

Rabbits

HOME SWEET HOME

Like all companion animals, rabbits should be kept inside with the family. Since rabbits are particularly susceptible to heat, cold, and dampness, they need to live in a controlled climate. Although you'll want to give your rabbit supervised run of the house, it will need a place of its own for security and quiet time.

Your rabbit's cage should be spacious enough to give room to exercise and stretch out. For a six-pound rabbit, the cage should be at least 48 inches long by 30 inches wide by 18 inches high. For each additional rabbit increase the floor area by four to six square feet. A cage with a solid floor is best for your rabbits. However if you go with a cage that has a raised mesh floor and removable tray, which is easiest to keep clean, be sure to provide a thin board so your rabbit can get off the wire mesh and put down plenty of bedding. **DO NOT** use pine or cedar shavings however for these materials can be harmful to your rabbit's health. A cardboard or wooden "house" for privacy is also necessary.

Rabbits are very clean animals and like their environments to be clean too. You should clean your rabbit's cage two to three times a week. Rabbits will tend to use just one corner of their cage for their bathroom, so you'll want to put a litter box in a corner of the cage in order to facilitate litter box training. Line the boxes with newspaper or use pelleted-newspaper litter and spot clean the litter box daily. Never use clay cat litter for that can result in respiratory or gastrointestinal problems. You should also put a litter box outside of your rabbit's cage, for it to use when it has free run of the house.

Remember that rabbits love to chew, so you'll need to keep electrical cords out of reach or covered with vinyl tubing to prevent electrocution. You'll also want to keep your plants out of your rabbit's reach, particularly if the plants are poisonous to animals.

CHOW TIME

Rabbit pellets made from alfalfa, timothy, and oats are available at pet supply and feed stores. Check the expiration date to make sure the food is fresh. Use a heavy crockery bowl that can't be tipped over and is easy to clean. A daily portion of hay is a must, too, in order to keep your rabbit's digestive tract healthy. Be sure to place it in a hayrack so it doesn't become contaminated with feces and urine. Keep fresh water available in a suspended "licker" water bottle at all times.

When your rabbit is over 12 weeks old you can supplement their food with fresh foods like carrots, any fresh fruit, broccoli, zucchini, cucumbers, sprouts, rolled oats, and leafy greens. Introduce new foods one at a time and in small amounts to reduce the risk of diarrhea.

Finally, there has been some debate over whether a salt lick is necessary for rabbits or not. We recommend talking to your veterinarian. If you do decide to purchase one, hang it from the side of the cage to prevent contamination.

HEALTH MATTERS

A well-cared-for rabbit can live 12 to 15 years. They're sexually mature at ten to twelve weeks and females can become pregnant at any time because they have no heat cycle. Spaying and neutering not only helps reduce pet overpopulation, but also improves litter box habits, minimizes excessive chewing, decreases territorial aggression, and prevents uterine cancer in females.

Rabbits have sensitive respiratory and digestive systems. Because they can't vomit and are susceptible to total blockage, it's essential that they receive a proper diet and are groomed regularly to prevent hairballs. Hay, exercise, and hairball medicine like Laxatone and Petromalt are good preventatives.

Because your rabbit's teeth grow continuously, it's essential that you provide it with hard things to gnaw on to prevent its teeth from growing too long. Untreated hard wood, untreated wicker and hard bread crusts are some suggested items. It's also possible for your rabbit's nails to overgrow, causing discomfort and increasing your risk of being scratched. Ask your veterinarian to show you how to trim your rabbit's nails.

HANDLING WITH CARE

Always let your rabbit know you're there by placing your fist on the ground and allowing it to sniff the back of your hand. To pick up your rabbit, gently slide your hand underneath its body behind its front legs, and with your other support its back end, scooping it up in one motion. Quickly bring it close to your body for added support. Rabbits will kick and squirm if they feel insecure, and can break their backs if handled incorrectly. Rabbits aren't very agile, so you'll need to hold your rabbit firmly to prevent it from falling or jumping out of your arms.

If you have children, be sure to supervise them whenever they handle the rabbit. Never allow them to pick the rabbit up by its ears or let its body hang. A rabbit's natural instinct is to be close to the ground, so it's best to have the children sit on the floor until your rabbit becomes more comfortable being handled.

BEHAVIOR BITS

Rabbits are social creatures, and shouldn't be left alone for long periods of time. They're curious, playful, and enjoy having toys to entertain themselves. Some inexpensive suggestions are cardboard tubes from toilet paper rolls, wire cat balls, plastic baby keys, and Mason jar rings. If you'd like to get a friend for your rabbit, the best pairs are two females that were raised together or a female and neutered male. Males generally don't get along unless they're neutered.

Rabbits can be trained to do tricks, come when called, or agility through clicker training.

Rabbits eat their feces, so don't be alarmed if you find your rabbit doing this. It is a natural behavior known as Coprophagy and is important for adequate nutritional intake.

RESOURCES

House Rabbit Society. 1524 Benton St. Alameda, CA; 510-521-4631; <http://www.rabbit.org/>.

Bunny Bliss. P.O. Box 4156. Oceanside, CA 92055; 619-439-3283.

Harriman, Marinell. House Rabbit Handbook. Drollery Press.

Fritzsche, Helga. Rabbits: A Complete Pet Owner's Manual. Barron Book Series. New York.

Wimner, Paul. A Beginner's Guide to Rabbits. T.F.H. Publications. annual. Barron Book Series. New York