

## PET RABBIT INFORMATION

Rabbits are very curious, intelligent, and playful companions. They can be litter trained and make wonderful house pets and additions to your family.

Your pet rabbit can create many years of companionship and fun for you and your family if you understand; rabbit behavior, proper veterinary care, creating the proper environment with plenty of enrichment, and how to bunny proof your home.



### RABBIT FACTS

*Rabbits are lagomorphs, not rodents. Males are called bucks and females are called does.*

*Rabbits are not good starter pets for children.* They are a delicate and ground loving species. Most rabbits do not enjoy being held or handled and often times try to escape a child's arms by biting and scratching. This can cause severe back injury to the rabbit when it struggles to get away and return to a solid surface. Proper handling is important with your pet rabbit.

*Myth: Rabbits are low maintenance and do not live very long.* Rabbits have the same needs as dogs and cats and need proper veterinary care when an illness arises. Rabbits have specific dietary needs (found further in this handout). It is recommended that rabbits be spayed and neutered to prevent unwanted behaviors. Cages and litter boxes need to be cleaned frequently to prevent ammonia odor and urine build up. A rabbit that is properly cared for can live up to 10 years.

### HOME AND ENVIRONMENT

It is recommended to have a cage for your rabbit, even if they have free roam of your home. They enjoy a place to call their own to nap, hide, or nibble on some hay and treats. Store bought rabbit cages often come with wire or mesh bottoms with a pull out litter tray underneath to catch feces and urine. A cage like this is perfectly fine as long as your rabbit has a resting board (wooden board, cardboard, folded newspaper, or a grass mat) for your rabbit to rest on. This can prevent your rabbit from getting sore hocks; open sores on their feet from constant exposure from wire surfaces.

The tray of the litter pan should be lined with shredded newspaper, wood shavings (avoid cedar or pine, as the odor can be toxic to your rabbit, causing liver and respiratory damage), or a paper based litter. Litter pans need to be cleaned often to prevent ammonia odor build up. Rabbits often times back into the corner of the cage to urinate and defecate. Urine guards for the cage can be purchased at

stores to prevent over spray onto your walls and carpet. You can also purchase a corner litter box with urine guards built in.

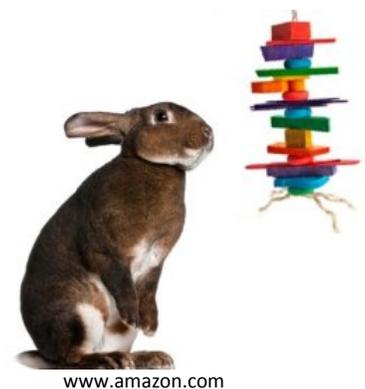
A rabbit must have access to water, food, and hay while in their cage. Water can be provided to your rabbit by a hanging bottle or a heavy spill proof ceramic dish. Avoid plastic dishes, as your rabbit will chew them. Hay can be placed directly on the floor, in a toilet paper/paper towel tube, or in a hay rack on the side of the cage. If your rabbit will be eating meals in their cage the dish should be metal or ceramic to avoid chewing on bowls. Plenty of toys in the cage will help your rabbit ward off boredom and keep them from being destructive.

Cages should be kept clean, and it is recommended to clean once weekly to avoid ammonia and urine build up. White vinegar is a really great cleaning solution to help ward of urine build up on the tray and cage wire, or in litter boxes. The rabbit's cage should be a clean and inviting place for your rabbit. They should view their cage as a safe place. Rabbits can become territorial of their cages and try to defend their "space" if they feel threatened.

## **TOYS AND ENVIROMENTAL ENRICHMENT**

Rabbits love to play and they need mental stimulation just like dogs and cats to stay active. They like to chew, push things around with their noses, jump, and dig. Giving your rabbit toys of their own will keep them from chewing on unwanted objects; such as furniture, carpet, wires, and walls. There are many store bought toys you can invest in for your rabbit, but there are also many recyclable items in your house your rabbit can use as toys as well. Below is a list of suggested toys and enrichment activities for your rabbit.

- Toilet paper or paper towel tubes, plain or stuffed with hay.
- Hard plastic baby toys (avoid teething items that have fluid in them)
- Wire or plastic cat balls. (make sure the bells, if any, inside are large to avoid choking hazards)
- Old books (phone books, magazines) for shredding
- Canning jar lids
- Empty rolled oats containers
- Balls (plastic whiffle balls, golf balls, etc. – avoid Styrofoam.)
- Boxes of all sizes (remove staples and tape)
- Grass mats for chewing and digging
- Big tub of hay or straw to dig in
- Untreated willow baskets and balls
- Cardboard tunnels (can be found at hardware stores or pet stores)
- Hanging bird toys (avoid any that have bird treats attached to them)



[www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

## **RABBIT PROOFING YOUR HOME**

Rabbits have the ability to rip, chew, tear, and shred pretty much anything they come in contact with. Their teeth continuously grow so they naturally chew to wear their teeth down to avoid overgrowth. Providing some of the toys listed above for your rabbit to chew on will help direct their chewing to appropriate items instead of your home.

Some rabbits are allowed free roam of the entire home, while others have a room of their own that is rabbit proofed. How you house your rabbit will depend on their behaviors around your home. The number one household hazard to rabbits is electrical cords. If you cannot cover or move the cords, it is best to prevent your rabbit from entering that area. A rabbit who chews a cord can suffer electrical shock, or even death, not to mention the hazard to your home when a cord is severed. Cords can be hidden behind book cases and other furniture that the rabbit cannot get behind. Another option is to encase the wire in something your rabbit cannot chew through. You can purchase plastic cable covers at most electronic or automotive stores. Another option is plastic tubing or garden hose, cut lengthwise and your cord inserted into the tube.

Rabbits also enjoy carpet fibers. They may dig or chew at the fibers causing a health hazard for your rabbit. If carpet fibers are ingested it may lead to intestinal blockage. If your rabbit has a few favorite spots in your house they like to dig or chew at, you can place a grass mat in those areas to encourage chewing and digging on appropriate items. A box full of hay or straw can also give your rabbit an outlet for their need to dig. If you have tried alternatives and your rabbit continues to chew your home, it may be best to seclude them to their own "rabbit room" instead of having free roam of the house when you are not around to keep an eye on their behaviors and redirect to appropriate items.

Another hazard to your rabbit is household plants. Many household plants are toxic to rabbits and can cause illness or death if ingested. Plants should be kept out of reach of your rabbit.

Any home can be rabbit proofed as long as the appropriate measures are taken. Books can be moved to higher shelves, shoes can be put away, important papers should be picked up and placed out of reach, clothes should be put away. Any important items left on the floor, you can bet your rabbit will find them and possibly destroy them!

## **SPAYING AND NEUTERING**

Just like cats and dogs, it is recommended to spay and neuter your pet rabbit. Spaying and neutering has both behavioral and medical benefits. Rabbits enter reproductive age between 3 and 6 months of age. They sometimes become territorial and can aggressively defend their territory by grunting, lunging, and biting. Rabbits that are not spayed or neutered may mount hands, feet, fuzzy slippers, and anything else that is available is a very common behavior. The most common behavior of intact rabbits is spraying. Rabbits spray to mark their territory and oftentimes jump in the air and spin in a circle while spraying. Rabbits can also directly spray humans they like to claim them as their own.

Spaying or neutering often relieves most of these behavioral issues without changing your rabbit's personality.

More importantly, for medical reasons, it is recommended to spay or neuter your rabbit. Studies have shown that unsprayed female rabbits develop uterine and/or mammary tumors by age five. Spaying your rabbit can add years to their life.

Spaying and neutering should be done only by a veterinarian with experience in treatment of rabbits. Male rabbits can be neutered as soon as their testicles descend (usually around 3-6 months of age). Females can be spayed around 6 months of age. La Crosse Veterinary Clinic routinely spays and neuters rabbits.

## LITTER TRAINING

"Many people are surprised to find that rabbits can be litter-trained. It takes patience, time, and a lot of litter-boxes (at first), but the result is a companion that can be trusted in the main living areas of your home. Spaying or neutering your rabbit is the first step. Unaltered rabbits are highly territorial and will frequently spray large amounts of urine to mark their territory, especially during adolescence. Spaying and neutering decreases this urge to spray and improves litter habits greatly. Rabbits vary in how quickly they learn to use a litter box. Young rabbits are often hyper and too busy exploring to remember to return to a litter box, and can be more difficult to train. A rabbit with a well-established spraying habit may continue to spray, especially in the presence of another rabbit. The setup and training you will most likely have to start with several litter boxes. Fill them with newspaper, hay, or paper-based litter. (Pine and cedar shavings can cause respiratory and liver damage and should not be used.) Clay cat litter and corn cob litter can cause intestinal blockages if ingested and are not recommended either. Clumping cat litter is especially dangerous if ingested as it can cause a cement-like blockage and should never be used. Litter training begins in the cage. Rabbits tend to urinate in one spot, so place a litter box in the corner of the cage that the rabbit has chosen to use as a bathroom. If the cage has a wire floor, place newspaper or other resting material on it or he will probably choose to sit and rest in the comfy litter box instead of the wire. Rotate the litter box every day since bunnies tend to frequent one corner of the box. Place a few droppings and some urine soaked litter in the litter box to encourage him to continue to use that place. Place fresh timothy or orchard hay in or above the litter box every day.



When he is reliably urinating in the litter box, allow a little freedom in a small area such as a bathroom. As he becomes successful in a small area, you can increase his territory. If he makes a mistake and misses a litter box, use white vinegar to clean the area. If he consistently urinates in one spot, place a litter box there. He will eventually narrow his bathroom areas to one or two favorite litter boxes and the extra ones can be removed. Control of droppings usually follows urine training. When entering a

new territory, even neutered rabbits will mark it with droppings. As they become more familiar with their surroundings, this marking decreases and usually becomes controlled on its own. Litter boxes should be cleaned once or twice weekly or more frequently if more than one rabbit is using them. Soiled recycled newspaper litter can be composted or used to fertilize a garden, or simply thrown away. Clean the litter box with white vinegar. This will dissolve any calcium buildup on the plastic and gets rid of any odor. Never use Lysol or pine cleaners, as the phenols in these cleaners can cause liver and respiratory damage." 2013 BunnyBuddies.com

### SAFE LITTERS

Some common paper based litters are;

- Shredded paper (staples and tape removed before shredding)
- Yesterday's News
- Nature Fresh
- Care Fresh
- EcoFresh
- Bio-Flush
- Feline Pine is a wood litter that has had the aromatic oils removed and is safe for pets.

### FOOD AND TREATS

The most important food you can feed your rabbit is unlimited amounts of grass hay. This can be in the form of Timothy, Oat, or Orchard/Coastal Grasses. Hay should be supplied 24 hours a day. Legume hays (alfalfa and clover) contain higher volumes of calcium and protein which can lead to health problems if fed in large amounts to rabbits over 6 months of age. It is recommended to avoid this type of hay and only use it as treats. Hay provides fiber without unnecessary calories and helps prevent intestinal problems like hairballs and Gastrointestinal Stasis (slow down or complete halt of the intestinal system).



Pellets should be offered in small amounts to rabbits over 6 months of age. Pellets with high amounts of fiber (around 18%), low fat, low calcium, and low protein is recommended. **Do not feed pellets mixed with nuts, seeds, dried vegetables, or other treats in them!** This type of pellet is very low quality and very high in fat. A plain pellet with high fiber is the best thing for your rabbit.

Vegetables should make up a portion of your rabbits diet as well. A list of safe vegetables is found later in this reading. Three types of vegetables should be fed daily to your rabbit. If you notice any diarrhea or stomach upset while feeding these vegetables it is recommended to stop feeding and reintroduce slowly. Be sure to wash all vegetables before feeding them to your rabbit.

Treats such as apple, pear, melon, papaya, or banana can also be fed in small amounts (no more than a tablespoon per day). Grains such as rolled oats (old fashioned oatmeal – NOT instant oatmeal) or barley can also be fed as treats to your rabbit to help keep their coat shiny and soft.

### **UNLIMITED HAY IS IMPORTANT TO AID IN DIGESTION**

|               |   |
|---------------|---|
| Timothy Hay   | Timothy is the best – all but the pickiest rabbits enjoy Timothy Hay              |
| Orchard Grass | Orchard grass is also good – can often times be seasonal and hard to find         |
| Alfalfa Hay   | Good for rabbits under 6 months of age, too rich for those over 6 months of age   |
| Oat Hay       | Great for treats only, do not feed in large amounts                               |
| Costal Hay    | Local variety, does not have much nutritional value, recommended for litter boxes |

### **PELLETED FOOD**

There are many varieties of pellets on the pet food market. It is best to look for a pellet that is readily available, so you are not switching your rabbits feed each time your purchase new, as this can lead to intestinal upset. You can find pellets at pet stores, feed stores, and Farm & Fleet. Look for a pellet that is high in fiber and low in protein. Do not buy the kind with added seeds and colored dried fruit and bits, it is basically junk food for rabbits. One of the more common mistakes with new rabbit owners is over-feeding their rabbits pellets. Below is a table for suggested feeding portions of pellets.

#### **PELLET FEEDING GUIDELINES**

(based on high quality timothy pellet)

|              |               |
|--------------|---------------|
| 2-4 pounds   | 1/8 cup daily |
| 5-7 pounds   | 1/4 cup daily |
| 8-11 pounds  | 1/2 cup daily |
| 12-16 pounds | 3/4 cup daily |

Rabbits up to 6 months of age should have free access to pellets, hay, and fresh water. When your rabbit reaches 6 months of age it is recommended to cut back their pellet intake and offer more timothy hay to prevent them from becoming overweight.



## SAFE VEGETABLES

Rabbits should be allowed to enjoy vegetables to help supplement vitamin intake. Introduce new vegetables slowly to prevent diarrhea, gas, or upset stomach. Feed at least one cup daily per five pounds of body weight, some rabbits will eat a lot more than others. The vegetables on this list are all safe for rabbits, but some rabbits have different preferences than others. Most fresh herbs are also considered delicious and safe to your rabbit as well!

- Alfalfa Sprouts
- Loose Leaf Lettuce
- Broccoli
- Okra
- Cauliflower
- Sweet Peppers
- Chicory Greens
- Radish & Radish Tops
- Spinach (in limited quantity)
- Zucchini Squash
- Kale
- Watercress
- Romaine Lettuce
- Beet Greens
- Mustard Spinach
- Carrots & Carrot Tops
- Pea Pods
- Swiss Chard
- Pumpkin Leaves
- Coriander (Cilantro)
- Dandelion Greens
- Jerusalem Artichoke
- Turnip Greens
- Asparagus
- Mustard Greens
- Chinese cabbage
- Parsley
- Celery
- Pumpkin
- Collard Greens
- Eggplant
- Summer Squash
- Turnips
- Kohlrabi

## SAFE FRUITS

A small amount of fruit can be fed daily. Introduce new vegetables slowly to prevent diarrhea, gas, or upset stomach.

- Banana
- Pear
- Mango
- Plum
- Apple
- Orange
- Peach
- Berries

Rabbits also enjoy frozen fruits in the summertime.

***Be careful! Apple & pear seeds, fruit pits, banana peel, and orange rind can also be deadly.***

## DANGEROUS & DEADLY FOODS

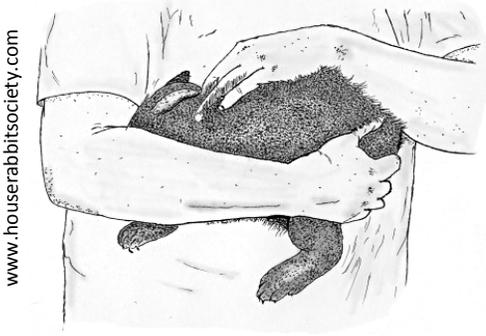
Be careful, there are many foods and plants that are toxic and dangerous to feed your rabbit. Below is a list of *some* foods to avoid!

- Beets
- Corn
- Green Beans
- Onions
- Starches
- Cassava
- Lima Beans
- Coffee plants
- Citrus Peels
- Jack In the Pulpit
- Amaryllis
- Boxwood
- Daffodil
- Hydrangea
- Juniper
- Sweet William
- Azalea
- Carnation
- Clematis
- Elderberry
- Holly Berries
- Larkspur
- Morning Glory
- Potato Plant
- Torn Apple
- Grapes
- Breakfast cereals
- Fresh Peas
- Iceberg Lettuce
- Potatoes
- Sugar
- Bamboo Shoots
- Millet
- Rhubarb Leaves
- Begonia
- Philodendron
- Bird of Paradise
- Cedar
- Daisy
- Hyacinth
- Redwood Tree
- Violas
- Locust
- Carolina Jasmine
- Daphne
- Geranium
- Ivy
- Licorice Plant
- Mountain Laurel
- Rhododendron
- Wintergreen
- Chocolate
- Grains
- Nuts
- Seeds
- Sweet Potato
- Maize
- Tea Leaves
- Lima, Kidney & Soy Beans
- Calla Lily
- Aloe Vera
- Birch
- Chrysanthemum
- Eucalyptus
- Iris
- Sweet Pea
- Angels Trumpet
- Bleeding Heart
- Castor Beans
- Easter Lily
- Hemlock
- Cherry
- Lily of the Valley
- Pig Weed
- String of Pearls
- Wisteria

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## HANDLING

Rabbits should be handled very carefully, they do not like to be suspended and not supported while being carried. They will oftentimes struggle and scratch their owners if not handled and carried properly. They have a very delicate skeletal system that can be damaged while struggling if handled improperly or if they are dropped.



*A rabbit should never be picked up by their ears.* Their ears are not strong enough to support their body weight and lifting by the ear can hurt them and cause damage. Rabbits should never be lifted by the scruff of their neck, this also hurts and can cause damage if your rabbit struggles and kicks their back feet. If you must scruff your rabbit, do not lift them. Instead scoop your other hand under their belly and lift while moving the hand on the scruff to their back end to help support them and pull them closely into you to help them feel safe and supported.

The best way to pick up a rabbit is to slide your hand under their chest, place your other hand firmly on their back end, and scoop the rabbit towards your body. Covering their eyes with your hand sometimes calms them down as well. Some rabbits even struggle when they are placed securely against your body. If your rabbit begins to struggle, stoop down to floor level and gently set them down. Do not ever drop your rabbit!

## GROOMING

Most rabbits do a very good job of keeping themselves clean. However, there are times when you will need to intervene and keep your rabbit looking well groomed and clean.

Long fur rabbits, such as angoras, fuzzy lop, jersey woolly, and lion heads need vigilant brushing to keep their wool-type fur mat free. Once your rabbit's wool begins to form mats the only way to remove them is to gently cut them out, being very careful not to cut their delicate skin. If you are not comfortable removing these mats it is best to contact a groomer or your veterinarian. Long haired/wool breeds require more maintenance than shorter haired breeds.

Short fur breeds will need to be brushed as well, but not as frequently as long haired/wool breeds. A rabbit sheds twice per year, which is also known as a molt. When a rabbit molts they begin to lose large amounts of fur and will need more frequent brushing to keep the fur from forming mats. When a rabbit molts they also have a greater chance of ingesting hairballs, which can be dangerous to their health, as they do not have the capability to vomit a hairball like a cat does.

Rabbits also need their nails trimmed regularly. Without proper nail trimming the nails can grow too long and cause foot problems, such as sore hocks. The nails can also become so long they curl around and grow into your rabbit's foot pads. Nail trimming can be done by your veterinarian or with a little practice you can learn how to do it on your own as well. We are always willing to teach you how to

trim your rabbits nails! If you make a mistake and accidentally cut through the quick on your rabbit's nails, the bleeding can sometimes be severe. This can be stopped by using styptic powder, quick stop, corn starch, or regular flour. It is recommended to keep an eye on that toe for a couple days to make sure it does not become infected, though.

## **MULTIPLE RABBIT HOUSEHOLDS**

Rabbits are very social animals, and often times enjoy companionship of another rabbit. Some rabbits also make friends with the family dog or cat. But it is recommended to keep an eye on socialization in the beginning to make sure your cat or dog will tolerate your rabbit before leaving them unsupervised.

Introducing new rabbits can sometimes be difficult. The easiest pair to introduce is a neutered male with a spayed female. It may be easier to introduce a spayed female to an already established neutered male. Female rabbits, even when spayed, can be territorial and not like sharing their space with another rabbit. It is possible to have two spayed females become bonded, but it can be a bit more difficult. The most difficult pair to introduce is two neutered males. Although not impossible, it is recommended to do this introduction very slowly, to avoid any altercations that could lead to injury.

When introducing new rabbits it is best to do it slowly. Once your new rabbit has had a health exam and you are sure it is in good health make the introductions slowly. Introduce them in an area that is new to them both, as they may band together to explore the new area. Keeping their cages close together so they can smell each other through the cage is also a way of slow introductions. Once your rabbits are comfortable with each other in their new surroundings you can expand their space. If at any time, a fight occurs, you can bring them both back to new territory and slow introductions. Sometimes, it is not possible to bond a pair of rabbits. This is a possibility when introducing any new rabbits. In this case, it is recommended to keep them separate and not reintroduce them. Accommodations will need to be made so they can live separately and far enough away from each other to avoid stress on either rabbit.

## **MEDICAL CONCERNS**

If you ever notice your rabbit is not eating, drinking, urinating, or defecating, consult your veterinarian. Rabbits get ill very suddenly and their health can deteriorate very rapidly without proper veterinary care.

There are many diseases common to rabbits that need to be diagnosed and properly treated by your veterinarian. *This section is not meant to diagnose illnesses on your own, but to help illustrate signs and symptoms that indicate your rabbit may need veterinary care.*

Some rabbits are more apt to have teeth problems than others. This is called malocclusion, when your rabbit's teeth do not line up properly



and continue to grow, despite chewing on food, hay, and toys. This can happen in both the front teeth and rear molars. These teeth will need to be clipped, filed, or sometimes extracted by a veterinarian.

Sore hocks are a condition in which the bottom of the rabbit's feet has hair loss, and the feet wear away. This can be very uncomfortable for your rabbit. You should check your rabbit's hocks routinely and your rabbit should be provided a flat, clean, and dry resting place to help avoid sore hocks. If you notice your rabbit has sore hocks, please contact your veterinarian.

Rabbits can be bothered by fleas, flies, mites, or other small pests. If you notice your rabbit has any small specks, dry flaky skin, or crusty material in your rabbit's ears, contact your veterinarian.

Respiratory diseases are very common in rabbits. If you notice any nasal or eye discharge, labored breathing, crusty fur on the front feet of your rabbit (which would indicate excessive drainage they are wiping away from their face), or excessive sneezing or coughing, take your rabbit to your veterinarian immediately.

### **SYMPTOMS OF ILLNESS**

*(if you notice any of these signs or symptoms, please contact your veterinarian to schedule an appointment)*

- Inactivity, your rabbit is hunched up and not social
- Tilted head, loss of balance or coordination
- Loss of consciousness or convulsions
- Loss of movement in hind legs or any apparent broken bone, serious cut, or injury
- Runny nose or eyes
- Lack of interest in food or water
- Lack of feces or urine in the litter box/litter pan below cage
- Excessive gurgling digestive sounds
- Diarrhea (liquid stool or normal stool surrounded by mucous) If you see soft droppings that resemble bunches of grapes, do not panic. These are normal in small amounts and are called cecotropes (night feces) and your rabbit will routinely ingest these feces for vitamin supplementation.
- Bulging eyes and grinding teeth
- Bloated or distended abdomen
- Any sores, abscesses, lumps, or bumps
- Drooling