Welfare assessment in pet rabbits

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Abstract

One million pet rabbits are kept in The Netherlands, but there are no data available on their behaviour and welfare. This study seeks to assess the welfare of pet rabbits in Dutch households and is a first step in the development of a welfare assessment system. In an internet survey, housing systems, general up-keep and behaviour of pet rabbits were reported by their owners. The answers of 912 respondents were analysed with behavioural observations carried out on 66 rabbits in as many households. The rabbits were observed in their home cage and during three fear-related tests: a contact test, a handling test and an open-field test. The survey revealed that the average lifespan of the rabbits is approximately 4.2 years (the maximum potential lifespan is 13 years) and solitary housing appears to reduce lifespan. Close to half of respondents subjected their rabbit(s) to solitary housing and the majority housed them in relatively small cages (< 5,000 cm²). Health risks may arise from a failure to inoculate rabbits and via inappropriate diet. During the contact test, solitary-housed rabbits made more contacts with a human than group-housed rabbits and rabbits in a small housing system made more contacts than those in a large system. Observations in the home cage differed greatly compared with the natural time budget of rabbits, ie displaying increased stereotypic behaviour and decreased foraging and, in solitary-housed rabbits, a complete lack of social behaviour. Nearly 25

Key words: Animal welfare, Behaviour, Fear tests, Housing conditions, Pet rabbits, Welfare assessment

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Published on: Animal Welfare 18: 477-485
Available on web (free access): Link not available
Type of paper: Scientific paper
Sector: Welfare