



# What makes my pet happy?

YOUR GUIDE TO THE  
WELFARE OF YOUR PET



**Animal Welfare Foundation**

[www.bva-awf.org.uk](http://www.bva-awf.org.uk)

AWF is the charity led by the veterinary profession

Registered Charity No. 287118

## Have you ever wondered whether your pet is happy?

---

Most pet owners will probably immediately answer 'yes', but how can you be sure? What signs are you using to tell you that he or she is? Most pets are loved and treated as one of the family. In many cases this love leads to good treatment—but what about a dog that's on its own all day while its owners are out at work? Or a budgie alone in a cage? Are these pets happy? Do they have good welfare, or a good quality of life?

## Animal feelings

---

Happiness, welfare and quality of life all relate to how animals feel. This can seem very difficult to know for sure; animals can't, after all, tell us how they're feeling.

Fortunately, however, there are now ways of using scientific methods to check that our pets are happy. In many cases we'll probably find that they are, but in some cases we may find that they're not. What's important is that we at least check. This leaflet will give some information on how we can approach this important subject.



## What do we mean by 'happy'?

---

How an animal is feeling (its welfare) can range from good to bad, with lots of possibilities in between. When welfare is very bad, we say that an animal is suffering. When welfare is very good, we might say that an animal is happy. Somewhere in between, we might say that an animal is content, which is when it has everything it needs. Ensuring our pets are content and have what they need to be healthy and happy is what's most important.

## Why is it important to know if our pets are happy and content?

---

To most people this is hopefully obvious: because we want them to be!

But it's also important because animal welfare legislation (The Animal Welfare Act 2006 in England and Wales, and the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006) introduces something called a 'duty of care'. This means that we must, by law, not only prevent our pets from suffering, but we must provide them with the things they need to make them healthy and happy. This is good news for our pets!



## Thinking of everything that matters – the five welfare needs

---

The first thing to do is try to think of all the things that can affect whether our pets are happy or not. A useful approach is to think about the ‘five welfare needs’. These are a list of five things which all animals need to be healthy and happy (see boxed text below) and which, under the new laws, all owners need to provide for the pets they keep.

The five welfare needs make sure that we think of all the things that can affect how animals feel. For example, it’s not good to be well fed but in pain, or to feel comfortable but lonely.

### The 5 welfare needs

- ✓ **Environment**  
A suitable place to live
- ✓ **Diet**  
The right food in the right amounts
- ✓ **Behaviour**  
Being able to behave normally
- ✓ **Company**  
For animals that need to live together
- ✓ **Health**  
Protecting your pet from pain, injury and disease

## How can your veterinary practice help?

---

Vets and veterinary nurses are trained in many aspects of animal welfare, and have lots of practical experience with animals. They can advise on each of a pet's five welfare needs. The best time to get this advice is before you get a pet, so that you will have all the information you need to keep your new pet healthy and happy.

## As a pet owner, what can I do?

---

- Assess your own pet's quality of life by using the five welfare needs like a tick-list.
- If you think that you aren't achieving one or more of the five welfare needs, change the way you keep or look after your pet so that you can achieve them. Ask your vet for advice if necessary.
- If you're not sure whether you're achieving the five welfare needs, or you're not sure how to make changes for the better, ask your veterinary practice for help.
- We have lots of other useful information for pet owners on our website: [www.bva-awf.org.uk](http://www.bva-awf.org.uk)



## Case study: Are my pet rabbits happy?

---

Use the five welfare needs to help you answer. Answer 'yes' to all five, and they are probably happy and content!

**Question:** Do they have a suitable living environment?

**Answer:** I've heard that lots of hutches sold for rabbits are too small. There was one of the biggest in the shop though and it's on two levels. It lets my rabbits do at least three hops from end to end, they can stand up without their ears touching the top and it has a large exercise run attached.

**Action:** No action needed.

**Question:** Do they have a suitable diet?

**Answer:** My vet told me I wasn't feeding them enough hay, so now they get their own body size in hay every day. I don't feed muesli-type food because I know it is linked to teeth problems, but I'd like to feed some different greens.

**Action:** I'll ask my vet about which greens are safe to feed.



**Question:** Are they able to behave normally?

**Answer:** I give them large tubes and cardboard boxes which they like to go in and jump up on to. I've heard that giving them a planter filled with potting compost can be good, because rabbits like to dig.

**Action:** Look in to providing a planter for them to dig in

**Question:** Do they have company?

**Answer:** When I was young I used to keep a rabbit on his own. I have since learnt that rabbits need the company of another rabbit, as they are very sociable and can get lonely. I keep the combination that my vet recommended: a neutered male with a neutered female.

**Action:** No action needed.

**Question:** Are my rabbits healthy?

**Answer:** The diet that my vet recommended — lots of hay, some greens and a small amount of rabbit nuggets — means that they shouldn't get teeth problems. I also get them vaccinated against serious diseases. My vet mentioned cases of 'fly strike' (maggots living on dirty skin) that were seen in rabbits last summer, so I will ensure their hutch and fur is kept clean.

**Action:** Check their bottoms daily in summer to ensure no sign of dirt or maggots, as my vet recommended.

Have a think about the way you keep your pets, following this method and using your veterinary practice for advice. If you do this, your pet should have everything it needs, you'll stay within the new laws, and hopefully everyone, including your pet, will be happy!



### Further information:

---

Welsh Assembly Government Codes of Practice:  
<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/environmentcountryside/ahw/animalwelfare/pets/codesofpractice/?lang=en>

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) Codes of Practice:  
[www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-pets/pets/cruelty/index.htm](http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-pets/pets/cruelty/index.htm)

### Advice on choosing the right pet:

---

- [www.your-right-pet.org.uk](http://www.your-right-pet.org.uk)

### How to meet the five welfare needs:

---

- [www.pdsa.org.uk/pethealth](http://www.pdsa.org.uk/pethealth)
- [www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/pets/general](http://www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/pets/general)

### Animal Welfare Foundation

AWF is the charity led by the veterinary profession. We are committed to improving the welfare of all animals through veterinary science, education and debate.

The Foundation is funded entirely by voluntary contributions. To make a donation please visit [www.bva-awf.org.uk](http://www.bva-awf.org.uk) or call us on 020 7908 6375

You can download our other leaflets and resources from our website or you can request copies by contacting us:

AWF, 7 Mansfield Street, London W1G 9NQ

Tel: 020 7908 6375

Email: [bva-awf@bva.co.uk](mailto:bva-awf@bva.co.uk)

Web: [www.bva-awf.org.uk](http://www.bva-awf.org.uk)

Twitter: AWF\_VETS