



# Introduction to Rabbit Care

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Rabbits are wonderful pets! They are easy to litter box train and will enjoy being out of their enclosures to spend quality time with you. This handout will help you provide the best care for your rabbit.

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## Handling

Proper handling of your rabbit is essential. Always support the hind end of your rabbit when you pick them up. Never pick up a rabbit by the legs or ears. Rabbits can seriously injure their backs when picked up without supporting their hind end!

Handle your rabbit often when she is young to increase her acceptance of affection when she is older. I do not recommend letting children under the age of 12 handle rabbits without supervision. The best way for young children to handle rabbits is to sit on the floor and let the rabbit lay in the lap of the child with legs crossed.

## Housing

Rabbits are very curious critters that love to explore by chewing on objects in the environment. Many rabbits have been injured by chewing on electrical wires or other dangerous items. Always keep your rabbit caged when you are not there to supervise her activity.

Puppy exercise pens that are at least 30" high are a popular choice for a rabbit enclosure. You can line the inside of the pen with soft bedding such as sheets and fleece blankets.

If you have hardwood or carpeted floors, consider lining the enclosure with a protective material, such as sheet vinyl.



If you use a commercial rabbit cage with a wire bottom, be sure to provide a solid surface for your bunny to sit or lie on if she chooses. A rabbit forced to sit on wire can develop a condition called "sore hocks", which is a serious skin condition if left untreated.

Always keep your rabbit's cage and bedding as clean as possible. Rabbits who come into contact with their urine frequently can develop sore hocks. This problem is easier to prevent than it is to treat (not to mention very uncomfortable for your bunny)!

You can line your rabbit's cage with shredded paper or a paper-based bedding/litter available at most pet stores. Eco-bedding brand (which looks like crinkled brown paper) and Carefresh (recycled paper) are excellent choices.

NOTE: Do not use wood shavings of any kind, as these can cause respiratory issues.

## Litterbox Training

Rabbits can be litterbox trained! Begin with the rabbit and the box in a small area. Place the box in a location where your bunny normally defecates. Once she learns to use the box regularly, you can gradually increase the area she is allowed to explore. If she has access to more than one room, place a box in each room. Both male and female rabbits can be trained to use a litterbox. In general, rabbits prefer a shallow, rectangular litterbox. Do not use cat litter for rabbits. Use shavings such as the bedding you use for the enclosure, or a baked paper pellet product such as Yesterday's News.

## Diet

Fresh water should always be available. A water bottle or water bowl raised off the cage floor is more sanitary than a bowl that sits on the floor.

An unlimited amount of fresh, clean, and dry (not moldy) timothy hay should always be available. Alfalfa hay is not recommended for rabbits over four months of age. It is too high in calcium and fat for teenage and adult rabbits. We recommend the products sold by Oxbow Animal Health: [oxbowanimalhealth.com](http://oxbowanimalhealth.com). Choose either timothy hay or orchard grass for every day. Other hay varieties can be given in small amounts as occasional treats. We offer a selection of Oxbow Animal Health products in our hospitals for your convenience.

In the past, rabbits were fed unlimited amounts of a pellet-based diet. Research and experience indicate that this is not necessary and can even be harmful. Pelleted diets have been implicated in the development of soft, pasty stools, hairballs, obesity and its related diseases, and urinary issues. Additionally, rabbits that eat only pellets without fresh hay to chew can develop painful, overgrown teeth.

Limit your rabbit's intake of pellets to only 1/8 cup of timothy hay-based product per 5 pounds of body weight per day. Avoid pellet mixes containing pretty seeds and colored pellets, as these are like candy and can cause stomach issues. For optimum nutrition, feed only timothy pellets, like those offered by Oxbow Animal Health.

Provide fresh greens on a daily basis. Your rabbit should receive one heaping cup per 5 pounds of body weight, with a mixture of at least three greens: red leaf lettuce, green leaf lettuce, escarole, carrot tops, parsley, romaine lettuce, or fresh-picked non-chemically treated grass. Do not give your rabbit the same greens each week, as variety will ensure a more balanced diet. Spinach, kale, and dandelion greens may also be fed on occasion, but sparingly.



Unlimited

Moderate Quantity

Small Quantity

## Spay and Neuter

Spaying (removal of the ovaries and uterus) and neutering (removal of testicles) are very important for your pet rabbits. Spaying your female rabbit prevents uterine cancer while neutering your male prevents testicular cancer. Both of these cancers are frequently seen in middle-aged to older, intact rabbits. Spayed or neutered rabbits also tend to be better pets due to fewer aggressive and sexual behaviors.

## Teeth

Rabbits are prone to multiple dental problems. One important way to avoid this is to provide plenty of fresh timothy or orchard grass hay for your bunny to chew daily. Eating hay helps to wear down the teeth naturally, avoiding painful overgrowth of the molars.

You should regularly check your rabbit's front teeth, called incisors, for overgrowth. Some rabbits have front teeth which do not align properly, causing them to grow abnormally long. If you notice any unusual growth, please call and schedule an appointment.

If your bunny stops eating, call us right away. It's a serious problem when a rabbit stops eating!

## Nail Trims

When clipping nails, it is helpful to wrap your rabbit in a towel (called a bunny burrito). The towel needs to be wrapped snugly. Each foot can be individually pulled out of the towel for clipping. A member of our staff can show you how to clip your rabbit's nails. We recommend that you do not attempt to clip your rabbit's nails until we have shown you the proper technique. We can also perform nail trims for you if you prefer.

## Signs of Disease

NOTE: If your bunny ever stops eating or producing normal fecal balls, call us right away. This can be a serious condition called ileus, or G.I. stasis. A rabbit that is not eating or defecating normally can become seriously ill very quickly. There is no time to lose with these symptoms. If your rabbit does not eat on its regular schedule – – CALL US! Common illnesses include:

- **Skin disease** will usually begin with hair loss, redness, or itchiness.
- **Respiratory disease** usually presents as sneezing or discharge from the eyes or nose.
- **Dental disease** usually involves loss of appetite, grinding of teeth, or drooling.
- **Digestive diseases** usually begin as loss of appetite or soft stools. Watery diarrhea is a serious symptom and must be treated right away.
- **Ear problems** usually result in scratching or shaking of the ears.
- **Lameness** or dragging legs may be a sign of sprains, bruises, fractures, or spinal problems.
- **Head tilt** may be a sign of ear infection, parasitic infection, or neurological issues.
- Excessively yellow fur, fur loss, skin inflammation, and/or pus may indicate **urine scaled**. This condition is caused by excessive exposure to soiled areas in the enclosure.
- Exposed, red, dry skin on the feet may indicate **sore hocks**.

All of these diseases are easier to treat if we can address them early on. Don't delay if your bunny is sick. If you are unsure, please call us and describe the symptoms you are noticing.

## Preventive Care

We highly recommend that you bring your rabbit in for a yearly check-up. Rabbits are very good at hiding signs of disease until it is too late. We may be able to catch a problem early on when it is still treatable.

At your rabbit's yearly exam, we will record her weight, examine her teeth, eyes, and ears; listen to her heart and lungs, feel her belly, and evaluate her overall general condition. These exams can bring to light problems before they become advanced. We will also discuss with you any new advances in rabbit care.