

Litter Training 101:

Helpful tips to successfully train your bunny



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Many people are very surprised when they find out that rabbits can be litter trained. Rabbits are intelligent, clean creatures of habit. They like to "go" in the same spot, which will work to your advantage when you are trying to litter train your rabbit.

HOW TO LITTER TRAIN

To litter train your rabbit, start by placing a litterbox inside your rabbit's cage or pen, in the corner that he has chosen as his "bathroom" corner.

As you increase your rabbit's supervised exercise time, you need to make sure that he has access to one or more litterboxes (besides the one in his cage) in his exercise area. Having more than one litterbox will increase your bunny's chance of success. He will likely dictate the placement of these litterboxes by choosing a bathroom corner in his exercise area. Hopefully, he will choose a spot that is convenient to the rest of the household. If not, you can try to convince him to change his mind by putting the box first in the spot he has chosen and gradually moving it until it is where you would like it to be. However, it may be easier to oblige a stubborn rabbit than to try to change a chosen litterbox spot. After your rabbit is using the litterbox regularly, you can decrease the number of litterboxes until he has one box in his cage and only one box in his exercise area.

TIPS

- Perhaps the most important thing you can do to help your bunny achieve good litterbox habits is to have him or her fixed. Unaltered rabbits are much harder to litter train than unaltered rabbits. After reaching sexual maturity (3-4 months for smaller breeds, 4-6 months for larger breeds), a rabbit's hormones tell him to "mark" territory. Having your rabbit spayed or neutered can stop (or at least decrease) hormonally driven negative behaviour. As with any surgery, there is some risk. Only an experienced bunny veterinarian should spay or neuter your pet.

- Young and adolescent rabbits will not have perfect litter habits all the time. They are still growing physically and mentally, and accidents will happen. Be patient: your bunny will improve as he matures. Always praise your bunny for a job well done and never scold or hit your bunny because he had an accident.
- Keep those litterboxes clean! Your bunny's litterbox should be cleaned everyday or every second day. Simply wash the litterbox with white vinegar and rinse with water to neutralize the odour. Vinegar can also be used to remove accidents on carpeting or tile flooring. Be sure to test the vinegar on a small inconspicuous area of your floor before using.
- Giving your bunny too much freedom too soon can contribute to poor litterbox habits. Gradually increase your rabbit's freedom, after he is using the litterbox regularly. If your bunny has access to more than one room, give his access to more than one box.



- Put some hay at one end of the litterbox to make it a more inviting place to visit. Some rabbits will spend hours munching on hay in their litterboxes. In addition, many rabbits will urinate or defecate while eating.
- Even spayed or neutered rabbits may mark their territory when a new rabbit (or other animal, for that matter) is added to the household. Gradually, the need to mark territory will lessen as they get used to the newcomer.

- A change in your rabbit's environment or the addition of stress (e.g., a new animal, new furniture or new people) may cause a temporary lapse in even a spayed or neutered rabbit's litterbox habits. Keeping a close eye on your bunny as he explores new territory will help to prevent accidents and new bad habits from developing.
- A rabbit that previously had good litterbox habits or one that is having prolonged problems achieving good litterbox habits may have a physical problem, such as a urinary tract infection, that requires medical care.
- If you are having a hard time training your bunny, try a new brand of litter.

WHAT TO USE FOR A LITTERBOX

Hard plastic storage bins that come in various sizes, as well as traditional cat boxes, make fantastic litterboxes. The size of the litterbox should be determined by the size of the bunny and by the size of the pen or cage. You will still need room in the cage for food, toys, water and a place for the rabbit to lie down. Many bunnies like to stretch out in their litterboxes so, as they grow, the box will need to grow too. If your bunny is kicking litter out of the box or urinating over the edge of the box, try a hooded cat-type litterbox, a deeper litterbox or a box with a lip around the outside. If you have a special needs rabbit that has trouble hopping in and out of his litterbox, try cutting one side down for easy entry. A litter pan with a low front side may help as well.

WHAT TYPE OF LITTER TO USE

Since rabbits spend a lot of time in their litterboxes, finding a safe litter is important. The following types of litter are acceptable to use in your rabbit's litterbox:

1. Litters made from hardwood, such as Aspen.
2. Wood stove pellets made from compressed hardwoods. Wood stove pellets are sold at home improvement stores (in the seasonal department) or stores that sell wood stoves. In some areas this product is only available in the fall and winter months.
3. Products made from recycled, shredded or compressed newspaper, e.g., Yesterday's News or Carefresh, are excellent choices. These litters

are biodegradable, dust-free and nontoxic, and are safe even if your rabbit should take a nibble. These litters are also absorbent and will control odours well.

4. Newspaper with hay layered on top. If you have a source of inexpensive hay (such as a local farm), then using hay and newspaper in your rabbit's box is very economical and nontoxic. Don't worry, your rabbit will know better than to eat the soiled parts. If you choose this option, the litterbox will need to be cleaned every day to prevent odours.

Note: Don't be surprised if your rabbit samples the new litter. However, if he decides to feast on the litter (unless you use hay on top of newsprint and he's eating the hay), then you need to choose a new litter. You can prevent your rabbit from eating his litter by placing a grid made of hardware cloth (without sharp edges) or hard plastic (such as the hard plastic grids that cover fluorescent lights) on top of the litter.

Things to consider:

- Biodegradable litters (e.g., woodstove pellets, Carefresh, Yesterday's News or hay layered over newsprint) make excellent fertilizers
- Prolonged exposure to the phenols (aromatic oils) in softwood shavings, such as pine and cedar, may cause liver damage or upper respiratory problems.
- Clay cat litter is not a good choice if your rabbit is a digger. No clay litter is 100% dust free and the dust can cause respiratory problems. In addition, do not use clay cat litters that contain deodorant crystals which may be dangerous if ingested.
- The following types of litter may cause blockages or intestinal problems if ingested: clumping cat litter (clumps when it gets wet), clay cat litter and litters made of silica gel or silica sand.
- Litter products (e.g., CatWorks) that contain zinc oxide may cause zinc poisoning if ingested.
- Some sources claim that litters made from corncobs may cause gastrointestinal problems if ingested, while other sources say that corncob litters are safe. Until we know for sure, we recommend using caution when using litters made from corncobs.