

Litter Box Training Your Bunny

By nature, rabbits choose one or a few places (usually corners) to deposit their urine and most of their pellets. Urine-training involves little more than putting a litterbox 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 litterbox.

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!

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).

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 that use them. CatWorks litter has been linked to zinc poisoning. Another approach is to place a handful of hay in each box, or to simply use hay as litter. Obviously, you need to change the hay fairly frequently (daily), since your rabbit will be eating it.

Pros and cons of the various types of litter include:

- clay litter is dusty--if your bunny is a digger, the dust can make her vulnerable to pneumonia
- the deodorant crystals in some clay litters are toxic
- clumping litters will clump inside the rabbit's digestive and respiratory tracts (the latter if they manage to make enough dust to breathe) causing serious problems and often leading to death
- pine and cedar shavings emit gases that cause liver damage when breathed by the bunny
- corn cob litter isn't absorbent and doesn't control odor, and has the the risk of being eaten and casing a lethal blockage.
- oat- and alfalfa-based litters (available from Purina, Manna-Pro, and King-Soopers groceries (not sure what the geographical range of this chain is)) have excellent odor controlling qualities, but if a rabbit eats too much, they expand and cause bloating; these, too, can be added, with the bunny's waste, to compost
- newspapers are absorbent, but don't control odor
- citrus-based litters work well, offer no dangers, and can be composted, but may be hard to get and expensive in some areas of the country/world
- some people have reported success with peat moss which can also be composted
- Many people have great success with litter made from paper pulp or recycled paper products. These litters are very good at absorbing and cutting down on odors. A litter called CAREfresh is available. You can find out about local places that carry Carefresh by emailing absorbs@absorption-corp.com or

by calling 1-800-242-2287. A similar litter in a pelleted form is called Cellu-Dri 1-800-382-5001. These litters are harmless if ingested.

- Compressed sawdust pellets: are inexpensive, highly absorbent litters used in many foster homes. They are made from softwood or hardwood sawdust, but they are not toxic because the phenolic compounds are removed during their manufacture. Their wood composition helps control bacterial growth and odors. Wood stove fuel pellets and Feline Pine are two examples of this product.
- Litters made from Aspen bark are safe and good at absorbing odors. One brand is called GentleTouch 1-800-545-9853.

Cleaning and Disposal.

Clean litterboxes 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 pellets can be directly applied to plants as fertilizer.

What kinds of cages work best?

Use a cage large enough to contain a small litterbox (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 litterbox 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 too small for a litter box?

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 Netherland Dwarf.

Pellets vs. Urine.

All rabbits will drop pellets 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 pellets in the cage is to give him ownership of his cage--respect the cage as HIS:

- 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 they 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.
- 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. (Smart rabbits--I wouldn't object if someone were cleaning my house, either....)

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 litterbox, or into one of the boxes in her room. Be careful, however. You don't want to make the cage or the litterbox 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 litterboxes, 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 litterboxes?

The more, the merrier, especially if your rabbit is a bit of a slow learner, or is especially obstinate about where she wants her box(es) to go. As her habits improve, you can decrease the number of litterboxes.

Litter Box Training Problems

Kicking litter out of the box

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

Urinating over the edge of the litterbox

A second problem is that rabbits often back up so far in the litterbox that the urine goes over the edge. Again, a covered litterbox 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 litterbox, 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?

1. 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.)
2. 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.)

Why does my rabbit urinate or leave pellets right beside the litterbox?

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

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

Build Your Own Rabbit Condo

Check out these web-sites to build your own rabbit condo for much less:

- <http://breyfamily.net/bunnycage.html>
- <http://www.michiganrabbitrescue.org/condo.htm>