

# **CARE OF PET RABBITS**

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Rabbits make friendly house pets with their own distinctive personalities. They can be litter-trained and are generally quiet, clean animals. Small breeds may grow no larger than 2-3 pounds while the largest breeds can weigh over 16 pounds! The average life span for a pet rabbit is 7-9 years, but many can live longer.

## **ENVIRONMENT**

There are a number of ways to house pet rabbits. Any cage should be large enough to allow your rabbit to move around comfortably and also contain a hide box. The cage should be well ventilated in order to prevent the accumulation of urinary ammonia, which can increase the risk of respiratory problems. Flooring can be wire, plastic, or another material that is easy to clean; however if the flooring is wire, a solid area should be provided in order to reduce pressure on your rabbit's feet. You can use acrylic cutting boards, fabric without fraying threads, or other materials that can be easily cleaned. Hay or pelleted paper are optimal choices for bedding. Avoid wood chips which have irritating oils. Frequent cage cleaning and bedding replacement will help prevent health problems.

If allowed to roam the house, be sure there are no areas where your rabbit can escape or get caught. Rabbits like to chew on almost anything; be especially careful of electrical cords, strings, fabric, carpeting, and toxic materials. You should not leave your rabbit(s) with other animals if not supervised.

Most rabbits can be litter-trained fairly easily. Keep your rabbit in a small area initially – either a cage or part of a room – and put the litter box in a corner, preferably one already used. The sides of the box should be low to make it easily accessible. It might help to put some droppings or urine-soaked bedding in the box. Since rabbits often produce droppings while eating, you can place some hay in the box as well.

The best environmental temperature for rabbits is 60 to 70 degrees F. Rabbits are prone to overheating, especially when the temperature reaches upper 80's and beyond. An ice-filled plastic jug placed next to your bunny can provide a cool area when air-conditioning is not available. Rabbits exposed to excess humidity can develop respiratory problems.

Rabbits drink a lot of water, and they can become dehydrated if it is not available. You can provide water in either a bottle or a bowl. If using a bottle, periodically check the nozzle and ball valve to make sure the water is flowing properly.

Outdoor caging can be acceptable if sheltered from the wind, rain, and excessive sun. Protection from predators, insects, pesticides, and raccoon feces is crucial. In the winter, drinking water can freeze rapidly and should be changed frequently.

## DIET

Fiber is a very important part of your rabbit's diet. Most rabbit pellets do not contain adequate amounts of fiber and have high concentrations of carbohydrates and calcium. Unlimited amounts of pellets can lead to obesity, kidney or bladder disease, diarrhea, and other digestive tract problems. Feeding excess pellets is one of the major causes of health problems in rabbits.

If pellets are offered, they should have a fiber concentration of 18% or greater. Up to eight months of age, rabbits can be offered pellets free choice. After that time, pellets should be limited to 1-1/2 tablespoons per 2 pounds of body weight daily for non-breeding, non-nursing rabbits. You should not refill the bowl after the daily pellet ration is eaten. Contact your veterinarian for alterations to this diet if you intend to breed your rabbit.

Pellets are usually not required for adequate nutrition. The following diet will provide all the nutrients needed for most rabbits (exceptions are pregnant or nursing females). Timothy, or other grass hays, should be offered free choice at all times. The fiber in hay is important for your rabbit's digestion and will help prevent hairballs. Alfalfa hay is high in calcium and protein and while suitable for rabbits up to 8 months of age, large amounts can cause health problems in older rabbits. Horse barns and local feed stores are good sources for hay. If you have difficulty finding timothy hay, alfalfa is acceptable for short times. The important thing is to always have hay available for your bunny. Store the hay in a cool, dry place with adequate circulation; do not close it tightly in a plastic bag. Do not feed hay that is moist or has a musty smell.

Fresh foods should be fed daily. Rabbits in the wild eat tough fibrous plants which are important for intestinal motility. You will see how much your rabbit loves these foods! Start by adding veggies one at a time every 3 to 5 days. If diarrhea or soft stools are produced for 72 hours or more after the addition of any item, omit that item from the diet. Once your rabbit is accustomed to these foods, offer at least 3 different items daily and vary the choices. At least one heaping cup of veggies per 5 pounds body weight should be fed daily, and your rabbit can be fed more if he is eating hay as well.

**Recommended foods:** basil, beet greens\*, bok choy, broccoli (including the leaves), Brussel sprouts, cabbage\*, carrots, carrot tops, clover, collard greens\*, dandelion greens and flowers (no pesticides)\*, endive, escarole, green pepper, kale\*, mustard greens\*, parsley\*, pea pods (flat edible type, not the peas), peppermint leaves, radicchio, raspberry leaves, romaine lettuce (no iceberg or light leaf lettuce), spinach\*, swiss chard, watercress\*

**Treat foods:** (no more than one tablespoon of combined fruits per 4 pounds of body weight daily): apple, pear, blueberries, cactus fruit, mango, melon, papaya\*, pear, persimmon, pineapple, strawberries, and tomato. Dried fruits can be used as well.

\*Foods with an asterisk are high in calcium and may need to be avoided if your rabbit has too much calcium in the urine.

**Foods to avoid:** cereals, chocolate, grains (bread, corn, oatmeal), nuts, salty or sugary snacks.

Do not supplement your rabbit's diet with multi-vitamins. This diet is complete, and use of additional vitamins may lead to over dosage and health problems. Your rabbit produces his own "vitamin pellets" in the form of soft stools, called cecotropes, which are products of bacterial populations in the cecum. These are produced about 4 to 6 hours after ingesting food, and your rabbit eats them as they exit the anus. This may seem strange to us, but it is an efficient way for your rabbit to produce everything he needs from his diet! These stools may occasionally drop in the cage. They are soft and have an odor, but this is not diarrhea.

## HANDLING

The most important thing to remember when picking up your rabbit is to support the hind end to prevent kicking and serious spinal injury. A safe method for picking up your bunny is to support him under the chest with one hand while lifting the rear with the other hand.

## MEDICAL PROBLEMS

Reproductive: Female rabbits have a high rate of uterine cancer and other uterine diseases which can be fatal. Having your female rabbit spayed between the ages of 6 months and two years of age can prevent these problems. Male rabbits can become very aggressive and begin spraying urine when they reach sexual maturity (6 to 10 months). Castrating your rabbit should eliminate these problems. This can be done any time after 5 months of age.

Dental: Your rabbit's teeth grow continuously throughout life. Any of these teeth can become overgrown and cause oral ulcers or difficulty in eating. Signs of overgrowth include an inability to grasp or chew food, excess salivation, pawing at the mouth, mouth odor, or a loss of appetite. Overgrown teeth should be trimmed by a veterinarian used to working with rabbits.

Loss of appetite: Anorexia can have a number of causes – often a diet low in fiber is to blame. This leads to slow intestinal motility and a build-up of hair and food in the stomach. Many infections, liver or urinary tract problems, or ingestion of toxic materials can cause anorexia. Rabbits can develop potentially irreversible liver disease after even short periods of anorexia, so contact your veterinarian as soon as possible if your bunny stops eating.

Diarrhea: True diarrhea, which is liquid stool, is uncommon in rabbits and is a very serious condition that must be dealt with immediately. Soft stools may be normal (cecotropes described above) or may be a result of insufficient fiber in the diet. Contact your veterinarian if your rabbit is continually passing soft stool.

Pasteurellosis or other bacterial infections: Many rabbits carry a bacteria, *Pasteurella multocida*, without any obvious health problems. Stress can predispose your rabbit to bacterial growth which can cause problems in any area of the body. If you notice discharge around the

nose, eyes, or anus; swellings in any part of the body; or if your rabbit exhibits diarrhea, head tilt, loss of balance, labored breathing or depression, contact your veterinarian. Do not attempt to administer antibiotics on your own, because certain antibiotics can be fatal to your rabbit.

Rabbits do not have to be vaccinated against any diseases.

A very good layperson's periodical for rabbit owners is the House Rabbit Journal. You can subscribe by contacting the House Rabbit Society at <http://www.rabbit.org/>

Good luck with your bunny!