



Rabbit Care

From www.aspca.org

Housing and Exercise

Where's the only place for your rabbit's cage? INDOORS! Although an outdoor hutch has been the traditional housing for a rabbit, today we know better. A backyard hutch forces these social critters to live in unnatural isolation. Furthermore, rabbits can die of heart attacks from the very approach of a predator or vandal. Keep your bunny safe indoors, where he can have plenty of interaction with family members.

They may be small, but rabbits require a lot of room for housing and exercise. They have powerful hind legs designed for running and jumping. Get your pet a cage that allows him to move freely. The minimum recommended cage space for a single rabbit of a small- to medium-sized breed is four feet wide, two feet deep and two feet tall. Although wire-bottom cages are common, they can ulcerate a rabbit's feet. If you have a wire cage, cover the bottom with a piece of wood or corrugated cardboard. Better yet, buy a cage with a solid bottom. Please put down plenty of straw, hay or aspen shavings so your pet can make a cozy nest.

Please note, rabbits should not be housed with other rabbits unless all are spayed and neutered. Introductions are often difficult and injuries can result, so please introduce them in neutral territory, under careful supervision.

Did you know that many rabbits have been surrendered to shelters because of destructive behavior? In most cases, their owners failed to provide them with appropriate toys to fulfill their natural urges to dig and chew. Safe chew toys include cardboard boxes, an old telephone directory (that's no joke!) and commercially made chew sticks. Your bun will greatly appreciate his own digging box, such as a cardboard box filled halfway with soil or shredded paper.

Your rabbit needs a safe exercise area with ample room to run and jump, either indoors or out. Any outdoor area should be fully enclosed by a fence. Never leave a rabbit unsupervised outdoors—even for a few minutes! Cats, dogs and even predatory birds can easily get around fencing material. Also, rabbits can dig under fences and get lost. You can rabbit-proof an indoor area by covering all electrical wires and anything else your pet is likely to chew. Recommended exercise time for pet rabbits is several hours per day.

Diet

The most important component of your rabbit's diet is grass hay, such as timothy or brome. This is crucial for keeping his intestinal tract healthy. Unlimited hay should be available at all times.

You'll also need to feed your bunny good-quality rabbit pellets. Opt for a formula with at least 15 to 19 percent protein and 18 percent fiber. Until your pet is fully grown (around six months), he can have all the pellets he wants. After that, pellets should be limited to 1/8 to 1/4 cup per day per five pounds of bunny body weight. Pellets should be fresh and plain, without seeds, nuts or colored tidbits.

Fresh leafy greens make up a third component of your pet's diet. He'll enjoy dark leaf lettuces, collard greens, turnip greens and carrot tops. We recommend a minimum of two cups per six pounds of rabbit.

Clean, fresh water, dispensed in a bottle or sturdy bowl, should be available at all times.

Litter Training

Rabbits are very clean by nature, and will do their best to keep their living quarters clean. Most rabbits will choose one corner of the cage as a bathroom. As soon as your rabbit's choice is clear, put a newspaper-lined litter box in that corner. Fill it with timothy hay (or any other grass hay except alfalfa) or pelleted-newspaper litter. If the litter box is changed daily, your rabbit's home will stay fresh and odor-free. Don't use pine or cedar shavings! The fumes may affect your rabbit's liver enzymes, which can cause problems if

the animal needs anesthesia for surgery. Avoid using clay cat litters (both clumping and non-clumping), as these may result in respiratory or gastrointestinal problems.

Handling and General Care

Rabbits can be messy, so you'll need to clean your pet's cage once or twice weekly. Put your rabbit in a safe room or alternate cage as you sweep out the cage and scrub the floor with warm, soapy water.

Pick up your rabbit by supporting his forequarters with one hand and his hindquarters with the other—failure to do so can result in spinal injuries to the rabbit. Never pick up a rabbit by his ears; this can cause very serious injury.

Brush your rabbit regularly with a soft brush to remove excess hair and keep his coat in good condition. Brush from the back of the head down to the tail. Ask your veterinarian how to clip your pet's nails.

Health and Veterinary Care

Rabbits should be spayed or neutered by a veterinarian experienced with rabbit surgeries. Spaying or neutering prevents unwanted litters, spraying in males and uterine cancer in females. To find a qualified rabbit veterinarian, please visit the [House Rabbit Society](http://www.rabbit.org) (www.rabbit.org).

You should bring your pet to the vet for a check-up once a year. If your rabbit stops eating or moving his bowels for 12 hours or longer or has watery diarrhea, don't wait--seek expert veterinary care immediately. Other signs of illness include runny nose and eyes, dark red urine, lethargy, fur loss and red, swollen skin.

Written for the ASPCA by Mary E. Cotter, Ed.D., licensed educator, House Rabbit Society; additional information provided by the ASPCA

Rabbit Supply Checklist

- Cage, preferably solid-bottom
- Carrier
- Good-quality rabbit pellets
- Litter box with hay or pelleted bedding
- Grass hay and hay rack
- Sturdy ceramic or metal food bowl
- Ceramic water bowl or water bottle that attaches to cage
- Grooming brush
- Digging box and safe chew toys

More Rabbit Care Tips:

- He's doing what?! Do not be alarmed if you see your rabbit eating his feces. This may seem strange, but it is perfectly normal and perfectly healthy. The small, soft pellets are an extra source of nutrients and aid in digestion.

- When they sense danger or don't feel secure, rabbits thump their back legs on the ground. So that's how Thumper got his name?