

# Introduction to Rabbit Care

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Rabbits are wonderful pets. They adjust well to living indoors as well as outdoors. 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.

## Handling

Proper handling of your rabbit is essential. Always support the hind end of your rabbit when you pick it up. Never pick up a rabbit by its legs or ears. Rabbits can seriously injure their backs when picked up without supporting their hind end! Handle your rabbit often when it is young to increase its acceptance of affection when it 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.

## Caging

Rabbits are very curious critters that love to explore by chewing on objects in their environment. Unfortunately 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. Wire cages are readily available and work well by allowing the feces and urine to fall through the cage. However, always provide a solid surface for your bunny to sit or lie on if she chooses. A rabbit forced to sit on wire can develop "sore hocks" which is a skin infection that can become very serious if left untreated. Keep the cage and the bedding as clean as possible. Rabbits that are allowed to come into contact with their urine for long periods can also develop "sore hocks". This problem is easier to prevent than it is to treat (not to mention very uncomfortable for your bunny)!

Line your rabbit's cage with newspaper, shredded paper, or a paper based bedding/litter available at a commercial pet store. Eco-Bedding brand (which looks like crinkled brown paper) is an excellent choice. **DO NOT USE WOOD SHAVINGS** of any kind.

Rabbits can be litter box trained! Begin with the rabbit and the box in a small area. Place the box in a location 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. Males and females can be trained to use a litter box. Rabbit litter boxes are not the same as cat litter boxes. Do not use cat litter for rabbits. Use shavings such as the bedding you use for the rabbit enclosure.

## Diet

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

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 soft, pasty stools, hairballs, obesity and its related diseases, and urinary diseases. In addition, rabbits that eat only pellets and do not have fresh hay to chew can develop painful overgrown teeth.

In the wild, rabbits have adapted to eating large amounts of food that make up relatively poor diets, i.e. grasses, tree bark, and other vegetation. Pellets are too rich for them. Limit your rabbit's intake of pellets to only 1/8 cup of a timothy hay-based product per 5 pounds of body weight per day. Please do not feed the rabbit pellet mixes with pretty seeds and colored pellets. This is like candy to them and can cause stomach issues. Please feed only timothy pellets, like those offered by Oxbow. An unlimited amount of fresh, clean and dry (non-moldy) timothy hay should always be available. Alfalfa hay is not recommended if over 4 months of age. It is too high in calcium and fat for teenage to adult rabbits.

We recommend the products sold by Oxbow Hay Company. Their "Bunny Basics/T" pelleted diet for rabbits is excellent. They also have wonderful fresh, clean hays available. Choose either timothy or orchard grass for every day. The other hays Oxbow has available can be given in small amounts as occasional treats. Oxbow's products are available at [www.oxbowhay.com](http://www.oxbowhay.com) or here at our hospital.

Provide fresh greens on a daily basis. Your rabbit should receive one heaping cup per 5 pounds of body weight of a mixture of at least three greens: red leaf lettuce, green leaf lettuce, dandelion greens, carrot tops, parsley, romaine lettuce, or fresh picked non chemically treated grass. Be sure to vary the greens you give. Do not give the same ones each week. Providing a variety will ensure a more balanced diet. Spinach and kale can also be given on occasion but sparingly.

## Spaying and Neutering

Spaying (removal of ovaries and uterus) and neutering (removal of testicles) are very important for your pet rabbit. Spaying your female prevents uterine cancer and 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

Unfortunately, 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. If your bunny ever stops eating, call us right away. A rabbit that is not eating is a serious problem. In addition, you should regularly check your rabbit's front teeth for overgrowth. Some rabbits have front teeth that do not align properly, causing them to grow abnormally long. If you notice any unusual growth, please call us for an appointment.

## Nail Trims

When clipping nails, it is helpful to wrap your rabbit in a towel (a bunny burrito). The towel will have to be wrapped snugly. Each foot can be individually pulled out of the towel for clipping. Nail clipping can be done with either dog or human nail clippers. A member of our staff can show you how to clip your rabbit's nails. We recommend to not trim your rabbit's nails unless we have shown you first how to do them. We can also do it for you if you do not feel comfortable doing it yourself.

## Signs of Disease

Note: If your bunny ever stops eating or producing normal fecal balls, call us right away. A bunny that is not eating or defecating normally will become seriously ill very quickly. There is no time to lose with these symptoms! If your rabbit does not eat on his regular schedule—CALL US!

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 very serious 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.

All of these diseases are easier to treat and more likely to be cured if we can address them early on. Don't delay if your bunny is sick. If you are unsure, you can always call us and describe the symptoms/signs you are noticing. If we think your bunny needs to come in for an exam right away, we will let you know.

### Examination

We highly recommend that you bring your rabbit in for a checkup every year. 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 pet's yearly exam, we will record her current weight, examine her teeth, eyes and ears; listen to her heart and lungs, feel her belly, and evaluate her general overall condition. These exams often identify problems before they become advanced. At your pet's yearly exam, we will also discuss with you any new advances in rabbit care.

This guide aims to provide you with the information you need to help your rabbit live a longer and healthier life. The House Rabbit Society is also an excellent source of information on rabbit care. Their website ([www.rabbit.org](http://www.rabbit.org)) is full of useful information. They also publish a newsletter for members called the "House Rabbit Journal". Also check out the local chapter of this organization at [www.mahouserabbit.org](http://www.mahouserabbit.org) .