

BASIC CARE: RABBITS

The domestic rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) can be a fantastic and loving pet. When well kept, the average rabbit can live for up to 10 years or more! Typically, dwarf breeds live longer than giant breeds. Let us help you set your rabbit friend up for success at home!

Domestic rabbits are a crepuscular species, meaning that they are most active around sunrise and sunset so that might be when your rabbit wants to play. Many bunnies will adjust their schedule so that they are most active when you first wake up and between your dinnertime and\ bedtime. It is important that your rabbit has a dedicated “bedtime” so as not to interfere with normal circadian rhythms. Studies have shown that rabbits with interrupted sleep cycles while dealing with illness have a poorer prognosis than rabbits that are allowed to have normal sleep cycles.

Most rabbits are gregarious animals, meaning they enjoy the company of other rabbits. Typically, rabbits live as bonded pairs. However, not all rabbits get along, and some rabbits are best kept alone. For more information on bonding rabbit's visit: <https://rabbit.org/faq-bonding-multiple-rabbits/>.

While rabbits are typically regarded as a species that does not vocalize, rabbits have a variety of verbal and non-verbal cues to indicate how they are feeling. For example, a happy rabbit may hum or jump and kick their back legs (referred to as a "binky" in layman's terms). An angry rabbit may thump their hind feet or grunt. A rabbit in severe distress may even scream. If your rabbit screams while being handled, immediately put the rabbit down.

If your friends like your rabbit and want one of their own, recommend that they adopt a rabbit from a rescue or check with a local humane society. We do not recommend buying them from pet stores.

HANDLING TIPS

Always scoop up a rabbit with your arms so that its back legs are supported. A rabbit that kicks and dangles can break its back. Children should always have an older experienced rabbit handler to help them get a rabbit out of its pen or cage, and to be nearby while they hold the rabbit. As a general rule, children under the age of 12 may not understand or remember how important it is to be careful with rabbits and need supervision at all times. Some children under this age are very careful and some children older than this may play too rough with pets, so it is important to use your judgment about your child's abilities before leaving him other alone with a rabbit.

HOUSING

When choosing housing options for your rabbit, please consider the lifestyle you are willing to live to give your rabbit adequate exercise and environmental stimulation. Many rabbits do well as free-range house rabbits; however, the home needs to be appropriately rabbit proofed to ward off dangers. Also, rabbits that are free range often get less exercise overall, so consider partial time caging.

When it comes to confining a rabbit to a safe space, bigger is always better. If you have room, a rabbit should be kept in an exercise pen. Housing length and width should be 4-6 times your rabbit's length when fully stretched out. The height depends on your rabbit's skill as a jumper but should be at least 2 feet high.

Any cage should be well-ventilated. Daily exercise outside the cage is a must, such as within a bunny-proofed room, yard, or exercise pen. Some rabbits can even be leashed trained to enjoy time outside or participate in agility competitions!

If the cage or exercise pen has a solid floor, you may not need to put anything down if your rabbit is litterbox trained. If your rabbit has accidents outside the litter box, you may try newspaper, brown paper, or special paper cage liners.

Some rabbits with special health needs may have trouble getting in and out of the litterbox or may be unable to control urination. These rabbits often do well on a fleece blanket placed over dog potty-pads. Urine quickly drains through the fleece and get strapped in the dog potty-pads. The fleece can be washed and re-used, but it is best to have several changes of fleece available, so you are not having to do a load of wash daily.

ENRICHMENT

Rabbits are a highly intelligent species and enjoy having a lot of interaction with different textures in their environment. Providing your rabbit's enclosure with a variety of rabbit safe items to chew on (such as from the Oxbow Enriched Life™ line) will allow your rabbit to exhibit normal inquisitive behaviors. Consider the many toys available as well as some human toddler toys that work well.

Additionally, your rabbit will need to seek out a quiet, dark place that resembles a natural burrow. A cardboard box big enough to hide in (but not so cramped a rabbit can't turn around) is essential or a more permanent dark nest box. A dig box is also an excellent option for your rabbit to have a place to scratch and dig in a box filled with shredded paper, hay, or grass mats.

LITTER BOXES

Rabbits naturally seek out an area of their burrows to use as a litter area. House rabbits should be provided with a litter pan in a dedicated corner of the pen. Warning: your rabbit may have a different opinion than you which corner is best for his or her litter area.

Paper pulp products, such as Yesterday's News™ or Carefresh™ Clean and Cozy Unscented, or compressed straw pellets, such as Eco-Straw Litter, should be used in the litter box. A layer of litter about 2 inches thick will absorb urine and trap odors even if you miss a cleaning one day. Some people place newspapers on the bottom of the litter box and then place the litter on top to make cleaning the litter box easier. It can be dumped into the trash without having to scrape litter stuck to the bottom of the litter box. Top the litter with a layer of hay for training and long-term use.

Spot-cleaning the litter box daily, more often if needed, is important so that your rabbit does not develop dirty fur on its hind feet and tail from going into a soiled litter box. Additionally, keeping the litter box clean will make sure your rabbit's area is free of unpleasant odors which may contribute to upper respiratory infections. Complete cleaning of the litter box should occur once every 1 to 2 weeks using hot soapy water. Rinse well and then wipe it down with vinegar to disinfect it. The vinegar will also break down hard crystal deposits that sometimes form in rabbit urine and stick to the litter box.

Training your new rabbit to use a litterbox:

Most rabbits quickly learn to use their litter boxes on their own, but you may need to place some soiled material (urine and fresh feces) in with the litter to get them started along with a lot of hay. They will sit in the box and eat and learn to use it for urination and defecation.

HEAT

Rabbits can become overheated easily. Do not expose to temperatures above 85°F or below 60°F for any length of time. If your yard is securely fenced and has plenty of trees and cool shady areas, your rabbit will appreciate time outdoors in the early morning or very late afternoon to early evening except during our hottest months, June through September. It's important that you check on your rabbit every 10 to 15 minutes or watch it while it is outside since a rabbit can quickly overheat. Additionally, outdoor rabbits may end up with unpleasant encounters with predators such as feral cats, dogs, and birds of prey -- even in suburban neighborhoods.

DIET

Most of the rabbit's diet should be grass hay. Timothy Hay, Bermuda, orchard grass, and many other options should be available at all times. This provides the right amount of fiber

to keep their gastrointestinal tract healthy and helps prevent problems from developing with their teeth.

Alfalfa hay is not a grass hay, but a legume! It is a great source of protein and calcium for growing, pregnant, or lactating individuals. However, adult rabbits do not need alfalfa, unless specifically prescribed by a veterinarian. It is a myth that adult rabbits should not eat it, but it should be used sparingly because of its high calorie count. Alfalfa hay should be offered to lactating female rabbits until the young are weaned.

For adult rabbits, we recommend offering a measured amount of timothy hay-based pellets (e.g., Oxbow, Sherwood Forest, Selective diets etc.). Pellets are to ensure that our rabbit friends are getting micronutrients which may be highly variable in hay or completely absent. Rabbits under 5 lbs. should get no more than 1/4 of a cup of pellets daily while larger rabbits should be offered no more than 1/2 to 3/4 cup daily.

Baby and juvenile rabbits can be offered alfalfa-based pellets (e.g., Oxbow Young Rabbit Diet) or fed to rabbits with special needs but are not recommended for healthy adult rabbits. These pellets should also be fed to lactating female bunnies until weaning.

Depending on the size of the rabbit, one to three cups of dark green leafy vegetables, fresh grass, and safe plants like hibiscus leaves and flowers may also be given daily. Tiny treats of fruit such as banana or watery vegetables such as carrots are okay in very small amounts but are best avoided. Give no more than a 1” slice of banana or a baby carrot a day. This amount may be too much for some rabbits. Overfeeding these treats often causes diarrhea or chronic gastrointestinal issues. For a listing of what treats are healthy and what are not, please see <https://rabbit.org/suggested-vegetables-and-fruits-for-a-rabbit-diet/>.

Salt and mineral blocks are not necessary for domestic rabbits and should be avoided.

WATER

Clean water should always be available. Water can be provided by a bowl, bottle, or ideally both! A water bowl allows your rabbit to hold its head in a more natural position while drinking, and studies have shown rabbits that are offered bowls drink more water than rabbits offered water bottles. Disinfect the bowl or bottle with a solution of 1 tablespoon bleach to 1 cup of water at least once a week and rinse thoroughly with fresh water before refilling it for your rabbit. A water bowl should be washed daily in warm soapy water, rinsed well, and filled with clean drinking water.

PREVENTIVE MEDICINE

Doing what we can to keep our patients happy and healthy is important to us. An annual wellness examination is recommended for all our furry patients to make sure they are healthy, make sure their teeth are growing properly, and to catch problems before they become serious.

Spay and Neuter: Spay or neuter your rabbit at 5 to 6 months of age. Spaying and neutering can help with certain aggressive behaviors or excessive scent marking. Also, reproductive cancer is common in rabbits and easily prevented with spaying or neutering.

COMMON PROBLEMS

Loss of appetite and change in stools: Many rabbits lose their appetite or have hard tiny stools when sick. If a rabbit goes more than 8-12 hours without eating or more than 4 hours without defecating, it needs to be seen by a veterinarian as soon as possible.

Malocclusion of the teeth: Many rabbits, particularly of the dwarf breeds, may develop problems with their teeth. When the premolars and molars (i.e., cheek teeth) do not wear properly, they form sharp points that can cause ulcers on the cheek and tongue. This can cause a rabbit to lose its appetite, drool (known as slobbers in layman's terms), and develop abnormal hard small fecal pellets or diarrhea. Treatment normally requires anesthesia so that the cheek teeth may be filed into more normal shapes. Some rabbits may need filings every 4 to 6 weeks (about 1 and a half months) or tooth extractions to do well.

Mandibular abscess: A rabbit may develop a lump and discharge from its jaw or neck. Many times, this is due to an infection of the root of the teeth and will not clear up on antibiotics alone. Surgery is typically required to remove the infected tooth and associated infected bone. This may be a very difficult problem to resolve and may take weeks to months of treatment at the hospital and at home.

Congested or runny nose: A rabbit may develop a clear runny or thick yellowish discharge from its nostrils and dried crusts around its nose (commonly referred to as snuffles). Sometimes the rabbit may sneeze frequently and may also have problems breathing. Pasteurella is the classic cause of this, but nasal congestion may also be caused by very serious illnesses such as abscesses, deep sinus infections, inner ear infections, pneumonia, and bone infections which may require surgery and long-term antibiotic treatment.

Runny eyes: A rabbit may develop a watery or thick yellowish discharge from either or both eyes. There are many possible causes for this, and a thorough ophthalmic exam is needed to uncover the underlying problem. It may also be caused by overgrown roots of the teeth,

a condition associated with malocclusion of the teeth. Radiographs (i.e., X-ray films) of the skull may be needed to identify the cause of runny eyes.

Head Tilt: A rabbit may develop a head tilt from an inner ear infection or a disease called *Encephalitozoon cuniculi*, as well as head injuries, heatstroke, and many other conditions. The sooner a rabbit with a head tilt is examined by a veterinarian, the more likely it will be able to be helped.

Matted hair: This may be secondary to malocclusion of the teeth since a rabbit uses its incisor teeth like a comb to groom its fur. If the incisor teeth are normal, this may indicate back pain, arthritis, or some other discomfort that makes the rabbit reluctant to curl into the positions needed to groom itself. Sometimes this may happen because of a dirty litter box, or diarrhea or “sludgy” urine accumulating around its hind end.

Hair loss: Some rabbits may groom themselves or their companions excessively and cause patches of hair loss, a condition called “barbering”. Other causes of hair loss include the ringworm (a fungal infection and not a true “worm”), mites and fleas, irritation from urine scalding, endocrine problems, and other conditions.

Tumors: Unspayed female rabbits have a high incidence of uterine tumors and mammary tumors (breast tumors) that can dramatically shorten their life. These are some of the main reasons that we recommend spaying a rabbit when it is young.

Rabbits Resources: <https://azeah.com/rabbits/basic-care-rabbits>