

Caring for Rabbits

- Rabbits require daily interaction with, and affection from, their owners.
- If a rabbit's weight is not supported during handling, its back can be injured.
- Rabbits need to chew to maintain their physical and psychological health.
- Commercially available pelleted feeds can provide good nutrition at a reasonable cost but often do not have an adequate fiber content.
- Rabbits produce two types of droppings. One is firm; the other is soft. Rabbits eat the soft type of feces, which supplies protein, vitamins, and other nutrients.
- Rabbits that are kept outdoors in temperature extremes must have a shelter that is heated in winter and cooled in summer.
- Frequent removal of waste is important for preventing respiratory disease in rabbits.
- When your rabbit is outside the cage, he or she must be supervised and/or contained in a safe play area.
- Spayed and neutered rabbits have fewer health problems (related to reproduction) and are better adjusted, less territorial, and easier to litter train than intact rabbits.

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A clean, roomy cage and a nutritious diet are important to keeping your rabbit healthy and happy. Also important is the time you spend interacting with your rabbit: a bored and lonely rabbit can become destructive and even aggressive. Providing the interesting surroundings and companionship that your rabbit needs can help him or her be well adjusted and affectionate.

Handling

To pick up and hold your rabbit, grasp the loose skin over the shoulders with one hand while supporting the rump (and the rabbit's weight) with the other hand. If a rabbit's weight is not supported during handling, its back can be injured. Because rabbits can be fragile, they may not be suitable pets for young children.

Chewing

Rabbits need to chew to maintain their physical and psychological health. Provide your rabbit with a variety of chewable items, such as commercial chew toys that have been developed for rabbits. This can help prevent boredom and wear down the teeth, which constantly grow throughout life.

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Diet

Rabbits are plant eaters (herbivores). Here are some guidelines for your rabbit's daily menu:

- Feed unlimited quantities of fresh, green, dust-free, and mold-free timothy hay, brome, or other grass hay. This is crucial for keeping your rabbit's intestinal tract healthy. Alfalfa can be fed to rabbit kits and, in restricted amounts, to full-grown rabbits.
- Feed high-quality food pellets formulated for rabbits. The pellets should have at least 15% to 19% protein and 18% fiber and should be fresh and plain, without seeds, nuts, or colored tidbits. Until your rabbit is full grown (around 6 months of age), he or she can have unlimited pellets. After that, pellets should be limited to 1/8 to 1/4 cup per day per 5 pounds of body weight. Pelleted feeds should be stored in an airtight container and kept cool and dry to prevent destruction of vitamins.
- Feed dark-green leafy vegetables (such as romaine lettuce, spinach, collard greens, parsley, cilantro, basil, mustard greens), which provide the fiber necessary to keep your rabbit's gastrointestinal system working properly. A minimum of 2 cups per 6 pounds of body weight is recommended. The following should be fed in restricted

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amounts: turnip greens, broccoli leaves, spinach, kale, and collard greens.

- Feed small amounts of fruits, such as apples (remove all seeds), pears, strawberries, peaches, raspberries, blueberries, and pineapple.
- Because fruits and vegetables with a high water content (such as cucumbers and grapes) may cause diarrhea, feed them to your rabbit in small quantities only.
- The following are toxic to rabbits: beans, rhubarb, potatoes, chocolate, corn, cauliflower, cabbage, apple seeds, philodendron, lily of the valley, calla lily, azalea, aloe.
- Provide fresh, clean water in a bottle.

Housing

Rabbits may be housed indoors or outdoors, but prolonged exposure to temperatures above 80°F (26°C) can cause illness, including heat prostration. Domesticated rabbits should not be kept in temperatures below 50°F (15°C). Rabbits that are kept outdoors in temperature extremes must have a shelter that is heated in winter and cooled in summer.

Your rabbit will appreciate as large a cage as you can provide. The cage should be tall enough to allow your rabbit to stand up on his or her hind legs and long enough to allow your rabbit to hop at least three and a half times, but an even larger cage is better. The cage should allow room for a food dish, a water bottle, a large litterbox, and toys. It should have a nonslip floor. Straw or shredded paper covered with straw or hay can be used as bedding. Your rabbit also needs a soft blanket or pad on which to sleep. The cage and its contents should be periodically sanitized with a disinfectant such as household chlorine bleach diluted to 1 ounce per 1 quart of water. After cleaning the cage, rinse it well and make sure it is dry before returning your rabbit to it.

The litterbox should be filled with a rabbit-safe litter such as one made of alfalfa, oats, citrus, or paper. Unsafe litters include those that clump or that are made of cedar, pine, or clay. Frequent removal of waste is important for preventing respiratory disease in rabbits. The litterbox should be emptied and disinfected once a week.

The Play Area

A large cage is no substitute for daily time outside the cage. As you introduce your rabbit to his or her play area, start with a small area and gradually enlarge it. This will help your rabbit learn where to find the litterbox. A small room is a good place to start. Over time, you can expand the play area to include several rooms, if desired.

Rabbits are curious explorers by nature and chew on almost anything, including electric cords, wood furniture, books, and carpet. Rabbit-proofing the play area can help keep your rabbit—and possessions—safe. Tactics for effective rabbit-proofing include covering electric cords with conduit or tubing, blocking access to favorite targets of chewing, and spraying table legs with bitter apple. When your rabbit is outside of the cage, he or she must be supervised and/or contained in a safe play area. A large puppy pen can be an ideal playpen for an unsupervised rabbit. To keep your rabbit from damaging your valuables, provide more attractive alternatives, such as approved rabbit-safe toys, a box filled with paper to shred, or cardboard tubes from paper towel rolls.

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Grooming

Rabbits frequently groom themselves and swallow their hair, which is usually eliminated in their droppings. However, rabbits can develop hairballs that block digestion or cause other problems. To help prevent hairballs, regularly brush your rabbit with a soft brush. Long-haired rabbits require daily brushing; short-haired rabbits should be brushed at least twice a week. Extra brushing may be required during shedding (every 3 months). To help your rabbit pass a hairball, you can offer fresh or frozen pineapple juice once or twice a day for 3 days; canned pineapple juice is not as effective

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because the canning process destroys an enzyme in the juice.

Veterinary Care

Spayed and neutered rabbits have fewer health problems (related to reproduction) and are better adjusted, less territorial, and easier to litter train than intact rabbits. Pet rabbits that have been spayed or neutered early in life and well cared for can live for up to 10 years.

Pet rabbits should be taken for an annual veterinary checkup. Rabbits don't require routine vaccinations.

If your rabbit shows any of the following signs of illness, contact your veterinarian immediately:

- Discharge from the eyes and nose
- Drooling
- A lack of energy
- Loss of appetite and weight
- Diarrhea or no droppings for more than 12 hours
- A lack of normal movement
- Trouble breathing
- Fur loss and red, swollen skin
- Dark red urine

Routine Rabbit Care Schedule

Daily

- Provide fresh food and water
- Allow supervised exercise and play outside of the cage
- Brush long-haired rabbits
- Scoop out the litterbox

Twice a week

- Brush short-haired rabbits

Once a week

- Clean and disinfect the cage and its contents
- Provide fresh bedding

Once a year

- Go for a veterinary checkup

As needed

- Provide new chew toys