop empathy for animals, and may encourage positive human/animal interactions. **We recommend that it is part of every young person's programme.**

What to do

Animal/human needs

- Ask the young person to draw a simple, smiley face – this will represent him or herself.
- Ask him or her to think about what they need to make them happy and healthy, and to write each need around the smiley face, using a coloured felt pen. If you prefer, you can use the word/picture cards from the activity sheet *What we need*, and group them around the face. In the discussion, relate each suggestion to the young person's everyday life. For example, we need food, so ask them what they like to eat.
- Look at each suggestion and ask the young person to think how they'd feel if they had to live without it. Would it be possible? If they say yes, cross that idea out, so you are left with just the *basic* human needs.
- Place the picture of a dog from the activity sheet *Animals* over the smiley face.
- Look at each basic need in turn and ask whether the dog needs it too. Use a different-coloured pen to tick those it does need and put a cross by those it doesn't need. For example, does it need water? Does it need exercise? Use the information on dogs in the facilitators' notes *Animals' basic needs: Dogs* to support your discussion.
- Discuss the connection between the basic needs of humans and dogs. Did you cross out many things? What did you discover? What similarities are there between the basic needs of humans and dogs? Does an animal need anything that a human doesn't?

Comparing animal needs

- One by one, put pictures of other animals from the activity sheet *Animals* over the smiley face and think about the needs of each in turn. You could include a cat, rabbit, hedgehog, swan, sheep, laying hen. See the series of facilitators' notes *Animals' basic needs* for information about the basic needs of each animal.
- Discuss the connection between the basic needs of the animals. What similarities are there between them? Are there any differences? Who is responsible for meeting their needs? You could agree that pet owners are responsible for pets and farmers for farm animals, while wild animals are good at meeting their own needs. Refer to the section [Who is responsible?](#) to explore this idea more fully.
- Explain to the young person that the RSPCA believes the basic welfare of all animals must take into account the five freedoms. These are:
 1. Freedom from hunger and thirst
 2. Freedom from discomfort
 3. Freedom from pain, injury or disease
 4. Freedom to express normal behaviour
 5. Freedom from fear and distress.
- Ask them to consider how similar these are to the basic needs they identified for all animals. Are there any they didn't consider? The factsheet *The five freedoms* provides more information.

Extension activities

- Cut out the symbols and statements from the factsheet *Remembering the five freedoms (answers)*. Mix them up on the table and ask the young person to match the logos with the correct definitions.
- Ask the young person to complete the activity sheet *Remembering the five freedoms* from memory.

The five freedoms

- A central theme running through all these resources is the concept of the five freedoms. We hope that by introducing this to the young people in the **Basic needs** section and then reinforcing it in a number of other sections, that we will provide them with a code of conduct to apply to every situation in which they encounter animals. The five freedoms are very similar to the duty of care criteria mentioned in the [Animal Welfare Act](#).
- For more detailed information about pets, wild and farm animals visit the **All about animals** section of the RSPCA website.
- We have also developed three interactive activities - *Was it cruel?*, *Consequences* and *Triggers* - that help young people think through what happens when people are cruel to animals (see right). However, before you attempt to use these, we suggest that you explore some of the activities in the other sections - **What is animal cruelty?**, **What triggers animals cruelty and how it can be avoided**, **Consequences of cruelty to animals** and **The incident**.

Useful websites

[RSPCA – All about animals](#)

Activity sheet – Animals

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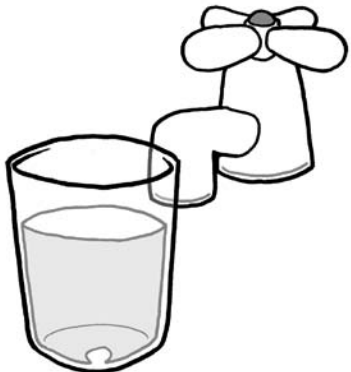
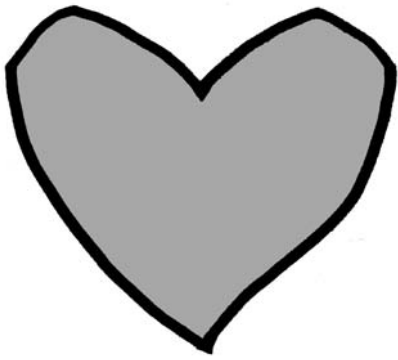



Activity sheet – Animals




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Activity sheet – What we need (1)

Food	
Water	
Love and care	
Exercise	

Activity sheet – What we need (2)

Somewhere to live	 A black and white line drawing of a two-story house with a chimney, several windows, and a front door.
Medical care	 A black and white line drawing of two medical professionals, a woman and a man, both wearing white lab coats and stethoscopes. The man is holding a clipboard.
Friends	 A black and white line drawing of three young people (two boys and one girl) sitting around a table, smiling and holding cups, suggesting they are drinking together.

Activity sheet – The five freedoms

The RSPCA believes that anyone responsible for looking after animals should try to give them the five freedoms. The five freedoms are considered aspirational, as they cannot always be achieved and maintained at all times. For example, an animal may need to feel hungry before it will eat. However, animal keepers should always aim to provide the five freedoms to their animals as far as possible.

For more information about animals' needs see:

www.rspca.org.uk/animalcare



Freedom from hunger and thirst –

by providing enough fresh water and the right type and amount of food to keep them fit.



Freedom from discomfort –

by making sure that animals have the right type of environment including shelter and somewhere comfortable to rest.



Freedom from pain, injury and disease –

by preventing them from getting ill or injured and by making sure animals are diagnosed and treated rapidly if they do.



Freedom to express normal behaviour –

by making sure animals have enough space, proper facilities and the company of other animals of their own kind.



Freedom from fear and distress –

by making sure their conditions and treatment avoid mental suffering.

Activity sheet – Remembering the five freedoms (1)

Can you draw the matching five freedoms symbol from memory?

Need the right food and water	
Need the right place to live	
Need to be protected from pain – also injury, disease, fear and distress	
Need to be able to act normally	
Need to be able to choose to live with, or apart from, other animals	

Activity sheet – Remembering the five freedoms (2)

Can you write the matching five freedoms statement from memory?

Factsheet – The five freedoms

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Factsheet – Remembering the five freedoms (answers)



**Freedom from hunger
and thirst**



**Freedom from
discomfort**



**Freedom from pain,
injury and disease**



**Freedom to express
normal behaviour**



**Freedom from fear
and distress**

Facilitators notes – Animals' basic needs: Cats (1)

Environment

Make sure your cat has a suitable place to live

Things you should do:

- Provide your cat with a comfortable, dry, draught-free, clean and quiet place where it can rest undisturbed.
- Give your cat regular access to a suitable place where it can go to the toilet, outside or in a litter tray, which is separate to where it eats and sleeps.
- Make sure your cat has constant access to safe hiding places where it can escape if it feels afraid.
- If more than one cat shares a living space, provide sufficient extra resources (e.g. toys, beds and hiding places) and give them enough space that they can get away from one another if they choose.
- If your cat doesn't go outside, make sure it has plenty of activities it can do and enough space to exercise, climb and play indoors. Read more about keeping cats indoors.
- Make sure your cat can reach a safe high place where it can climb and rest, e.g. shelves, cupboard top.
- Ensure the size and temperature of any place you leave your cat (including your vehicle) is appropriate.
- If you have to take your cat to a new place, use a secure cat carrier and introduce your cat to it gradually. Putting familiar smelling items in the carrier and the new environment can help the cat feel at ease.
- If you are going away, try to find someone to care for your cat and meet all its welfare needs within its familiar home, or if boarding your cat, try to ease the move by taking familiar items along too, e.g. your cat's bed and toys.
- If you move house, your cat may try to get back to its previous home; keep it indoors for at least one to two weeks after you move, and make sure that it seems settled before letting it outside.
- Make sure that where your cat lives is safe, secure and free from hazards.



Facilitators notes – Animals' basic needs: Cats (2)

Diet

Make sure your cat has a healthy diet

Things you should do:

- Provide your cat with constant access to clean drinking water; cow's milk is not a substitute.
- Make sure your cat eats a balanced diet suitable for its age, health status and lifestyle.
- Feed your cat every day, preferably splitting the daily ration into several small meals throughout the day (unless advised otherwise by your vet).
- Read and follow the feeding instructions relating to any cat foods that you buy.
- Adjust how much you feed your cat to make sure it does not become underweight or overweight.
- If your cat's eating and drinking habits change, talk to your vet, as your cat could be ill.
- Position your cat's food and water well away from its litter tray (if you provide one).

Behaviour

Make sure your cat is able to behave normally

Things you should do:

- Make sure your cat can reach all the things that it needs (bed, water, litter or outdoors) without having to pass things or other animals that may scare it.
- Make sure that your cat has constant access to safe hiding places where it can escape if it feels afraid.
- Make sure your cat has opportunities to exercise each day to stay fit and healthy. If it doesn't go outside, provide suitable indoor activities to keep your cat active. Read more about keeping cats indoors.
- Provide your cat with safe toys and regular opportunities to play with friendly people and by itself.
- Be observant. If your cat's behaviour changes or it shows regular signs of stress or fear, seek advice from a vet or clinical animal behaviourist.
- Never shout at or punish your cat, it is very unlikely to understand and can become more nervous or scared. If your cat's behaviour becomes an ongoing problem, seek expert advice.
- Add interest to your cat's meal time by hiding dried food or using a puzzle feeder.
- Provide your cat with a sturdy scratching post which is tall enough for it to use fully stretched, especially if it doesn't go outdoors.

Facilitators notes – Animals' basic needs: Cats (3)

Company

Make sure your cat has appropriate company

Things you should do:

- If your cat likes people, provide regular contact, even when you are away.
- Think very carefully before getting a second cat, and if you do, seek advice on the best way to introduce them.
- If you have cats who are not friends, make sure that they can avoid each other at all times and that they can access everything they need (e.g. food, water, outside, litter, bed) without having to pass one another.
- When you are away, make sure your cat is properly cared for by a responsible person.
- Never leave your cat unsupervised with another animal or person who may deliberately or accidentally harm or frighten it.
- Don't force your cat to interact with people or animals that it doesn't like, and make sure it can avoid them. Seek advice from a clinical animal behaviourist if this becomes a problem.

Health and welfare

Make sure your cat is protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

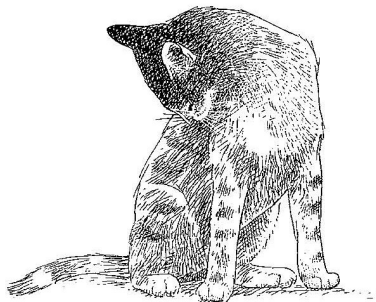
Things you should do:

- Check your cat for signs of injury or illness every day, and make sure this is done by someone else if you are away.
- Consult a vet promptly if you suspect that your cat is in pain, ill or injured.
- Ask your vet for advice about things you can do to protect your cat's health, such as vaccination, treatments to control parasites (e.g. fleas and worms) and neutering.
- Get your cat neutered, unless it is intended for breeding and provisions have been made to care for both parents and offspring. Before allowing cats to breed, seek the advice of a vet to ensure they are suitable for breeding in terms of their health and personalities.
- Before deciding to buy a cat, make sure you find out what health and behaviour problems it has, or may be prone to, for instance as a result of its breed, how it has been bred and how it has been cared for. Always check with a vet if you are unsure about anything.
- Try to minimise stress in your cat's daily life, by so doing you will decrease its risk of certain illnesses.

Facilitators notes – Animals' basic needs: Cats (3)

- Take your cat for a routine health check at your vets at least once each year.
- Only use medicines that have been prescribed for your individual cat. Human and dog medicines can be very dangerous to cats.
- Ensure your cat's coat is kept in good condition by grooming it regularly. If you are unsure how to groom it properly seek advice from a pet care specialist. If your cat changes its grooming habits, you should seek advice from a vet as your cat may be ill.
- Make sure your cat can be identified, ideally via a microchip (ask your vet for advice), so it can be treated quickly if injured or returned to you if lost.
- Consider taking out pet insurance to ensure your cat is covered if it needs veterinary treatment.

Pet owners now have a legal responsibility to meet the five welfare needs of their pet. This sheet provides further information about the specific needs of cats. However it is important to note that there is no one 'perfect' way to care for all cats because every cat and every situation is different. It is up to the owner how they look after their cat, but they must take reasonable steps to ensure that all its needs are met.



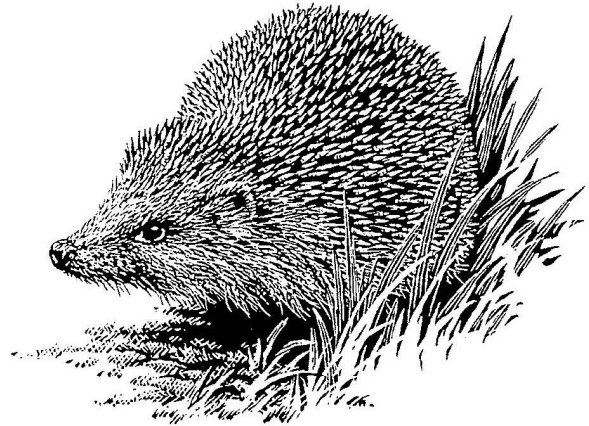
Facilitators notes – Animals' basic needs: Hedgehogs (1)

Freedom from hunger and thirst

Animals should have access to water all the time and the right food.

Hedgehogs need:

- a diet of insects (such as beetles), earthworms, slugs, snails and caterpillars
- access to water.



Freedom from discomfort

Animals should live in a comfortable environment at the right temperature.

Hedgehogs need:

- to live mainly in woodlands, hedgerows, fields, parks, town and country gardens
- to collect leaves, grass, straw, bracken and reeds to make nests under hedgerows, logs or piles of wood
- to hibernate from November to mid-March.

Freedom from pain, injury or disease

Hedgehogs need:

- you to contact the RSPCA if you find an injured one, after finding out how badly hurt it is
- you not to use slug pellets in your garden – they are poisonous for hedgehogs too
- you to cover drains and other holes so that hedgehogs can't fall in and get hurt
- you to be very careful when using strimmers in your garden – you might badly injure one before even realising it's there
- care with ponds, netting and litter, in which they can become trapped – make sure animals can easily climb out of your pond, roll up netting when not in use, and clean and throw away rubbish so hedgehogs aren't tempted to eat the leftovers
- specialist care if they get injured.

Facilitators notes – Animals' basic needs: Hedgehogs (2)

Freedom to express normal behaviour

Animals should have enough room to move around and behave normally.

Hedgehogs need:

- to roam over 2 to 4km a night in search of food, climbing stone walls and fences, and even swimming across water
- to hibernate between November and mid-March
- females need to build a nest of leaves and grass to give birth in and raise their babies.

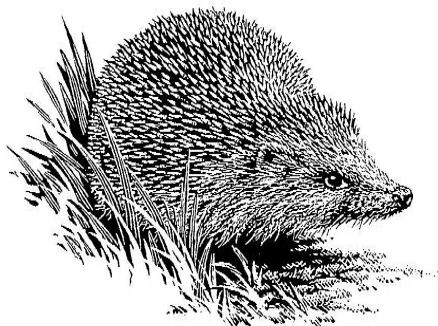
Freedom from fear and distress

Animals should always feel happy and safe.

Hedgehogs need:

- protection when we build bonfires – check underneath before lighting.

To deter other animals when threatened with danger, hedgehogs roll into a tight ball, with their spines raised.



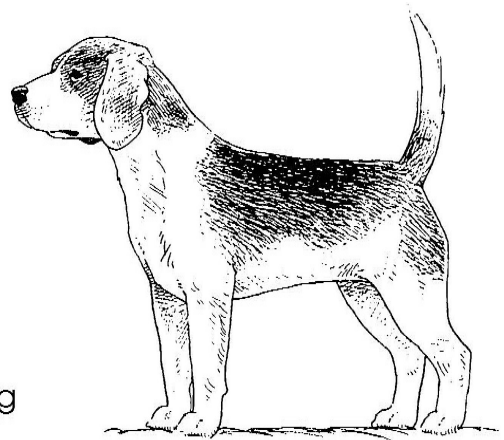
Facilitators notes – Animals' basic needs: Dogs (1)

Environment

Make sure your dog has a suitable place to live

Things you should do:

- Provide your dog with a comfortable, dry, draught-free, clean and quiet place to rest undisturbed.
- At least every few hours provide your dog with access to an appropriate place where your dog can go to the toilet.
- Provide exercise for your dog at least once a day.
- Give your dog constant access to a safe hiding place where he/she can escape if he/she feels afraid.
- Make sure your dog has access to suitable objects to chew and play with.
- If dogs live together, you should provide enough extra resources (e.g. toys, beds and hiding places) to stop them from becoming competitive and fighting.
- Make sure the size and temperature of any place you leave your dog (including your vehicle) is appropriate.
- When you transport your dog, make sure he/she is comfortable and safe at all times.
- Make sure that where your dog lives is safe, secure and free from hazards.
- Keep your dog under control and do not let he/she stray.



Diet

Make sure your dog has a healthy diet

Things you should do:

- Provide your dog with constant access to clean drinking water.
- Make sure your dog eats a balanced diet suitable for his/her age, lifestyle and health status.
- Feed your dog at least once each day, unless advised otherwise by your vet.
- Read and follow the feeding instructions on any dog foods that you buy.
- Adjust how much you feed your dog to make sure he/she does not become under or overweight.
- If your dog's eating or drinking habits change, consult your vet, as your dog could be ill.

Facilitators notes – Animals' basic needs: Dogs (2)

Behaviour

Make sure your dog is able to behave normally

Things you should do:

- Choose a type and size of dog that is suited to you, your home and your lifestyle.
- Train your dog from an early age to behave well using rewards. Never shout at or punish your dog. The dog is very unlikely to understand and can become more nervous or scared. If your dog's behaviour becomes an ongoing problem, seek expert advice.
- Exercise your dog regularly to keep him/her fit, active and stimulated. Give your dog the opportunity to run every day, unless your vet recommends otherwise.
- Make sure your dog has enough to do so that he/she does not become distressed or bored.
- Provide your dog with safe toys and regular opportunities to play with people or other friendly dogs.
- Be observant. If your dog's behaviour changes or he/she shows regular signs of stress or fear, seek advice from a vet or clinical animal behaviourist.
- If your dog often shows fear or signs of stress (such as excessive panting, licking lips, hiding, cowering, aggression), seek advice from a vet or clinical animal behaviourist.
- Be consistent in the way you, your family and friends react to your dog.
- Give your dog constant access to a safe hiding place where he/she can escape if he/she feels afraid.

Facilitators notes – Animals' basic needs: Dogs (3)

Company

Make sure your dog has appropriate company

Things you should do:

- Make sure that your dog has opportunities to interact positively with appropriate companions so that he/she does not become lonely or bored.
- Make sure your dog is never left alone long enough for him/her to become distressed.
- If your dog is friendly towards other dogs, allow him/her to interact with them on a regular basis.
- Never leave your dog unsupervised with another animal or person who may deliberately or accidentally harm or frighten him/her.
- When you are away, make sure your dog is properly cared for by a responsible person.
- If your dog is fearful of, or aggressive towards, other dogs, avoid those dogs except under the advice of a vet or clinical animal behaviourist.
- If you have more than one dog, house them together if possible, but make sure they have enough space and can get away from one another if they want to.

Health and welfare

Make sure your dog is protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

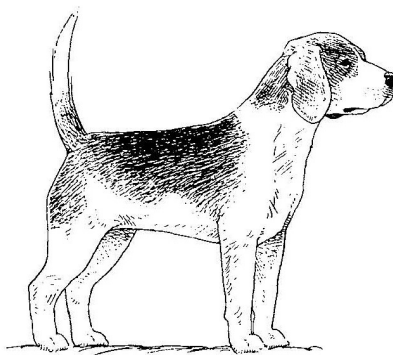
Things you should do:

- Check your dog for signs of injury or illness every day, and make sure someone else does this if you are away.
- If you suspect that your dog is in pain, ill or injured, consult a vet promptly.
- Take your dog for a routine health check with your vet at least once each year.
- Ask your vet for advice about things you can do to protect your dog's health, such as vaccination, neutering, and treatments to control parasites (e.g. fleas and worms).
- Get your dog neutered, unless he/she is intended for breeding and provisions have been made to care for both parents and offspring. Before allowing dogs to breed, seek the advice of your vet to ensure they are suitable for breeding in terms of their health and personalities.

Facilitators notes – Animals' basic needs: Dogs (4)

- Before deciding to get a dog, make sure you find out if he/she has, or is prone to, any health and behaviour problems, for instance as a result of his/her breed, how he/she has been bred, and how he/she has been cared for. Always check with a vet if you are unsure about anything.
- Avoid harsh, potentially painful training methods. Only use reward-based training.
- Keep your dog under control, and do not let him/her stray.
- Take sensible precautions to keep your dog safe. Always be alert to risks that may affect your dog.
- Only use medicines that have been prescribed for your individual dog.
- Ensure your dog's coat is kept in good condition by grooming him/her regularly. If you are unsure how to groom your dog's coat properly, seek advice from a pet care specialist.
- Make sure your dog can be identified, ideally via a collar and microchip (ask your vet for advice), so that he/she can be treated quickly if injured, or returned to you if lost.
- Consider taking out pet insurance to ensure your dog is covered if he/she needs veterinary treatment.

Pet owners now have a legal responsibility to meet the five welfare needs of their pet. This sheet provides further information about the specific needs of dogs. However it is important to note that there is no one 'perfect' way to care for all dogs because every dog and every situation is different. It is up to the owner how they look after their dog, but they must take reasonable steps to ensure that all his/her needs are met.



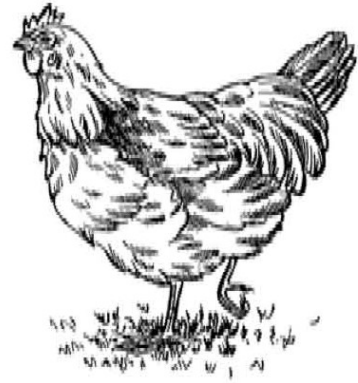
Facilitators notes – Animals' basic needs: Laying hens (1)

Freedom from hunger and thirst

Animals should have access to water all the time and the right food.

Hens need:

- to be given clean, fresh drinking water every day
- food to satisfy their nutritional needs
- insoluble grit to aid digestion.



Freedom from discomfort

Animals should live in a comfortable environment at the right temperature.

Hens need:

- a suitable environment that is draught-free, has comfortable flooring, good quality litter and perches
- a well-maintained barn or appropriate hen house.

Freedom from pain, injury or disease

Hens need:

- to be inspected in their flocks at least three times a day to make sure any sick or injured birds are identified quickly
- to be visited routinely by a vet, as well as at times when birds need veterinary treatment.

Facilitators notes – Animals' basic needs: Laying hens (2)

Freedom to express normal behaviour

Animals should have enough room to move around and behave normally.

Hens need:

- suitable, good quality litter to enable them to scratch, forage and dustbathe together
- perches to roost on at night with their flockmates
- enough room to move around, exercise, peck at interesting objects and scratch at the ground
- somewhere suitable to nest and lay their eggs
- space to flap their wings and stretch.

Freedom from fear and distress

Animals should always feel happy and safe.

Hens need:

- shelters to hide under if outside in case they get scared by loud noises or sudden movements
- company of their own kind in flocks.



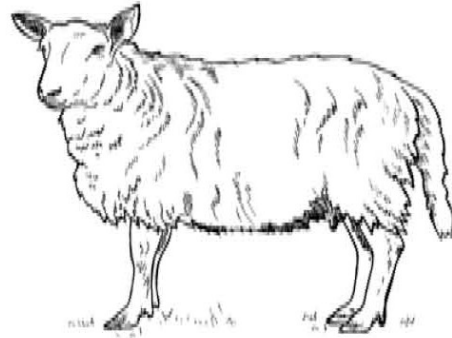
Facilitators notes – Animals' basic needs: Sheep (1)

Freedom from hunger and thirst

Animals should have access to water all the time and the right food.

Sheep need:

- to eat grasses and other low-growing vegetation
- access to fresh water
- to spend most of the day alternating between periods of grazing and resting/ruminating.



Sheep ruminate (chew the cud).

Freedom from discomfort

Animals should live in a comfortable environment at the right temperature.

Sheep need:

- to be able to sleep for around four hours per day
- in the case of some breeds to have their wool shorn once a year to keep them feeling comfortable.

Freedom from pain, injury or disease

Sheep need:

- to hide easily recognisable signs of suffering, such as making a loud noise, because they are prey animals, and could attract the attention of a predator
- to be checked regularly to make sure they are well and have not been injured, since the changes in behaviour that indicate pain or distress may be very subtle.

Facilitators notes – Animals' basic needs: Sheep (2)

Freedom to express normal behaviour

Animals should have enough room to move around and play normally.

Sheep need:

- the company of other sheep, as they are highly social animals
- to be around other sheep they are familiar with, as they find isolation from their flock stressful
- to form strong social hierarchies (pecking orders) within their flocks, and sometimes to show aggression (e.g. butting) to maintain them.

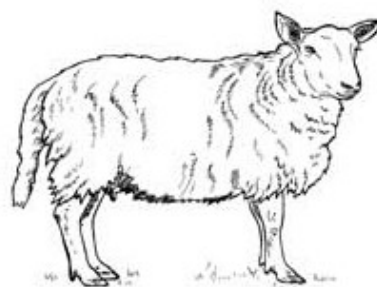
Freedom from fear and distress

Animals should always feel happy and safe.

Sheep need:

- to be able to flock closely together whenever they feel threatened
- high welfare standards to be maintained during procedures such as shearing, dipping, transport and slaughter, to ensure they do not suffer as a result of their fear of humans.

Sheepdogs need to be trained and kept under control to minimise the impact of sheep's natural fear of dogs.



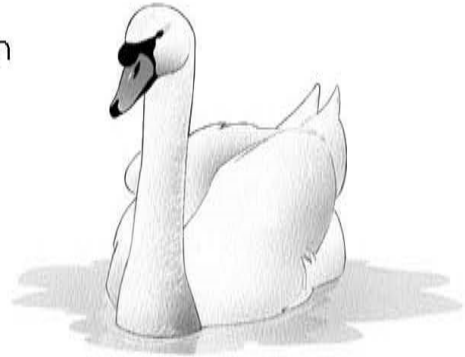
Facilitators notes – Animals' basic needs: Swans (1)

Freedom from hunger and thirst

Animals should have access to water all the time and the right food.

Swans need:

- a diet of underwater plants, insects, grasses and grains
- to swallow grit and small stones to help them grind up food in a special organ called a gizzard.



Freedom from discomfort

Animals should live in a comfortable environment at the right temperature.

Swans need:

- to live in large areas of water, such as rivers, lakes, canals and estuaries.

Freedom from pain, injury or disease

Swans need:

- you to contact the RSPCA if you find an injured one, after finding out how badly hurt it is
- you to take any fishing litter – like hooks and line – home with you, as this can really harm, and even kill, swans.

Freedom to express normal behaviour

Animals should have enough room to move around and behave normally.

Swans need:

- to be able to paddle on water and find food by plunging their head and neck underwater
- male swans need to find and defend a territory
- breeding pairs need to build a nest together: the male finds reeds and sticks that the female arranges into a nest.

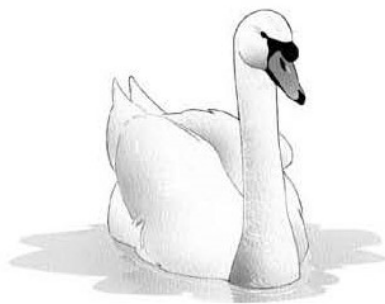
Facilitators notes – Animals' basic needs: Swans (1)

Freedom from fear and distress

Animals should always feel happy and safe.

Swans need:

- people to avoid walking too close to them or their nests
- protection from man-made dangers, including litter (especially from fishing).



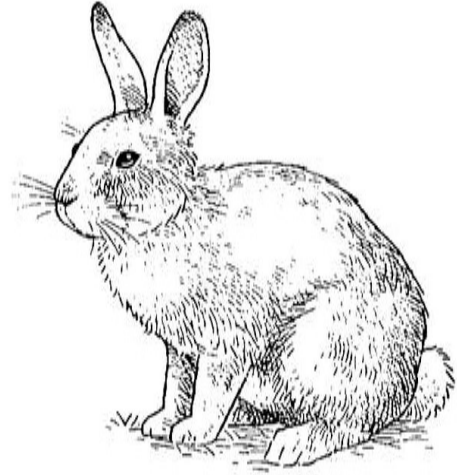
Facilitators notes – Animals' basic needs: Rabbits (1)

Environment

Make sure your rabbit has a suitable place to live

Things you should do:

- Provide your rabbit with a secure living environment that is large enough for it to exercise in and stand up fully on its back legs.
- You should provide both a large exercise area and a secure shelter where your rabbit can re feel safe and is protected from predators and extremes of weather and temperature. Ensure all areas of your rabbit's environment are well ventilated, dry and draught-free.
- Make sure your rabbit has constant access to safe hiding places where it can escape if it feels afraid.
- Allow your rabbit to exercise regularly.
- Provide enough bedding to keep your rabbit warm. Bedding should be safe for your rabbit to eat, e.g. dust-free straw or hay.
- Give your rabbit regular access to a suitable place where it can go to the toilet, separate to where it eats and sleeps.
- Clean the housing and toilet areas regularly.
- If you are going away, try to find someone to care for, and meet all your rabbit's welfare needs within its familiar home. If boarding your rabbit, try to ease the move by keeping grouped rabbits together and taking familiar items, such as toys, along too.
- When you transport your rabbit make sure it is comfortable and safe at all times. Putting familiar smelling items in the carrier and the new environment can help make your rabbit feel at ease.
- Ensure the size and temperature of any place you leave your rabbit (including your vehicle) is appropriate.
- Make sure that where your rabbit lives is safe, secure and free from hazards.



Facilitators notes – Animals' basic needs: Rabbits (2)

Diet

Make sure your rabbit has a healthy diet

Things you should do:

- Provide fresh clean drinking water at all times. Check the water supply twice a day. Make sure water doesn't freeze if your rabbit is outdoors in winter.
- Good quality hay and/or grass should make up the majority of your rabbit's diet and should be available at all times
- You can feed a small amount of commercial rabbit pellets or cereal mix, but hay and/or grass are much more important. If pellets or mix are provided, follow the manufacturer's instructions. Don't keep topping the bowl up as this may result in it not eating enough hay and/or grass. Growing, pregnant, nursing or underweight rabbits may need a larger portion of pellets or mix. Your vet or a rabbit nutritionist will be able to advise you about how to provide the best diet for your rabbit.
- Find out which plants are safe to feed your rabbit. Offer safe, washed leafy greens or weeds every day.
- Do not feed lawnmower clippings as these can upset your rabbit's digestive system and make it ill.
- Only give root vegetables like carrots, or fruit, in small amounts as a treat. Don't feed any other treats as these may harm your rabbit.
- Adjust how much you feed your rabbit to make sure it does not become underweight or overweight.
- Don't make any sudden changes to your rabbit's diet as this could upset its digestive system and make it very ill.
- Monitor the amount your rabbit eats and drinks. If your rabbit's eating or drinking habits change, the number of droppings gets less or stops, or there are soft droppings sticking to its back end, talk to your vet straight away as it could be seriously ill. Read more about rabbit health and welfare.

Facilitators notes – Animals' basic needs: Rabbits (3)

Behaviour

Make sure your rabbit is able to behave normally

Things you should do:

- Make sure your rabbit can access all the things that it needs (space, food, water, safe hiding places, companion rabbit(s), toilet area(s) and toys) at all times.
- Provide your rabbit with safe toys to play with and chew, and regular opportunities to play with people or other friendly rabbits.
- Make sure your rabbit has constant access to safe hiding places where it can escape if it feels afraid.
- Make sure your rabbit has opportunities to exercise every day to stay fit and healthy.
- Provide your rabbit with suitable materials that allow digging behaviour and areas to mark its territory with chin secretions, urine and droppings.
- Be observant. If your rabbit's behaviour changes or it shows regular signs of stress or fear, seek advice from a vet or a clinical animal behaviourist.
- Never shout at or punish your rabbit, it is very unlikely to understand and can become more nervous or scared. If your rabbit's behaviour becomes an ongoing problem, seek expert advice.

Company

Make sure your rabbit has appropriate company

Things you should do:

- Keep your rabbit with at least one other friendly rabbit, unless advised otherwise by a vet or clinical animal behaviourist. A good combination is a neutered male and a neutered female, or neutered littermates of the same sex.
- Get your rabbit neutered, unless it is intended for breeding and provisions have been made to care for both parents and offspring.
- Handle your rabbit every day from an early age. Rabbits which live indoors can see humans as important companions. If your rabbit has to be kept on its own for some reason you must provide it with companionship by interacting with it every day.
- Make sure your rabbit has places it can go to get away from companions if it wants to and that there are enough resources (e.g. shelter, food, water, hiding places) for all your rabbits at all times.
- Introduce new rabbits gradually and under supervision, preferably in a space that is new to both rabbits. Seek advice from a clinical animal behaviourist if you are unsure or have problems.
- When you are away make sure your rabbit is cared for by a responsible person.
- Never leave your rabbit unsupervised with another animal or person who may (deliberately or accidentally) harm or frighten it. Never leave your rabbit unsupervised with a cat or dog, even if you know they are good friends.

Facilitators notes – Animals' basic needs: Rabbits (4)

Health and welfare

Make sure your rabbit is protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

Things you should do:

- Get your rabbit neutered, unless it is intended for breeding and provisions have been made to care for both parents and offspring. Before allowing rabbits to breed, seek the advice of your vet to ensure they are suitable for breeding in terms of their health and personalities.
- Before deciding to buy a rabbit, make sure you find out what health and behaviour problems it has, or may be prone to, how it has been bred and how it has been cared for. Always check with a vet if you are unsure about anything.
- Feeding your rabbit a correct diet of mainly hay and/or grass will help prevent a lot of common diseases such as dental and gut disease. Check that your rabbit is eating every day and that it is passing plenty of dry droppings. If your rabbit's eating or drinking habits change or the number of droppings gets less or stops, talk to your vet straight away as it could be seriously ill.
- Check your rabbit for signs of illness or injury every day, and make sure this is done by someone else if you are away. In warm weather you should check the fur and skin around your rabbit's rear end and tail area twice a day, as urine staining or droppings that are stuck will attract flies, which can lay eggs and cause 'flystrike', which is often fatal.
- Consult a vet immediately if you suspect that your rabbit is in pain, ill or injured.
- Front teeth and nails should be checked at least once a week as these can grow quickly. Only a vet should correct overgrown or misaligned teeth.
- Take your rabbit for a routine health check at your vets at least once each year.
- Get your rabbit vaccinated regularly against myxomatosis and Viral Haemorrhagic Disease (VHD), as advised by your vet.
- Prevent your rabbit having contact with wild rabbits or areas where wild rabbits have been.
- Give your rabbit treatment for external and internal parasites (e.g. fleas and worms) as necessary, as advised by your vet.
- Only use medicines that have been specifically recommended for your rabbit by a vet. Some medicines used for other animals can be very dangerous to rabbits.
- Ensure your rabbit's coat is kept in good condition by grooming it regularly. If you are unsure how to groom it properly seek advice from a pet care specialist.

Facilitators notes – Animals' basic needs: Rabbits (5)

- Make sure your rabbit can be identified, ideally via a microchip (ask your vet for advice), so it can be treated quickly if injured or returned to you if lost.
- Consider taking out pet insurance to ensure your rabbit is covered if it needs veterinary treatment.
- Never leave your rabbit unsupervised with another animal or person who may (deliberately or accidentally) harm or frighten it. Never leave your rabbit unsupervised with a cat or dog, even if you know they are good friends.

Pet owners now have a legal responsibility to meet the five welfare needs of their pet. This sheet provides further information about the specific needs of rabbits. However it is important to note that there is no one 'perfect' way to care for all rabbits because every rabbit and every situation is different. It is up to the owner how they look after their rabbit, but they must take reasonable steps to ensure that all its needs are met.

For more information visit www.rspca.org.uk/rabbits

