

# RABBIT CARE GUIDELINES

Supplied by:  
House Rabbit Society: Wisconsin Chapter

Rabbits are wonderful house pets. They are highly social and friendly and live an average of 8 to 12 years. They require as much attention as a cat or dog. Because rabbits are bred for appearance and not personality, all breeds can make wonderful companions. Choose a rabbit for his/her individual personality. The information offered here is designed to help you and your rabbit enjoy a happy life together.

## HOUSING

### Environment

Rabbits are most active in the morning and evening and sleep during the day and night. This schedule coincides with that of most active families. Bunnies should be given only as much freedom as they can handle. Some bunnies can be outside their cages all day, but many need greater limits. Bunnies need 3-6 hours of exercise outside the cage each day. The remaining time is spent napping in a cage or attached playpen area. They are curious creatures and need social interaction. Place the cage where the family is active -- family room, kitchen. Rabbits enjoy listening to people and will often position themselves to watch you. If the rabbit's "house" is in a very active area, a small hiding area ("cave") should be added to allow a quiet, safe place to lounge when stressed or tired. (Cardboard boxes with a hole cut in it, paper bags, and upturned milk crates all work well.) Do not keep your rabbit out of doors. There are many predators that can directly or indirectly kill a rabbit. Many insects carry diseases that easily infect an outdoor rabbit. Outdoor rabbits also suffer from undetected illnesses and loneliness. If you allow your rabbit outside during the day, make sure he or she is confined in a sturdy wire enclosure, protected from the weather, and safe from predators of feet and wings.

### Temperature

Rabbits are susceptible to heat stroke and will succumb to temperatures in the 80's. Keep your bunny in 60-70 degree temperature. On hot days run the air conditioner or place a plastic soda container filled with frozen water in the cage with a fan. Exposure to freezing temperature may result in the loss of ears due to frost bite. Pet rabbits belong indoors with the family.

### Cage

A good *minimum* cage size is 24" wide x 30" long x 18" high...although, in this case, BIGGER is BETTER. Wire cages are fine --- 14gauge wire with 1" x 1/2" openings.

Wire cage bottoms should always have solid areas to protect the feet. Carpet squares or throw rugs are easily laundered and add a solid surface to wire cage bottoms. For rabbits that chew the rugs, try woven grass mat squares. Multiple level hutches with carpet covered ramps are the height of luxury.

Cages with solid plastic bottoms are slick and can lead to injury if the bunny slips. Solid walls on cages trap heat and reduce circulation and, therefore, should not be used. Metal urine guards help keep hay, poops, etc inside the cage. Place a large litter pan under the cage to catch debris will make clean up easier. Place a smaller litter pan in a corner of the cage (on top of the floor of the cage) for toilet use. Make the “inner” litter pan of sufficient size so that “bunny” may use it for a lounge as many rabbits will. Hang a filled “hayrack” on the outside of the cage over the litter pan so as to encourage litter pan usage and to allow “nibbling” throughout the day. Change toys frequently to avoid boredom.

### **Bunny-Proofing Your Home**

There are three goals involved with Bunny-Proofing your home:

- 1) Prevent destruction of your home
- 2) Protecting the rabbit from harm
- 3) Providing safe chewing alternatives

Electrical cords look like branches and must taste very good as rabbits love to chew them. Wrap them with spiral wrap plastic tubing or pre-slit tubing. (Electronic stores or hardware stores are good sources of these.) Loose wires can often be bundled and placed into hare PVC pipes. Most houseplants should be considered toxic and kept out of reach. Often rabbits will burrow under furniture and chew the underside. Block off the ability to gain access to the underside and/or cover the underside with hardware cloth. Woodwork (especially corners) seems to be irresistible chewing material. Double-sided sticky tape can help. Applying lemon oil with hot chili peppers soaked in it often dissuades chewing. Better yet is to not let bunny loose without strict supervision or having his play area fenced off away from any temptation. Never leave the bunny loose when you are asleep or away. Provide a variety of toys that are acceptable for chewing.

### **Diet**

Hay should be the main-stay of your rabbit’s diet and should be provided in unlimited quantities. Rabbits’ large intestines are designed to ferment the long strands of fiber in hay. The intestinal tract does not work properly without the stimulation of this fiber. Grass hays (*e.g.*: timothy, orchard, brome, oat, marsh) are preferred because they are lower in calcium and protein. Alfalfa and clover hays are too rich in protein and calcium for rabbits and can cause health problems if fed exclusively. Loose hay is better than pressed blocks or hay pellets because of the long fiber strands that are present in the loose hay. Hay provides entertainment as well as being an essential fiber source for proper digestion. Addition of hay to the litter pan can encourage proper toilet habits.

Pellets were designed to be used for food-producing and breeding rabbits and are too rich to feed exclusively to house rabbits. Ration pellets consumption and make sure that the one you choose is high in fiber (>18%), and low in protein (<14%), low in calcium (<0.9%), and low in fat (<2%). Some pellets are mixed with grains, dried corn, seeds, and dehydrated vegetables. These items are not well digested and can cause serious, life-threatening problems.

Vegetables are an important part of a healthy rabbit's diet. However, these should not be the major portion of his diet. Make sure the veggies are fresh and cleaned of any herbicide or fertilizer residue. Avoid vegetables that are rich in sugar and starches such as peas, potatoes, corn and even carrots). The bunny's digestive tract is not designed to handle much of these. Green leafy vegetables are the best (cilantro, parsley, carrot TOPS, beet TOPS, radish TOPS, alfalfa sprouts, kale, spinach, unsprayed and washed dandelion leaves, collard greens, Dark green lettuce leaves). Do NOT feed iceberg lettuce. It is low in fiber, contains primarily water and can cause diarrhea.

Water should be available in unlimited amounts at all times. Water flushes excess calcium from the kidneys and urinary bladder and is essential for the proper functioning of the gut and digestive bacteria. Water containers need to be washed daily to prevent the build-up of disease causing bacteria. Heavy crockery bowls work well and are easily cleaned and refilled on a daily basis. Water bottles can be used but they must be cleaned daily as well and need to be checked frequently (twice daily) to make sure there is no air lock that will prevent drinking.

Treats that are available commercially and advertized as "healthy" must be watched closely. Most of these are high in sugar and/or fat and are not healthy at all. The best treats are a thin apple slice or one of the vegetables that was mentioned above. Treats are a great way to bond with your bunny and to train her. However, treats should be used moderately and be as safe for bunny's digestive tract as possible.

Supplements, vitamins, salt block, digestive enzymes, laxatives, enhancers are NOT necessary if bunny is fed a balanced diet.

## **Litter-Training**

The litter box is your bunny's passport to freedom. It will get the rabbit out of the cage and into the house to interact with family.

Basics of litter box training include "thinking like a rabbit." By nature, rabbits are neat. They prefer to choose 1-2 spots to urinate. They like to defecate where they eat. Take advantage of these tendencies. Place hay in the litter box or suspend it above the pan in a hay rack. Place the litter pan in a corner as most bunnies will choose a corner for his toilet area. Place a litter box or two in favorite corners outside of the box for use when the rabbit is loose. Start "outside the cage training" with a small, more confined area to give bunny fewer places to have an accident. Sexual maturity brings with it the desire to mark territory. Spaying/neutering helps reduce these tendencies.

Litter comes in all shapes, sizes, textures, and compositions. As some rabbits eat their litter, it is important to choose the litter wisely. Most rabbits do not like the texture of clay or clumping cat litter and it is dangerous if ingested so we don't recommend its use. Good choices include compressed wood pellets, hardwood shavings (aspen or birch) and recycled newspaper products. Oat hulls or citrus peels are calorie rich and should be avoided if bunny likes to munch on the litter. Soft wood shavings (pine or cedar) give off fumes that can be detrimental to the bunny. Change litter daily for cleanliness purposes and to more closely monitor the rabbit's urine and stool for early signs of ill health. Search for a reason if your rabbit should "break" litter training. Often it is a sign of urinary tract infection, infrequent changing of litter, too much freedom, family stress, injury, arthritis, or boredom.

Cecal pellets are soft droppings that often resemble a cluster of grapes. These are not often seen as they tend to be passed at night and the rabbit will eat them soon after passing them. This is a perfectly normal product of bunny's digestive system and ingesting them helps to keep the proper balance of bacteria in the digestive tract.

### **Spay/Neuter**

Far from being cruel, this is one of the kindest things you can do for your rabbit. Sexual maturity brings with it hormonal compulsions to "mark territory," protect territory, or mate with inappropriate objects or even humans. Males may spray and mount constantly while females often become highly territorial and will attack hands that enter her cage. Two males or two females that have lived together happily before sexual maturity may become hostile to each other at puberty. Notice that we didn't say "choose" or "desire" to do these things. These urges are strictly chemically induced by the rabbit's system and can be reduced by the removal of the organs that are the cause. Female rabbits are highly susceptible to cancer of the uterus that can start as early as 1 year of age. Often by the time it is diagnosed, it has spread to breasts or lungs. Females should be spayed (ovariohysterectomy) around 6 months of age and males can be neutered (castrated) any time after 3 months of age.

For individuals who are proponents of "natural behavior," please consider this. It may be natural (or even desirable) for hostility to exist between members of the same sex in the wild. However, what purpose does it serve in your home? By the same token, social interaction between sexes is "natural" as well. However, to prevent the birth of multitudes of bunnies, the un-neutered sexes must be kept separate. The choice is not so much a choice between natural and unnatural but a choice between two sets of natural behaviors. Many neutered pairs will continue to engage in sexual activity. The extent of this behavior seems to depend on their individual personality traits before neutering. It is not uncommon for spirited, energetic rabbits to retain a certain amount of sexual interest.

### **Toys**

Rabbits are curious, inquisitive animals that require as much stimulation as a cat or dog. Toys are important to keep him occupied. Excellent toys include: a full hay rack mounted on the exterior cage wire, hard plastic baby or bird toys, wire balls or whiffle balls, toilet paper tubes (empty or stuffed with hay), cardboard boxes with a small “entry” hole, woven grass mats, a box or tub filled with wadded newspaper or hay for digging, concrete tube forms for a “tunnel,” or anything else your imagination may conceive. Be cautious of anything that may catch a head or foot, that may be toxic (lead paint), or could cause a digestive blockage if eaten (soft plastic or rubber toys).

### **Picking Up Bunny**

Most rabbits do not “enjoy” being picked up and cuddled. They prefer being petted while on the floor or on the couch next to you. Rabbits have surprisingly delicate bones and extremely strong rear legs. This combination makes it very easy for a rabbit to break its own back with one kick of its rear legs. Therefore, it is imperative to pick a rabbit up in the proper fashion. Scoop the bunny up under the chest while supporting his back feet with your other hand. Bring him to your body quickly in order to make him feel as secure as possible. Using a towel to make a “bunny burrito” is often helpful in making everyone more comfortable and safe. Never pick a rabbit up by the ears or by the scruff of the neck. Children should not be allowed to pick up a rabbit.

### **Companions**

Many rabbits appear to enjoy the companionship of another rabbit or even the company of another species of animal. However, they can be quite picky as to which creature they prefer to be with. Never take for granted that your rabbit will “automatically” like a new animal that is placed in his space. If you wish to give your rabbit a companion, spend time with them to see how they get along and do not leave them alone on initial introduction.