

RABBIT CARE



DOMESTIC RABBITS ARE DELIGHTFUL companion animals. They are inquisitive, intelligent, sociable, affectionate and clean! Well-cared-for indoor rabbits can live for 7 to 11 years.

Rabbits and Children

Children are naturally energetic and loving. But “loving” to a small child can mean holding, cuddling or carrying an animal - precisely the things that frighten most rabbits. Rabbits can’t cry out when distressed. Instead, they may scratch or bite to protect themselves. Because of this, thousands are abandoned or surrendered to animal shelters every year. Rabbits may also suffer broken legs or backs after being dropped accidentally by children. While rabbits are appropriate family companions, *an adult should be the primary caretaker and supervise all interactions with children.*

Housing and Exercise

Many people think an outdoor hutch is the best way to keep a domestic rabbit. Rabbits, however, are highly social animals and a backyard hutch forces them to live in unnatural isolation. Furthermore, rabbits can die of heart attacks from the very approach of a predator or vandal. Finally, domestic rabbits do not do well in the hot Arizona weather. Domestic rabbits are happiest indoors in a safe, climate-controlled habitat where they have plenty of interaction with family members.

Another common misconception is that rabbits don’t require a lot of space or play time. In fact, rabbits have powerful hind legs designed for running and jumping. They need plenty of out-of-cage exercise time, as well as a habitat that allows them to move freely. The minimum recommended habitat space for a single rabbit is 2’ x 2’ x 4’. Although wire-bottom habitats are common, they can injure or be uncomfortable for a rabbit’s delicate feet. If you already have a wire habitat, cover the bottom with a piece of wood, corrugated cardboard, sea grass mat, or a ceramic tile. Ultimately, consider buying a habitat with a solid floor.

To keep her happy and healthy, your rabbit will need several hours of ‘free run time’ outside of her habitat. Again, it is best to keep her indoors at all times. If she must be outside during playtime, make sure the area is fully enclosed by a fence and *never leave her unsupervised* - even for a few minutes! Cats, dogs, coyotes and even predatory birds can easily get around fencing material. Also, rabbits can dig under fences and escape.

Bunnies are also VERY smart and playful animals. Therefore, you’ll need to provide your bunny with several different kinds of toys to keep her from getting bored. Most rabbits enjoy noise-making toys, such as balls with bells in them, for tossing and nudging. Mobiles and dangling bird toys are also amusing, and most rabbits will enjoy a simple cardboard box or tube for chewing on and hiding in. Even a towel can provide hours of scooting and bunching enjoyment for a rabbit. Rabbits love levels, too, so consider adding a *short* kitty tower to your bunny’s play area.

Due to their notorious breeding capabilities, rabbits should not be housed with other rabbits unless they are spayed or neutered. Spayed and neutered or same-gender rabbits should be introduced in neutral territory under careful supervision. Rabbits can be very territorial and may fight in an attempt to defend their home.

Diet

The most important component of your rabbit's diet is grass hay, such as Timothy or Brome, which keeps the intestinal tract healthy (see section on *Timothy Hay* for more on this). In addition to hay, you'll also need to provide commercial rabbit pellets *and* fresh, raw vegetables and fruit. Most bunnies enjoy: beets, broccoli, carrots, celery, green peppers, kale, parsley, radishes, romaine lettuce, spinach, apples, peaches and melons. Until they are fully grown (around 6 months), rabbits can have all the pellets they want. After that, assuming your rabbit is also eating hay and vegetables, pellets should be limited to no more than ¼ cup per 5 pounds of body weight. Look for fresh and plain pellets, without seeds, nuts or colored tidbits. And of course, fresh water, in a bottle or ceramic or stainless steel bowl, must *always* be available.

Handling & Grooming

Most rabbits don't like to be picked up - they prefer that you come down to their level. They may kick and struggle to get free which can severely injure their fragile backs. To pick up a rabbit *properly*, begin by supporting the front legs with one hand and the hind legs with the other. *Never pick up a rabbit by the ears as this can cause serious injuries.*

You will need to brush your rabbit regularly with a soft brush to remove excess hair and keep her coat in good condition. This can be easy as most bunnies love to have their nose and ears stroked. Her nails will also need to be trimmed regularly, and many veterinarians are happy to assist.

Rabbits' teeth grow constantly, so it is important for you to give your rabbit a piece of wood that she can gnaw on to wear her teeth down. It's best to provide a tree branch that has not been treated with pesticides or any other chemicals, but any piece of unpainted, untreated wood will do. Pet supply stores sell a variety of safe "chew sticks."

Veterinary Care

Any sick or injured rabbit should see a veterinarian as soon as possible. If your rabbit stops eating or moving her bowels for 12 hours or longer or has watery diarrhea, seek expert veterinary care immediately. Like all companion animals, your rabbit should be examined annually by your veterinarian.

Timothy Hay: A Must!

Timothy Hay, or any other grass hay except alfalfa, is absolutely necessary to any rabbit's diet and should be made available in unlimited quantities at all times! Rabbits, like cats, are very conscientious groomers and have a tendency to get hairballs. However, unlike cats, rabbits lack the ability to vomit, which means that hairballs can become lodged in their intestines. This can be fatal! Because Timothy hay works to promote a healthy digestive system, it will help bunny break down and pass those pesky hairballs. For house rabbits, Timothy hay can also be used both as litter and as a diversion for relentless diggers. Simply fill a large tub with plenty of hay, place it in a convenient location and let your bunny munch on it, dig through it and eliminate in it. Don't worry about contamination - your bunny knows not to eat the hay from the corner in which she eliminates!

Litter Training

Most rabbits choose one corner of the habitat as their "bathroom." As soon as your rabbit's choice is clear, put a newspaper-lined litter box in that corner and fill it with Timothy hay (or any other grass hay - not alfalfa). Pelleted newspaper litters are also acceptable; however, avoid pine or cedar shavings and clay cat litters (both clumping and non-clumping) as these may result in respiratory or gastrointestinal problems. Change the litter box daily and your rabbit's home will stay fresh and odor-free!

Fun Facts

Rabbits are NOT rodents - they are *lagomorphs*.

Rabbits are NOT nocturnal. They are *crepuscular*, which means they are most active at dawn and dusk.

The only two animals that can see behind them without turning their heads are the rabbit and the parrot.

There are MANY different breeds of rabbit: the smallest breed is the Netherland Dwarf who, at maturity, weighs only 2 pounds. In stark contrast is the Flemish Giant who can weigh up to 20 pounds!