

Caring for Your Rabbit



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A Guide to Keeping Pet Rabbits Healthy and Happy

Why Rabbits?

Rabbits are becoming increasingly popular pets as more and more people realize their potential.

- Rabbits are clean, adorable trainable animals that can become very affectionate and friendly pets.
- They also live longer than other smaller pets (up to 12 years) and often have more personality.
- Many rabbits can be litter-trained which means they could have the run of a rabbit-proofed room.

Children and Rabbits

Rabbits are not necessarily good pets for children under the age of five-years old. It's important to realize that rabbits, despite being timid and sensitive creatures, often have a surprising stubborn streak. They prefer doing things their way, and children will find this frustrating, particularly because most rabbits don't like to sit passively in a lap and be cuddled.

There are always exceptions. If your child is a quiet gentle person, who can empathize with the rabbit's needs and allow for life on the bunny's terms, a rabbit can be a wonderful pet for children.

Just remember that no young child should be given complete responsibility for any pet. It is not fair to the animal or the child. An adult must be responsible for making sure the rabbit's needs are met and be the primary caretaker, no matter how mature the child.



Handling Rabbits

Your rabbit may need awhile to adjust once you take it home. It could be wise not to try and handle your rabbit for a few days. Petting is okay if the rabbit seems fine with it, but please let her have a chance to settle in before exposing her to stressful events (yes, handling can be a stressful event for a new rabbit).

Rabbits are strong animals and will defend themselves if mistreated. However, if you handle your rabbit properly she will become a gentle and loving pet. When picking up your rabbit, grasp the loose skin over her shoulders and immediately support the rear end as you lift. You can also scoop up a rabbit by putting one hand under her forepaws and chest and your other hand on her rear.

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Be especially careful to support the rabbit's weight so she feels secure and hold her close to your body. NEVER dangle a rabbit or hold her by the ears - this is both frightening and extremely painful.

Frequently Asked Housing Questions

Is it OK to keep my rabbit in a cage with a wire floor?

Rabbits were not designed to live on wire floors--they're hard on their feet (which have no pads on the, like cats or dogs). You can find cages with slatted plastic floors, which are more comfortable, or you can use a solid floor. As long as your rabbit has a litter box in the corner that he chooses as his bathroom, there shouldn't be much of a mess to clean up.

What size cage is best?

Bigger is better! A cage should be at least 4 times the size of your bunny--more if he is confined for a large amount of the day. You can build or buy your rabbit a two-storey "condo" with the floors connected by a ramp--they love this!

Can my new bunny run loose 24 hours a day?

An untrained rabbit probably should be kept in a cage while you're not home to supervise and at night when you sleep. Rabbits are crepuscular, which means that generally they sleep during the day and during the night but are ready to play at dawn and at twilight. Be sure to let them out during the evening when you are home, and if possible, in the morning while you get ready for work. If you are giving your rabbit access to a room, make sure it has been bunny proofed!

What can I do to make the rabbit's cage time more enjoyable?

A cage should be seen as the rabbit's "nest." A special place where he can feel safe and secure. Make the nest enjoyable and she will enjoy being there, even when the cage door is open! Keep it stocked with baby toys, a synthetic sheepskin rug, a piece of wood attached to the inside (like a baseboard), and when you put him to bed at night, a nice veggie or fruit snack.

When is it OK to let a rabbit run loose in the house?

When your rabbit is better trained, and when your house (or the part that your rabbit will have access to) has been sufficiently bunny-proofed, your rabbit can be allowed free run of the home (or part of it) even when you are not home. The more room your rabbit has to run around in, the more delightful you will find her as a companion.

Even when a rabbit has a lot of room to run around, he may still get bored. A bored rabbit is often a naughty rabbit. If you don't make every attempt to provide your rabbit with lots of entertainment, in the form of boxes, baskets, brooms, sticks, magazines, phone books, grass mats, etc., then he will make his own entertainment in your carpet, behind your couch or under your recliner.

Can I let my rabbit run loose outside?

Always supervise your rabbit when she's outside if she's not in a secure rabbit pen. It takes just a few seconds for the neighbor's dog to jump the fence and attack or frighten your rabbit to death.

Make sure that the grass has not been sprayed with pesticides or fertilizers. Check the yard for holes in the fence and poisonous plants.

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Under no circumstances should rabbits be left outside after dark. Predators are possums, raccoons, skunks, coyotes, dogs and occasionally cats. If you have an outside enclosure that you feel is very secure, a rabbit can still die of fright while a predator taunts the rabbit from outside.

Litter Training

By nature, rabbits choose one or a few places (usually corners) to deposit their urine and most of their pills (poop). Urine-training involves little more than putting a litter box where the rabbit chooses to go. Pill training requires only that you give them a place they know will not be invaded by others. Here are some suggestions to help you to train your rabbit to use the litter box.

Does age make a difference?

Older rabbits are easier to train than younger rabbits, especially babies. A rabbit's attention span and knack for learning increases as they grow up. If you have a baby, stick with it! And if you are deciding whether to adopt an older rabbit, or litter train your older rabbit, go for it!

Does Spaying/Neutering make a difference?

Yes! This is often the most important factor. When rabbits reach the age of 4-6 months, their hormones become active and they usually begin marking their territory. By spaying or neutering your rabbit, he will be more likely to use his litter box (as well as be much healthier and happier).

What types of litter should I use?

It depends on what's available in your area and what your rabbit's habits are. Keep in mind the following as you choose your litter:

- most rabbits spend lots of time in their litter boxes

- rabbits will always nibble some of the litter
- rabbit urine has a very strong odor.

House Rabbit Society recommends organic litters, made from alfalfa, oat, citrus or paper. (Some brands to look for: Care Fresh, Cat Country, Critter Country, Yesterday's News, Papurr and Equine Fresh Pellets).

Stay away from litters made from softwoods, like pine or cedar shavings or chips, as these products are thought to cause liver damage in rabbits who use them. CatWorks litter has been linked to zinc poisoning. Swheat Scoop Litter should be avoided, because rabbits will often ingest it. Because it is comprised of wheat, it is very high in carbohydrates and can cause obesity, excessive cecal production, diarrhea, bacterial imbalance, and other health issues.

Another approach is to place a handful of hay in each box, or to simply use hay as litter. It is helpful to put several layers of newspaper under the hay, to absorb urine so that your rabbit is not standing in the urine. Most newspapers today are using soy-based ink, which is safe for your rabbit, but check with your local newspaper to make sure first. Obviously, you need to change the hay fairly frequently (daily), since your rabbit will be eating it. This method often helps to encourage good litter habits as well as to encourage hay consumption, since rabbits often eat at or near the same time as they use the litter box.



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Cleaning and Disposal.

Clean litter boxes often, to encourage your rabbit to use them. Use white vinegar to rinse boxes out--for tough stains, let pans soak. Accidents outside of the cage can be cleaned up with white vinegar or club soda. If the urine has already dried, you can try products like "Nature's Miracle" to remove the stain and odor. To dispose of organic litters, they can be used as mulch, or can be composted. Rabbit pills can be directly applied to plants as fertilizer.

What kinds of cages work best?

Use a cage large enough to contain a small litter box (along with bunny's food and water bowls, toys, etc.) and still allow enough room for the rabbit to stretch out. Place the box in the corner of the cage that he goes in. With a litter box in the cage, when the rabbit is confined to his cage when you're not home, cage time is learning time.

What if my cage is on legs or has a door that opens on top so the bunny can't get into it on his own?

If it is on legs, build a ramp or stairs, or pile boxes to make steps--anything so he can come and go on his own.

If the door is on top, put a small stool or box inside to help him get out, a board or piece of rug to help him walk to the edge of the cage, and a ramp, stairs, stool, or boxes to help him get down (and up again).

What if my cage is too small for a litter box or I don't use a cage?

If your cage is too small for a litter box, you may have a cage that is too small for your rabbit. Or you may have a dwarf rabbit and can't get a small litter box. A good substitute is a Pyrex baking dish. Even 9" x 9" is sufficient for a small 3 or 4 pound rabbit.

Pills vs. Urine

All rabbits will drop pills around their cages to mark it as their own. This is not failure to be litter-trained. It is very important for your rabbit to identify the cage as her property so that when she leaves the cage for the bigger world of your house, she will distinguish the family's area from her own and avoid marking it. To encourage this, make the rabbit the king of his cage. Try not to force him in or out of it-- coax him. Do not do things to his cage that he doesn't like, or things to him that he doesn't like while he's in the cage.

The trick to getting the rabbit to keep his pills in the cage is to give him ownership of his cage:

- Don't reach into the cage to take him out; open the door and let him come out if and when HE wants to come;
- Don't catch him and put him back in the cage or it will be his prison, not his home. Herd him back gently, and let him choose to go in to get away from you (I walk behind my buns, clap my hands, and say "bedtime." They know that I'll not stop harassing them with this until they go into their cage, so they run in except when they feel the haven't gotten their fair share of time outside the cage.)
- It's a bit like a child going home and closing the door, because someone is calling her names. They may make the playground an unpleasant place for her, but they can't bother her in her own home.
- If the rabbit has been snuggling with you, it's okay to carry him to the door of the cage and let him go in--just don't put him directly into the cage, and never chase and trap him and put him in the cage.

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- Don't reach into the cage to get food dishes--anchor them near the door of the cage so they can be filled with a minimum of trespassing into the cage, or wait until the rabbit is out to fill them.
- Don't clean the cage while the rabbit is in it--wait until he comes out. He'll come over and supervise you, even help you move things around that you've set down outside the cage, but as long as he isn't in the cage, he won't see your cleaning as an invasion of his territory.

The same technique can be used if a rabbit doesn't live in a cage, but in a particular part of a room. Mark the territory with a rug, tape, whatever, and don't trespass over that.

Can the rabbit have a running space?

Even if your goal is to let your rabbit have full run of the house, you must start small. Start with a cage and a small running space, and when your rabbit is sufficiently well-trained in that space, gradually give her more space. But do so gradually! If you overwhelm her with too much freedom before she's ready, she will forget where her box is and will lose her good habits.

So what's the actual method?

Start with a box in the cage, and one or more boxes in the rabbit's running space. If she urinates in a corner of the cage not containing the box, move the box to that corner until she gets it right. Don't be concerned if your bunny curls up in his litterbox--this is natural. Once she's using the box in the cage, open her door and allow her into her running space. Watch her go in and out on her own. If she heads to a corner where there's no box, or lifts up her tail in the characteristic fashion, cry

“no” in a single, sharp burst of sound. Gently herd her back to her cage and her litter box, or into one of the boxes in her room. Be careful, however. You don't want to make the cage or the litter box seem like punishment.

A handful of hay in the box makes it a more welcoming place. After she first uses the box, praise her and give her, her favorite treat. Once she uses the box in her room a couple of times, you're well on your way, as her habits will be on their way to forming. As she gets better trained in her first room, you can increase her space. Don't hurry this process. And if the area becomes very big, or includes a second floor, be sure to include more litter boxes, so as not to confuse her. Remember, as she becomes more confident and uses fewer boxes, you can start to remove some of her early, “training” boxes. Get your rabbit into a daily routine and try not to vary it. Rabbits are very habitual and once a routine is established, they usually prefer to stick with it.

How many litter boxes?

The more, the merrier, especially if your rabbit is a bit of a slow learner, or is especially obstinate



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about where she wants her box(es) to go. As her habits improve, you can decrease the number of litter boxes.

Kicking litter out of the box

Some rabbits love to kick their litter out of the box. You can get a covered litter box (with a hood) to help solve this problem. You can also try experimenting with different litters.

Urinating over the edge of the litter box

A second problem is that rabbits often back up so far in the litter box that the urine goes over the edge. Again, a covered litter box can solve this problem. Another solution would be to get a dishpan or other type of tub with much higher sides. Still another solution would be to get a “urine guard” to place around the back of the cage, to keep the litter from spraying outside of the cage.

What to do if your rabbit insists on using another spot?

Compromise. If your rabbit continually urinates in a spot where there is no litter box, put his box where he will use it, even if it means rearranging his cage or moving a table in the living room. It is much easier to oblige him than to try to work against a determined bunny!

What are the most common litter training mistakes?

Letting the bunny out of the cage and not watching her with undivided attention; (You can't watch TV or read the paper or knit or talk on the phone and expect to keep your mind on what the bunny is doing every second--if she urinates without being “caught” and herded to the litter box, she'll be that much slower in learning what she's supposed to do.)

Getting in a hurry.

Bunnies take time. Perhaps that's one of their special gifts to us in this hectic world. They require that we take time out to sit and watch and do nothing else. Besides getting a well-trained bunny for your efforts, you also get a short period of time each day to watch one of the most charming little creatures on earth explore, skip for joy, and in general entertain you with her bunny-ness.

What should I do if my rabbit starts dribbling all over her cage instead of using the litter box?

Dribbles usually indicate a bladder infection. Get your bunny to a rabbit-veterinarian who will probably put her on an antibiotic. If the dribbling stops, you know that was the problem. (Watch out for antibiotics given by veterinarians not familiar with rabbits as companion animals!)

If the “dribbles” are more than dribbles, or if the antibiotic doesn't stop the problem, consider any factors that may be making your bunny feel insecure (new pet, house guests, change in location of cage, etc.), any of which can cause a bunny to mark her cage more enthusiastically (similar to someone having a dispute with a neighbor about the location of a fence setting up a flag at the property boundary marker).

Why does my rabbit urinate or leave pills right beside the litter box?

The most common things that are related to poor litter habits (especially if the bun had been using the litter box in the past) are:

1. *Not being spay or neutered.*

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2. Urinary Tract infections; sludge in the bladder; bladder stones; kidney disease. This should be treated by a qualified doctor.

A common example is Oreo, a 8.5 year Dutch who had 75% kidney failure and began urinating on the floor next to the litter box when her problems first began. Hershey (her mate) did the same thing when he had a severe UTI last year. After the UTI was cleared up, he began to use the litter box again.

3. Behavior related. Once the possibility of physiological causes is eliminated, the behavioral reasons seem to go something like this:

Ms. Bun (example) eliminates next to her litter box because of some stress, e.g., a break in her routine such as less or more running time than usual, visitors at home, kids home from college or summer camp, any intensely emotional event whether good or bad. It could even be a single incident such as being frightened by a sudden noise (car backfiring, etc) while she's in her box, which she then associates with being in the box.

Whatever the reason, she's feeling insecure and tries to rebuild her confidence by "underlining her signature" (signature being her droppings in the box; underlining, the puddles/piles beside it). Unless it's an ongoing stress that can be removed, figuring out the cause is not particularly relevant.

The important factor is not what happened the first time but the habit that often grows from it. She pees beside the box today because she did it yesterday. Many people do not take action for the first few incidents, especially with a rabbit who's always been good about using the litter box. They

figure it's a fluke that will disappear as suddenly as it started. This gives the habit time to take firm root. By day 3, the habit is fairly entrenched, and correction of the perceived cause will not solve the problem.

What WILL solve it? the usual: confinement, praise, rewards, vigilant observation and supervision during free-run time. but there's a catch-22 to this method. It generally requires a change in miz bun's routine, which is a common cause for the behavior in the first place. I know of no easy way around this knot. The hard way is to confine, praise, etc with minimal change to her usual routine. Sometimes I add a box to the rabbit's area. The novelty makes the box attractive (as do treats placed in it).

It's important for people to understand that this process can take time. A rabbit who's been perfectly box-trained for 3 years and has peed next to the box for 3 days may need 3 weeks of intensive training to get back to her old, good behavior. Why is it that bad habits take longer to undo than to initiate while the reverse is true of good habits?

4. Territory related.

Winston, a religious litter box user began urinating on the floor next to the litter box near the gate... when Buttercup arrived on the opposite side of the gate. After Winston got used to Buttercup, and had "his" territory sufficiently marked, he stopped using the floor and resumed using the litter box.

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What are the basics of a good house rabbit diet?

A rabbit's diet should be made up of good quality pellets, fresh hay (timothy), water and fresh vegetables. Anything beyond that is a "treat" and should be given in limited quantities.

What makes a good pellet?

Pellets should be fresh, and should be relatively high in fiber (Timothy hay based - 18% min. fiber). Do not purchase more than 6 weeks worth of feed at a time, as it will become spoiled. Pellets should make up less of a rabbit's diet as he or she grows older, and hay should be available 24-hours a day.

What kinds of veggies should I feed my rabbit?

When shopping for vegetables, look for a selection of different veggies--look for both dark leafy veggies and root vegetables, and try to get different colors. Stay away from beans and rhubarb. Here's a suggested veggie list.

Is feeding hay important?

Hay is essential to a rabbit's good health, providing roughage which reduces the danger of hairballs and other blockages. Apple tree twigs also provide good roughage.

What quantities of food should I feed babies and "teenagers"?

- Birth to 3 weeks--mother's milk
- 3 to 4 weeks--mother's milk, nibbles of alfalfa and pellets
- 4 to 7 weeks--mother's milk, access to alfalfa and pellets
- 7 weeks to 7 months--unlimited pellets, unlimited hay (plus see 12 weeks)
- 12 weeks--introduce vegetables (one at a time, quantities under 1/2 oz.)

What quantities of food should I feed young adults? (7 months to 1 year)

- introduce timothy hay, grass hay, and oat hays, decrease alfalfa
- decrease pellets to 1/2 cup per 6 lbs. body weight
- increase daily vegetables gradually
- fruit daily ration no more than 1 oz. to 2 oz. per 6 lbs. body weight (because of calories)

What quantities of food should I feed mature adults? (1 to 5 years)

- unlimited timothy, grass hay, oat hay, straw
- 1/4 to 1/2 cup pellets per 6 lbs. body weight (depending on metabolism and/or proportionate to veggies)
- minimum 2 cups chopped vegetables per 6 lbs. body weight
- fruit daily ration no more than 2 oz. (2 TBL) per 6 lbs. body weight.

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What quantities of food should I feed senior rabbits? (Over 6 years)

If sufficient weight is maintained, continue adult diet. Frail, older rabbits may need unrestricted pellets to keep weight up. Alfalfa and unlimited Timothy Hay Pellets can be given to underweight rabbits, only if calcium levels are normal. Annual blood workups are highly recommended for geriatric rabbits.

If I feed fewer pellets, how do I compensate?

When you feed a lower quantity of pellets, you must replace the nutritional value without the calories, which is done by increasing the vegetables. Also, a variety of hay and straw must be encouraged all day long, we do this by offering fresh hay a couple of times a day.

Why is it important to provide toys?

Toys are important because they provide: Mental stimulation.

Without challenging activities to occupy your rabbit when you're not home, your rabbit, especially a solitary rabbit, will get bored. This could lead to depression and/or excessive destruction. The creative use of toys can extend your rabbit's life by keeping him interested in his surroundings, by giving him the freedom to interact with those surroundings, and by allowing him to constantly learn and grow.

Physical exercise.

Your rabbit needs safe activities to keep her body in shape as well as her mind. She needs things to climb on, crawl under, hop on and around, dig into, and chew on. Without outlets for these physical needs, your rabbit may become fat or depressed, or may create jumping, chewing, or crawling diversions with your furniture.

Bunny proofing for your home. As is clear from the above descriptions, toys are not just for your rabbit, they also keep your house safe. By providing your rabbit with a selection of toys chosen to meet her age, sex, reproductive status and temperament, you have fulfilled most of the requirements of bunnyproofing your home.

What are good bunny toys?

If you find your rabbit ingesting plastic or cardboard toys, switch to a different type of toy that the rabbit is not interested in eating.

Some good toys to start with:

Paper Bags and Cardboard boxes for crawling inside, scratching, and chewing. Bunnies like them much more when there are at least two entry points into the boxes.

Below are great tips on building bunny box toys:

- Cardboard roll from paper towels or toilet paper
- Untreated wicker baskets or boxes full of: shredded paper, junk mail, magazines, straw, or other organic materials for digging



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- Yellow Pages for shredding
- Cat toys: Batta balls, and other cat toys that roll or can be tossed
- Parrot toys that can be tossed, or hung from the top of the cage and chewed or hit
- Baby toys: hard plastic (not teething) toys like rattles and keys, things that can be tossed
- Children's or birds' mobiles for hitting
- "Lazy cat lodge" (cardboard box with ramps and windows) to climb in and chew on. Also, kitty condos, tubes, tunnels, and trees
- Nudge and roll toys like large rubber balls, empty Quaker Oat boxes and small tins
- "Busy Bunny" toys (sold at pet stores)
- Plastic Rainbow slinkies
- Toys with ramps and lookouts for climbing and viewing the world
- Dried out pine cones
- Jungle gym type toys from Toys-R-Us
- A (straw) whisk broom
- A hand towel for bunching and scooting
- Untreated wood, twigs and logs that have been aged for at least 3 months
- Apple tree branches can be eaten fresh off the tree. Stay away from: cherry peach, apricot, plum and redwood, which are all poisonous
- Untreated sea grass or maize mats from *Pier One* or *Cost Plus*
- Things to jump up on (they like to be in high places)
- Colorful, hard plastic caps from laundry detergent and softener bottles. They have great edges for picking up with their teeth, make a nice "ponk" sound when they collide, and the grip ridges molded into the plastic make a neat "rachety" sound when rabbits digs at the cap. The caps are nice for human-stacks-on-floor and bun-knocks-down kind of games.



Note: Be sure not to choose caps from caustic material bottles (e.g. drain uncloggers, bathroom cleaner bottles) since a residue of the cleaner might remain no matter how much washing off you do.

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How to Groom Your Rabbit

Rabbits are very clean animals, and almost never need a bath. They do, however, require regular brushing and nail care. Especially while your rabbit is shedding (which they do about every three months), be sure to brush them thoroughly. Grooming supplies include a wire slicker brush, a cat Zoom Groom, and a soft bristled brush. You can also groom your rabbit by wetting your hands and running them over your bunny's coat.

Rabbits need their nails clipped at least once every two months, or as needed, otherwise they become too long and may catch and splinter painfully. The guillotine style clippers sold for dogs and cats works best. Many rabbits can be laid on their backs and put into a "trance" by stroking the ears and face, after which nail clipping is a breeze. However, for novices and skittish rabbits, it is recommended that you simply hold the rabbit on your lap and hold each paw as you cut. Be very careful not to cut down to the quick of the nail. It is easy to see the quick on the light colored nails, but much more difficult with darker ones. You can use a flashlight (have a friend help you) to shine through the nail to see the quick. If unsure, err on the side of caution and only clip the very ends of then nail.

Should You Fix Your Rabbit?

YES! We highly recommend that pet rabbits be neutered or spayed. Males can be neutered as early as three to four months of age, while females should be spayed sometime after five months. Unaltered rabbits exhibit territorialism and may spray urine and poop everywhere to mark their territory. Both females and males may be moody

and may even bite out of their restlessness and preoccupation. Altered rabbits are also much easier to litter train, and if you want your rabbit to be able to run around outside its cage, it should be fixed.

Not only does neutering/spaying make the rabbit happier and easier to live with, but it has important health benefits as well. Unspayed female rabbits have an 80% chance of developing uterine cancer within their lifetimes, and unneutered male rabbits may develop testicular cancer.

Questions?

Feel free to call the Humane Society of Huron Valley at (734) 662-5585 and ask for Darleen.

Also visit:

The Humane Society of Huron Valley
www.hshv.org

House Rabbit Society
www.rabbit.org

VeterinaryPartner.com
www.veterinarypartner.com

Midwest Rabbit Rescue
www.rabbitrr.org/