

# Rabbit Behaviour:

## What we can learn from it



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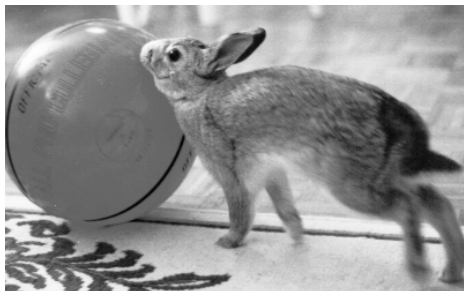
### WHY DOES MY BUNNY MISBEHAVE?

Each year too many rabbits are abandoned due to behavioural problems. To help prevent this tragedy, it is essential to develop a basic understanding of rabbit behaviour. While you may never completely understand your rabbit, it is possible to have some basic understanding of why your rabbit behaves the way he does. Understanding is key in knowing how to control his undesirable behaviour. The two biggest factors that cause your rabbit to misbehave are hormones and boredom.

### HORMONES

When rabbits reach sexual maturity (at three to six months of age, depending on the breed), hormones start to influence their behaviour: owners often see an increase in negative behaviours such as digging and chewing. Unaltered, sexually mature pets also have an overwhelming desire to mark territory, and frequently lose their litterbox habits. Some will even spray or become aggressive.

Spaying or neutering your pet can help to control negative behaviour associated with hormones. It deters, if not eliminates, most negative hormonally-driven behaviour within three months after the procedure. It's unfair not to give your potentially wonderful bunny a chance to be an important member of your family just because he has become a hormonally-charged nuisance. As with any surgery, there is some risk. Therefore, it is very important to have only an experienced bunny veterinarian spay or neuter your pet.



### BOREDOM

Rabbits are inquisitive by nature and require sufficient mental stimulation and physical exercise each day. A bored bunny may become depressed or destructive. To help prevent boredom, provide your rabbit with a selection of toys and daily exercise time in a bunny-proofed area.

### TOYS

#### Some safe-fun toys include:

- Cardboard boxes with doors and windows for 'remodeling'
- Tunnels made from cardboard concrete forming tubes (available at your local hardware or home improvement stores).
- Canning jar rings and hard plastic baby/bird toys, without small removable parts (such as a set of plastic keys) for tossing.
- Phone books for demolition projects
- Untreated willow rings, wicker baskets and grass mats. Important: Be sure that your rabbit's head cannot get stuck in the hole of the willow ring!
- Untreated fruit tree branches like apple, willow or aspen are tasty distractions, but cherry, apricot, peach, and plum (fruits with pits) are toxic unless they are removed from the tree and aged for a month.
- Cardboard boxes (or large litter pans) filled with hay or shredded newspaper for digging.

If your bunny doesn't seem interested in a certain toy at first, try it again later. Your bunny's interests may change. Also, remember that playtime can be a team effort and not just a spectator sport. Your bunny might enjoy a game of fetch...in reverse. He throws a jar lid and you retrieve it for him so that he can throw it again, and again, and again.

### DEALING WITH CHEWING & DIGGING

We have already discussed the importance of spaying and neutering in alleviating hormonal behaviour, which can include chewing and digging. It is important to realize, however, that chewing and digging are natural rabbit behaviours, and can't always be stopped. Sometimes rabbits will dig and chew because they are

bored, while others simply like to dig and chew. The key is to provide acceptable diversions from your antique dresser, colonial baseboards or favourite armchair.

When your rabbit digs or chews something that is inappropriate, it is helpful to remove him from the situation and replace the item with something that is appropriate for chewing and digging.

### PROVIDING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Don't assume that a rabbit must always be caged. Bunny-proofing your home can be relatively easy. Providing an area for exercise and out of cage time is extremely important to a bunny's well being. However, it is important to remember that rabbits are quick, quiet and curious: you may not even realize that your rabbit is in a dangerous situation until it is too late. Taking precautions to make your rabbit's exercise area bunny-safe is a must for any responsible rabbit owner.

**Dark Areas:** Be sure to block all openings that the rabbit can crawl into, including ductwork and the areas behind furniture and appliances with Plexiglas, wood panels and even cardboard or pillows (if your rabbit isn't an avid chewer).

**Electrical cords:** Electrical cords are very dangerous for bunnies. If chewed, they can cause severe burns or electrocution. Conceal cords in flexible plastic tubing, spiral cable wrap, PVC piping or plastic shower rod covers (great for cords that run along a wall).

**House plants:** Household plants should be kept out of your bunny's reach because many are toxic. Watch for fallen leaves as well.

**Unsafe surfaces:** It is important to make sure your rabbit cannot jump onto any unstable surface that he may fall off of and injure himself. If your rabbit likes to jump on to the top of his cage, secure a towel to the top with clothes pins so that he does not get his foot caught in the wire when jumping back onto the floor.

**Baseboards and Walls:** Some bunny owners have had success using commercial anti-chew products, such as Bitter Apple, on surfaces that they don't want their bunny to chew. Others have better luck applying a bit of cheap perfume or Ivory soap to areas that their bunny likes to chew. Whatever chewing deterrent you choose, it is important to apply a small amount to the object first to make sure that it truly deters your bunny. NEVER use anything toxic as a chewing deterrent. In addition, you can use clear corner guards, available at your local home improvement store on the corners of

your walls or tops of your baseboards (if your baseboards are wide enough).

**Off Limits:** You may not be able to adequately bunny-proof some areas of your home such as a home office. These areas should always remain off limits to your bunny. This can be done by closing the door or installing a baby gate (Note: Some rabbits can jump over a baby gate!).

**Carpet fibres:** Ingesting carpet fibres is very dangerous and can lead to a blockage or stasis. The best way to prevent a rabbit from digging and pulling out carpet fibres is to restrict access to carpeted areas or cover the areas that he finds attractive with cotton rugs or tiles.

Until your rabbit's exercise area is properly bunny-proofed, make sure your bunny is kept in a cage or play pen for his own protection, and only let him out under supervision. Rabbits can be quite creative and can sometimes foil even the best attempts at bunny-proofing. For this reason, it is recommended that new rabbit owners or owners with young rabbits confine their rabbits when they are not there to supervise. As young rabbits mature, they will become more calm and relaxed (spaying or neutering helps, too) and may eventually be allowed to roam free in a bunny-proofed area of the house. Remember, even a free-range bunny needs a homebase, or a special area to consider his own.

### WHEN BUNNY BITES

Since rabbits often nip as a way of communicating, it is important to distinguish between nipping as a way of communicating and biting out of fear or aggression. If your rabbit has started to bite or nip, you should determine what he is trying to tell you.

Light nipping could mean that your rabbit has become sexually mature, and he is trying to get you to notice him. It may also indicate that he has had enough attention, wants to be put down, wants food or that you are blocking his path.

Sometimes rabbits that are ill or sexually mature and unaltered will become aggressive and bite. Rabbits may also bite if frightened. This type of biting is different from nipping to communicate. Dealing with a bunny that bites out of fear or aggression requires patience as well as time to earn the rabbit's trust. This may mean modifying your own behaviour to make the rabbit feel comfortable and less fearful.

## Rabbit Friendships: Would your rabbit benefit from having a friend?



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Rabbits are social creatures, and may become bored if left alone all day. Many rabbits benefit from having another rabbit as a companion, but choosing a companion for a rabbit isn't always easy. The key to a good match is personality and compatibility. Two dominant, territorial rabbits are more difficult to bond than one dominant and one submissive rabbit. Personality cannot be determined by size or breed, therefore the bonding process will not be affected by the size and breed of the rabbits.

Generally, the easiest bond is between a spayed female and a neutered male. Babies often bond easily with one another and to some adults, but the bond may be broken at the onset of puberty. Male-male and female-female bonds may also work, but these pairs may require more effort and persistence. Spaying and neutering, which helps to alleviate hormonal tendencies and territorial behaviour, is important for bonding even same sex pairs. At the very least, one rabbit **MUST** be altered when bonding male-female pairs to avoid accidental pregnancy. (Note: Adult rabbits are fertile at all times, mate quickly, and can conceive at a very young age. Don't take this chance!).

### THE TECHNIQUE

Always quarantine any new rabbit for two weeks. It is also a good idea to have the new rabbit checked by a veterinarian before introducing him to your rabbit. After the quarantine, move the new rabbit's cage into the room with the existing rabbit. Place their cages side by side to allow the rabbits to get used to each other's scent. They should be able to smell and see each other, but should not be able to touch each other. You can allow separate exercise time in the same area, but always ensure that the rabbits cannot bite one another through the cage bars.

Bonding sessions must take place in a small neutral area, i.e., an area that is not frequented

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by either rabbit. Make sure that there are no places that either rabbit can crawl into, such as an open cage or box. You do not want either rabbit to feel cornered, or for a fight to break out in an area that you cannot readily get to. Two rabbits may get along fabulously in familiar territory when one rabbit is caged and the other is not; however, they may behave aggressively when they are both out of their cages. Always supervise each bonding session and do not leave the rabbits unattended.

At first, bonding sessions should be short. As the rabbits start to become friends, the sessions can be longer. The bonding sessions need to be a pleasant experience for your rabbits. Provide them with new toys, litterboxes filled with fresh hay, or a platter of veggies to share. Try to end the sessions on a positive note and work with your rabbits every day. Some rabbits bond very quickly, while others may take several months to bond.

### TIPS

1. Prepare for marking of territory with feces and urine. After the rabbits get used to each other, the marking will gradually subside. Even spayed and neutered rabbits may mark territory in the presence of a new rabbit.
2. For tough bonds, it may be helpful to take both rabbits for a car ride before the bonding session. If there is any danger of the rabbits fighting in the car, put them in separate carriers. If you put them in the same carrier, have a friend drive while you supervise the rabbits.
3. If you are planning to house the rabbits together in one of the existing cages after they are bonded, start by switching cages and litterboxes each day to avoid 'ownership'.
4. Learning to recognize aggressive body language (e.g., tail erect, ears back, tense body posture) is helpful in preventing fights. Rabbits who fight will sometimes hold grudges, making the bonding process harder.

### ASSESSING PROGRESS

If, during the bonding sessions, the rabbits ignore one another and go about their business of eating, grooming themselves or relaxing, the session is going well. In time, the rabbits will bond. However, if the rabbits are continually aggressive towards one another, it may be best to allow them to continue to live separately.

In order to assess progress, it is important to be able to understand your rabbit's body language. For example, to a rabbit, nipping and fighting mean very different things, even though they may look the same to us. Fighting is a deliberate attack. Nipping is a means of communicating.

Circling and chasing are common occurrences during bonding and can escalate into a fight. Stop circling and chasing when it occurs, but do not separate the rabbits. Instead, place them side by side while petting them or feeding them treats. After they have calmed down, you can let them run around again.

Mounting is a natural part of the bonding process. It is not necessary to stop mounting as long as the rabbit being mounted does not become aggressive or afraid. However, never allow backwards mounting because the rabbit on top can be seriously injured with one bite. Mounting can be amorous, as well as a way to establish dominance. After your rabbits are getting along well in neutral territory, you can expand the area to gradually include territory familiar to both rabbits. Cage them separately until they are getting along well in territory that is not neutral. Start to cage them together for short periods while you are there to supervise. You do not want a fight to break out in the cage when you are not there to intervene.

### IN CASE OF A FIGHT

When fights occur during a bonding session, our first instinct is to try to pick up one of the rabbits; however, this can lead to serious bite wounds. Do not use your bare hands to break up a scuffle. Instead, spray the fighting pair with a water bottle set on the 'stream setting' or cover them with a blanket. To prevent a fight, it is helpful to have a broom or sturdy piece of cardboard handy to slip between two angry rabbits. However, be careful not to poke either

rabbit in the eye with the broom, because this can cause injury to the eye. It is also helpful to wear oven mitts on your hands during a bonding session, in case you have to break up a fight.

Have these 'tools of the trade' on hand at the start of every bonding session so you don't have to leave the room for supplies, leaving the rabbits unattended. Serious fights can break out in seconds: pay attention to the rabbits' body language at all times. If fighting or nipping has taken place, always check your rabbits thoroughly for wounds. Disinfect any cuts or scratches and consult a veterinarian when necessary. A seemingly minor scratch can quickly become an abscess that requires medical attention.

### A FINAL WORD

Always remember: Never adopt a rabbit as a companion for your current rabbit if you cannot accept the fact that they may never bond. Instead, consider fostering a rabbit in need of a permanent home. If your current rabbit bonds with your foster rabbit, then you can adopt him

There are definite advantages to having bonded pairs. Rabbits who have bonded friends tend to be less bored -- and therefore, less destructive -- than single rabbits. They have company when you are working late, and it is easier to clean one rabbit cage than two. Sometimes, however, it is just not meant to be. And rabbits should never be overly stressed in the process of making them become friends. We have to remember to do what is right for our rabbits -- and not what is most convenient for us.



## Rabbits & Children: Is a rabbit a good pet for your family?



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Your child has been asking for a pet. You consider getting him a dog or a cat but think about how much of a commitment having a family pet can be. Then, you think about getting a rabbit. Why not? Rabbits are perfect pets for children. They are cute, cuddly, spend most of the time in a cage and don't seem to require much care, right? Wrong!

### DISPELLING THE MYTHS

**Myth #1: Rabbits are docile and cuddly.** Rabbits are often portrayed by the media and in children's books as being cuddly and docile. Most people are disappointed to find that most rabbits just simply do not live up this stereotype. Rabbits generally do not like - and even fear - being lifted off the ground or carried. They have a delicate skeletal structure, and may be easily injured trying to escape from a child's arms. A rabbit's sharp nails and powerful back legs may also cause injury to a child.

**Myth #2: Rabbits are low maintenance pets.** Rabbits have needs that are similar to other house pets. They require sufficient mental stimulation as well as physical exercise in a bunny-proofed area each day. Cages and litterboxes need to be cleaned often to prevent odour. Rabbits have very specific dietary requirements. When rabbits are ill, they require care from a qualified veterinarian. They also benefit from being spayed and neutered.

**Myth #3: Having a pet teaches a child responsibility.** Many parents say they want to get a pet for their child to teach the child how to be responsible. While this sounds good in theory, it's more likely that the child will end up losing interest in the pet. The pet is then either neglected or given away. In either case, the child doesn't learn responsibility. Even worse, the child will learn that life is disposable and that if he just waits long enough, someone else will relieve him of his "responsibility".

So, does this mean that you shouldn't get a rabbit for your child? No, not necessarily but, as the adult in the family, it is important to realize that you will be the primary care taker of the rabbit. Therefore, it is essential that you understand what rabbits are like and what proper care entails. Describing rabbit care properly and in enough depth is beyond the depth of this handout.

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We will briefly describe what rabbits are really like. (For information on proper rabbit care, please contact us or visit our web site at [www.ontariorabbits.org](http://www.ontariorabbits.org).) Check out our "How to Videos" on our website.

### WHAT IS A RABBIT REALLY LIKE?

It is very important to remember that every rabbit has a unique personality and that specific character traits cannot be generalized by breed. However, most rabbits do exhibit one or more of the following traits:

#### 1. Rabbits are social animals.

Rabbits are social animals. Most really enjoy the company of either another rabbit, a human, or sometimes other animals such as a guinea pig, dog or cat. This, of course, is determined by the personality of the rabbit and the other animal in question. Some dogs and cats may be aggressive towards a rabbit and a guinea pig may be injured by its powerful hind legs.

#### 2. Rabbits are curious.

Want to get a rabbit's attention? Simply sit on the floor in his area, read a book and ignore him. Most rabbits won't be able to resist approaching to find out what you're doing.

#### 3. Rabbits need physical exercise and mental stimulation.

Rabbits require between 4-6 hours of exercise per day depending on their housing. For bunny-proofing tips and suggestions for suitable toys, see our handout "*Rabbit Behaviour: What we can learn from it*".

#### 4. Rabbits are clean.

Rabbits are fastidious groomers, and are easily litter trained. If you keep your rabbit's cage/area clean, he won't have an odour. See our web site or our handout on litter training for tips.

#### 5. Rabbits love routine.

Changes to feeding and exercise schedules are stressful and may lead to illness or a badly-behaved rabbit. If a schedule must be changed, introduce changes gradually.

### OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER

In addition to research, and learning what having a rabbit involves, there are other things you must consider when deciding if a rabbit is right for you and your family.



#### 1. Do any family members have allergies?

If so, it is important to make sure that they aren't allergic to rabbits before bringing one home. Note: Many people are allergic to hay (a staple in your rabbit's diet) and NOT the rabbit itself.

#### 2. Consider your child's personality.

If your child is calm and cooperative, a rabbit may be an appropriate addition to your family. On the other hand, if your child is loud, tends to interact physically/aggressively, or frequently needs to be reminded of rules, then a rabbit probably isn't a good choice.

#### 3. Consider your child's age.

Rabbits are rarely good pets for very young children (younger than 7 years old). Very young children do not have the coordination to interact with a rabbit and may accidentally hurt it. However, if you are willing to supervise their interaction, then a rabbit may be appropriate.

#### 4. Does your family have time for a rabbit?

Are you and your child prepared to make time for the rabbit, which involves cleaning, feeding and socializing. This is a commitment that can last 6-12 years.

### TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL INTERACTION

Now that you've considered the rabbit's needs and have determined that your child would interact well with a rabbit, here are some tips that may help you to maintain a happy household.

**1.** Show your child how to pet the bunny. Guide your child's hand over the rabbit's head, ears, and upper back. To prevent fur-grabbing, hold his hand flat or use the back of his hand. Do this frequently but stop if the rabbit seems bothered by it. Always supervise your child's interactions with the rabbit. You may even want to have your child practice with a stuffed bunny toy first.

**2.** Rabbits need to feel secure when being handled. If a rabbit does not feel secure, he will struggle and kick in an effort to escape. Children simply aren't physically strong enough to be capable of making a rabbit feel secure. For this reason, larger bunnies often make better companions for children than smaller breeds. Children are less tempted to try to and pick up a larger rabbit.

**3.** Children like to be able to pick up their toys and pets and carry them around. Always teach your child to interact with the rabbit at ground level, since most rabbits feel more secure at ground level. Explain to the child that you or another adult will always be the one who picks up the bunny for grooming, etc.

**4.** Make interactions with the rabbit a positive experience for the child. Explain to him that it is his special job to not scare the rabbit, not to pick up the rabbit, etc. Avoid constantly using negative words like "Don't" and "Stop".

**5.** Teach your child to leave the rabbit alone when he hops away or goes into his cage. It is helpful to interpret the rabbit's body language for the child to help him to understand. For example, tell the child that "I think the bunny wants to eat or nap now. Let's leave him alone for a bit."

**6.** Discourage your child from chasing a rabbit, poking at him through the cage or banging on his cage. This can be done by explaining: "Chasing the rabbit will make him afraid of you." Or "Banging on his house scares him." It is important that you learn how to interpret rabbit behavior/ language so that you can explain the rabbit's feelings about your child's actions. Sometimes, it is also helpful to compare the bunny's feelings to a feeling familiar to your child. For example, tell the child that "You know how you are scared sometimes of loud noises?"

**7.** Teach the child that the litter box and the rabbit's droppings are "dirt" and always use a broom and dustpan to sweep up the rabbit's droppings when the child is around. A litter box with a grate over the top works well.

**8.** Create a "safe zone" where the rabbit can go for quiet and to escape. Use baby gates in doorways and or consider turning the cage so the door faces the wall with enough room for the rabbit but not for the child. Always remember that a rabbit - or any other companion animal - should be considered an addition to the family and not as a toy for a child. You, as the adult, must be the primary care taker of the animal. No child is responsible enough to assume such a job on a daily basis. Children learn by example, so it is important for adults to set a good one.



# Rabbit Dietary Guide:

General nutrition information for adult rabbits



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## BASICS

*Please note that this is a generic dietary guideline for adult rabbits. Not all rabbits will tolerate - or should be fed - exactly the same foods. It is important to find a diet that is suitable for your rabbit.* Typically, an adult companion rabbit should have a nutritious daily diet consisting of a limited amount of pellets, unlimited hay, a variety of fresh vegetables and fresh water.

## HAY

Hay is the most important part of an adult rabbit's diet and should be provided in unlimited quantities. It is high in fibre, which keeps the digestive tract moving, helping to prevent blockages and stasis. In addition, hay helps to sustain healthy teeth by helping to reduce the risk of molar spurs.

There are two types of hay commonly available in pet stores: Alfalfa (a legume hay) and Timothy (a grass hay). Alfalfa has more protein and calcium than adult rabbits (over approximately 7 months old) need. Too much dietary calcium, along with hereditary factors and insufficient water intake may lead to kidney or bladder stones or sludge for some rabbits. For this reason, adult rabbits should be fed grass hay (Timothy, Brome, Orchard, for example).

Hay bought directly from a farmer who grows hay for horses is usually superior and inexpensive, especially if you have more than one rabbit. If you have storage facilities or can split a bale of hay with other rabbit owners, a 45 pound bale can be purchased for under \$10.

When purchasing hay, remember that good hay should be mostly green in colour and should smell like grass. Hay mold can cause death in rabbits - look for white dust or black and/or white spots on the bale. If you drop the bale of hay and a lot of white dust flies up, it could be a sign of mold. Discard and do not use!

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You may find the occasional weed in a bale of hay. Thistles should be picked out. Milkweed, which is poisonous to rabbits, is easily recognizable by its thick fibrous stem and broad elongated leaves.

Hay purchased in large quantities should be stored in a cool, dry place in a container that allows for airflow (a large cardboard box or Rubbermaid container with holes poked in it, or a contractors garbage bag (heavy duty) with holes cut in it for example).

It is important to keep offering hay, even if your rabbit is reluctant to eat it. Some rabbits can be quite suspicious of new foods, but will eventually learn to eat them. Try a different brand or type of hay or offer a mix of grass hays. Some rabbits prefer stalky, course hay, while others prefer a softer cut of hay. Keep in mind, the fresher the hay, the more likely it is that your rabbit will eat it. Also, you may consider decreasing the amount of pellets being fed and offer hay first thing in the morning (when your rabbit is hungry), before feeding pellets or greens. However, never deny your rabbit other foods if he is not eating hay.

## VEGETABLES

Vegetables are an important part of a rabbit's balanced diet. For rabbits who drink little water, fresh vegetables can help to provide much needed hydration. It is important to realize, however, that some rabbits tolerate vegetables well, while others may suffer from gas or runny stools if they consume too many or the wrong kind of vegetables. Try to offer rabbits who tolerate vegetables at least 3-5 different types of greens daily (a minimum of 2 cups per 6 lbs. body weight per day). Introduce a small quantity of new greens every 5-7 days, and observe the rabbit's droppings closely. Remove any vegetable that causes soft stool or gas from the rabbit's diet. Wash vegetables thoroughly. Spoiled greens can make a rabbit seriously ill. Members of the cabbage/cauliflower family can cause gas. Do not feed iceberg lettuce, since it has little nutritional value. Supply mostly dark leafy veggies.

### Bunny Safe Veggies:

Alfalfa Sprouts, Artichoke leaves, Arugula, Asparagus, Basil, Beet greens, Bell peppers, Bok Choy, Carrot tops, Celeriac, Celery, Cilantro, Collard greens, Cucumber, Chard, Chicory greens, Clover(white only), Nappa/Chinese cabbage Dandelion(flowers and leaves), Dill, Endive, Escarole, Mint, Parsley (curly and flat leaf), Pumpkin, Radicchio, Radish tops, Raspberry leaves, Romaine lettuce, Swiss chard (red and green), Turnip greens, Wheat grass and Watercress.

### Bunny Safe Fruits:

Apple, Banana, Blueberry, Blackberry, Canteloupe, Grapes, Honey Dew Melon, Kiwi, Peach (pits are poisonous), Cherry (pits are poisonous), Papaya, Pear, Pineapple, Raspberry, Strawberry and Watermelon. Carrots which are high in sugar should only be offered as a treat.

### Safe In Moderation:

Broccoli, Brussels Sprouts, Cabbage, Cauliflower, Kale, Mustard Greens, Radish Tops and Spinach.

Although high calcium vegetables contain less digestible calcium per volume than alfalfa hay or alfalfa based pellets, it is important to note that excess dietary calcium, along with other factors, may cause bladder stones or sludge in some rabbits. In addition, consuming vegetables that are high in oxalates in large quantities on a daily basis may cause crystals or stones to form in the kidneys. For these reasons, and so that your rabbit doesn't consume an abundance of any one vitamin, it is helpful to feed your rabbit a variety of greens.

## PELLETS

Pellets should be high in fibre (ideally a minimum 18%), low in protein (maximum content of 14% - 15%) and low in calcium (maximum 1%).

We recommend Martin Little Friends Rabbit Food (Original or Timothy Adult for rabbits over 8 months). Plain pellets are a healthier choice than mixes that contain seeds, nuts, corn or dried fruit, which are unnecessarily high in sugar and fat. Some rabbits over-consume pellets, which can lead to obesity and other health problems. If your rabbit has had a diet that consisted solely of pellets, introduce grass hay and slowly add a variety of greens, while gradually reducing pellet intake. Remember to make dietary changes slowly and to watch your rabbit closely. As you limit your rabbit's pellet intake, make sure he is eating an increased amount of hay and greens.

Do not restrict pellets too much if there is no other food source.

A daily guideline for adult rabbits who eat hay and/or greens is approximately 1/8 cup for every 2-4 lbs. of body weight.

Timothy based pellets are higher in fibre and lower in calcium than alfalfa pellets, but are not as readily available at most pet stores. These pellets can, however, be ordered from most vet clinics. Timothy pellets may be beneficial to rabbits who have stones or sludge, those who are overweight or those who suffer from intermittent soft stool. Timothy pellets may not be a good choice for long-haired rabbits (who need extra protein for hair growth) or thin rabbits.

## FRUITS/TREATS

Fruits are high in sugars and calories. Feeding too much fruit can lead to obesity and an overgrowth of harmful bacteria in the digestive tract, which can lead to G.I. stasis or diarrhea. Fruit intake should be limited to 1-2 tsp of fresh fruit per 5lbs of body weight per day.

**When feeding dried fruit as a treat - only feed about half of the amount as fresh. Remember that one raisin is the same as one whole grape!**

People food, such as bread and cookies, and commercially available rabbit treats, such as yogurt drops and seed and nut treats are also very high in sugar and calories and should be avoided. Chocolate is poisonous.

## SPECIAL CASES

Rabbits who are thin or ill can be given more pellets to maintain a healthy weight. A product such as Oxbow's Critical Care or plain canned pumpkin can be fed for additional fibre and/or calories.

Long-haired rabbits need more protein for hair growth than short-haired rabbits. A long-haired rabbit who eats well, but continually loses weight may need to have its diet supplemented with more pellets or limited alfalfa hay (if sludge or stones are not a problem).

Rabbits with tooth problems may have difficulty eating vegetables, hay or pellets. Sometimes it is helpful to cut hay and vegetables into small pieces or soften pellets with warm water when caring for these rabbits. Again, a product such as Oxbow's Critical Care or plain canned pumpkin (not pie filling) can be fed for additional fibre or calories, if necessary.

# You Look Marvelous! Tips for grooming.



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Grooming time is a good time to get to know your rabbit and to check for lumps, fleas, urine burn, sore hocks and other potential problems. It is recommended that you groom your rabbit weekly.

## **SHEDDING**

Rabbits generally molt four times a year, alternating between heavy and light sheds. Typical shed patterns include a quick, overall full-body shed; tufts; or a shed that starts at the head and works its way down the back. Regardless of how your rabbit sheds, brushing, petting your rabbit with damp hands, or gently plucking off loose tufts of fur are all effective means of removing loose fur.

Suggested brush/comb type tools for removing loose fur from your pet include wire slicker brushes, Zoom Grooms (a rubber brush that is made by the Kong Dog Toy Company), rubber grooming gloves, plastic or metal combs, or shedding blades (a tool with a serrated edge that is dragged lightly across the rabbit's fur). Whatever tool you choose, it is important to remove loose hair so that your rabbit doesn't ingest too much while grooming himself. Like cats, rabbits spend a lot of time grooming themselves, but unlike cats, rabbits can't vomit. Regular grooming will prevent your pet from ingesting too much hair, which can lead to gastrointestinal problems.

**Longhaired:** Longhaired breeds require special care that includes daily brushing and grooming regimens, therefore these types of rabbit are not recommended for children or busy families.

Longhaired rabbits have powdery white dander that produces a webbing effect in their fur and causes mats to develop close to the skin. Some owners invest in a professional 'angora pet blower' to blow air through the rabbit's DRY fur and release the dander to prevent matting. You can also use a hairdryer on high speed, COOL setting. Do not use heat, as it will dry the skin and cause more dander. Do not direct the air towards the face, ears or genitals. These devices can be noisy: if the noise appears to upset or stress the rabbit stop using it.

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Metal combs and mat rakes are most effective for grooming longhaired rabbits. Keeping the fur clipped short will help to keep matting to a minimum and make grooming a bit easier.

**Matting:** Rabbit skin is very delicate and can tear easily. If your rabbit has become matted, try to use a dematting tool or a mat rake to gently try to break up the mats. If you are extremely careful, and are able to feel where the skin ends and the mat begins, you can snip into the mat with small grooming (blunt) scissors and gently work at what's left with a metal comb. A few small snips can help to break the mat apart, making it easier to comb out. When using scissors, make sure that you do not pull the fur up to clip it (which increases your chances of snipping the skin) and always hold your fingers between the rabbit's skin and the scissors. If the mats are too severe, you may have to get your rabbit shaved by your veterinarian. Because it is easy to nick or scrape a rabbit's skin while shaving, only someone experienced in grooming rabbits should shave your pet.

## **NAIL TRIMS**

Like dogs, rabbits need to have their nails cut. Nails that have grown too long can become snagged in the carpet and break, which is very painful. Use a guillotine or scissor-type nail cutter to trim the nails. Nails should be cut every 4-8 weeks, depending upon rate of growth. You can use an emery board (nail file) between cuttings to stop the nails from becoming too sharp.

When cutting your rabbit's nails, be careful not to cut the quick (blood vessel inside of the nail). The quick is easy to see inside of light toenails, but it can be obscured in darker coloured nails. Holding a flashlight under dark coloured nails will help you to see the quick. Have styptic powder on hand to help stop the bleeding in case the blood vessel is accidentally cut.

Different techniques for cutting your pet's nails include the following:

**'Bunny Burrito Wrap':** Securely wrap the rabbit in a towel (this is called a 'Bunny Burrito Wrap'), cover

his eyes and hold him on your lap, securing him in place with your arm. Pull one foot out of the towel at a time and firmly hold it while clipping each nail. If you use this nail cutting technique, be sure that the rabbit is wrapped securely enough that he can not struggle, but not so tightly that the rabbit is uncomfortable. Covering a rabbit's eyes may calm him down.

**Cradling:** Cradle your rabbit on his back like you are holding a baby, or hold him in your lap. Gently pet his face and nose to help him to relax. Always be sure to sit on the floor when cutting a bunny's nails in this position. Some rabbits will startle with little or no warning. If you are sitting on the floor, the rabbit is less likely to fall or jump from your lap and hurt himself. Slowly return the rabbit to the upright position after you've finished cutting his nails.



**A Little Help from a Friend:** Some rabbits may struggle and not allow you to cut their nails by yourself. To avoid overstressing the rabbit have a friend hold the rabbit in a comfortable position while you cut the nails (or vice versa).

Ask your veterinarian for other suggestions or tips. You may have to experiment with several different nail cutting techniques before finding the one that you and your rabbit are most comfortable with. If you are not comfortable cutting your rabbit's nails yourself, you will have to take your rabbit to the veterinarian for regular nail trims.

While cutting the nails, take the opportunity to check the feet for sore hocks. On some rabbits, you will see calluses on the heels. This is normal, as long as they are pink - not red, sore or irritated.

## **CHECK YOUR RABBIT'S UNDERSIDE**

You should regularly check the underside of your rabbit, making sure that his bottom end is clean. Overweight and disabled rabbits will have a difficult time reaching their anus and may have a problem with hardened cecals getting stuck to their fur. Occasionally your rabbit's scent glands, which are located on both sides of the genital mound, may need to be cleaned. If you take your thumb and index finger and gently

press on the area beside the genital mound, the scent glands will become visible. A bit of a pungent odor and some dark waxy material are normal. If the waxy material is hardened, you can gently use a moistened Q-tip or soft cloth to soften it and drag it away from the area. Do not dig or irritate this area.

## **CLEANING**

Bathing can be extremely stressful for a rabbit. For this reason, rabbits should not be bathed. If a part of your rabbit becomes soiled (i.e., his bottom end from loose stool), you can spot bathe that part of the rabbit. It is best to use a moistened cloth to clean that area or to hold the rabbit's rear under warm running water and gently remove the soiled parts with your fingers. If bathing is unavoidable, never immerse the entire rabbit in water. Instead, put enough warm water in the sink so that the level is up to his belly. Sit his back feet in the water and, with your hand under the bunny's chest, gradually lower his front feet into the sink. Use a small cup and slowly pour water over the rabbit to soak and rinse his body, staying away from his face and ears. Only use warm water to bathe your pet. If water doesn't sufficiently clean the bunny, consult a rabbit savvy veterinarian for a shampoo that is safe to use on your rabbit.

Rabbits take a long time to dry. In the winter or in cold climates, you can use a hair dryer on the low setting (NOT on face or genitals) to help dry the rabbit. Keep the dryer at least 12" from the bunny. It is best, however, to towel dry the rabbit, keeping him away from drafts, the air conditioning vent, etc., until he is thoroughly dry.

## **EARS**

Check your rabbit's ears for wax build up. This is especially important for lop breeds and rear leg amputees. A cotton swab or your fingernail can be used to remove the wax from the outer canal. To avoid pushing the wax further down into the ear canal, do not stick the cotton swab further down than you can see. To clean the ears deep down, use a commercial ear cleaner. Your veterinarian can recommend one that is appropriate for your rabbit.

Also, be sure to check the ears for mites. Mites make the ears appear red, crusty and sore. Often, rabbits with mites will dig excessively at their ears and shake their heads frequently. Ears with a rank odour (possible infection) or ears with pus inside should be checked by your veterinarian immediately.

More detailed grooming information can be found on our web site.

## General Rabbit Health Guide:

This guide is not intended to replace veterinarian care. Have your rabbit examined regularly.

For further information visit our website to check out our "How To Videos".



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## Ear Mites:

*Symptoms:* Shaking head, digging at ears, crusty/bloody scabs in the ear. In severe cases, infestation can spread to other areas of the body. *Possible Treatment:* Veterinarian administered anti-parasitic medication.

## Teary eyes:

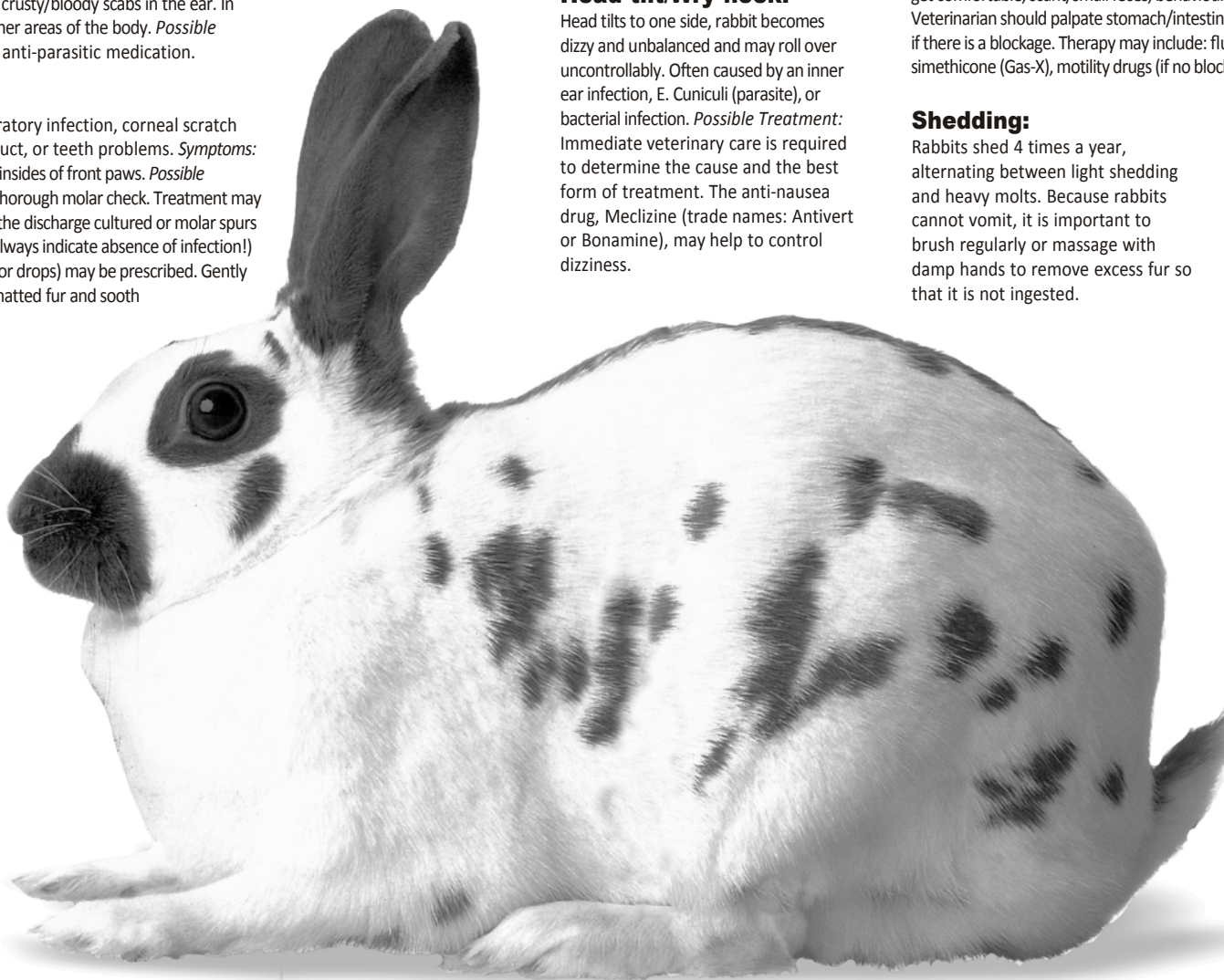
Discharge may indicate an upper respiratory infection, corneal scratch environmental irritants, blocked tear duct, or teeth problems. *Symptoms:* Matted fur around the eye, matted fur on insides of front paws. *Possible Treatment:* Examination should include a thorough molar check. Treatment may include having the tear ducts flushed and the discharge cultured or molar spurs removed. (Note: Clear discharge doesn't always indicate absence of infection!) Oral and topical antibiotics (eye ointment or drops) may be prescribed. Gently apply warm water compresses to soften matted fur and soothe the area then pat dry.

## Runny nose/sneezing:

Potential respiratory infection. *Symptoms:* Wet or runny nose, sneezing, congestion, matted fur on insides of front paws. *Possible Treatment:* Veterinary examination is necessary to determine the presence of infection. In case of infection, antibiotics should be prescribed by veterinarian.

## Malocclusion (misaligned teeth):

Misaligned incisors (front teeth) can grow long and pierce the tongue, roof of mouth or lips. Molars (back teeth) can develop sharp points (spurs), which can cut into the cheek or tongue and can lead to abscesses or loss of appetite. *Symptoms:* Change in eating habits (rabbit stops eating various foods or altogether), drooling, teary eyes, grinding teeth. *Possible Treatment:* Overgrown teeth need to be trimmed or filed. Severe cases may benefit from incisor removal. Have vet check molars with otoscope. Rabbit may need to be sedated for a thorough molar examination.



## Toenails:

Need regular trimming every 4-6 weeks using scissor or guillotine type clippers. A blood vessel (the quick) runs lengthwise through the nail, and can be easily seen in rabbits with light coloured nails. Apply styptic powder to stop the bleeding if the quick is accidentally cut.

## Sore Hocks:

Sitting on wire (especially Rex breed or overweight rabbits) or sitting on wet surfaces can cause ulcerated lesions on the rabbit's feet. *Symptoms:* Awkward movements, bald spots/scabs on bottom of feet. *Possible Treatment:* Clean lesions, apply antibiotic ointment and keep cage clean and dry. Provide a soft surface or resting board in the cage for the rabbit to sit on. Severe cases should be assessed by a veterinarian.

## Fur Mites:

Usually appear on the neck or spine areas first. *Symptoms:* Dandruff, dry skin, bald spots, thinning hair, scratching, white scaly skin. *Possible Treatment:* Veterinarian administered anti-parasitic medication.

## Head tilt/Wry neck:

Head tilts to one side, rabbit becomes dizzy and unbalanced and may roll over uncontrollably. Often caused by an inner ear infection, E. Cuniculi (parasite), or bacterial infection. *Possible Treatment:* Immediate veterinary care is required to determine the cause and the best form of treatment. The anti-nausea drug, Meclizine (trade names: Antivert or Bonamine), may help to control dizziness.

## GI stasis (decreased gastrointestinal motility):

Serious condition! If a rabbit has only eaten or defecated a small amount in the last 12 hours, seems listless or is uninterested in food or has other noticeable behavioural changes, he needs immediate veterinary attention. *Possible Causes:* Stress, diet changes, lack of fibre, too many carbohydrates, dehydration, an underlying condition causing pain (ie: molar spur, or gas), blockage of hair and food. *Symptoms:* Loss of or decreased appetite, sitting in a hunched position, inability to get comfortable, scant/small feces, behavioural changes. *Possible Treatment:* Veterinarian should palpate stomach/intestines and may take x-rays to determine if there is a blockage. Therapy may include: fluids (sub-q or children's Pedialyte), simethicone (Gas-X), motility drugs (if no blockage is present), or enzymes.

## Shedding:

Rabbits shed 4 times a year, alternating between light shedding and heavy molts. Because rabbits cannot vomit, it is important to brush regularly or massage with damp hands to remove excess fur so that it is not ingested.

## Fleas:

Look for black flecks or the fleas themselves moving through the fur close to the skin. *Symptoms:* Scratching, fur loss *Possible Treatment:* Some flea control products that are safe for kittens, such as Advantage (administered by a vet) can be used. *Do not use Frontline, which can be toxic to rabbits! Flea dips and flea baths should also NOT be used.*

## Determining Gender:

Determining the gender of young rabbits is not easy. Don't take chances! Keep rabbits separated until an accurate gender assessment can be made. Using your index and middle finger, press gently on either side of the genital mound. Males: a curved tapered protrusion should be visible. Testicles should appear when the rabbit is approximately 10 weeks old. Females: the protrusion will resemble a slit or be more V-shaped.

## Urine Burn/Scalding:

Prolonged contact with urine can cause burns to a rabbit's skin. *Possible causes:* a urinary track infection, kidney disease, spondylitis (fused vertebrae) or arthritis. *Symptoms:* Wet bottom, missing fur on bottom or red, irritated skin. *Possible Treatment:* Veterinary examination is necessary to assess cause. Keep bottom clean and dry.



# Finding the Right Cage for Your Rabbit



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Some rabbits spend many hours each day in a cage, while others are rarely confined. Regardless of how much time your rabbit spends in his cage, it is important that your choice of housing is one that is right for both you and your pet. There are many different housing arrangements that are appropriate for house rabbits.

## IMPORTANT CAGE CHARACTERISTICS

**Size:** The cage should be large enough to hold a litterbox, bowls for food, water and hay, toys, yet still allow the rabbit to have enough space to stretch out comfortably. Remember, young rabbits *will* grow, so the size of the cage should be based on how large the rabbit will be as a full grown adult, not on how large he is at the time you purchase the cage. Consider not only length and width of the cage, but height as well. The rabbit should be able to sit up and stretch without hitting his head on the top of the cage.

**Doors:** The cage should have a front door that the rabbit can easily hop through, unassisted, when it is unlatched. A front door should open to the side, not to the bottom, because the rabbit may get his foot caught in the cage door when entering or leaving the cage. In addition to a front door, a top door may also be helpful for times when you need to reach in and remove the rabbit or clean the cage. Be sure that all doors latch in both corners and not just in the middle so that your rabbit doesn't try to escape, getting caught in the bars. Also, remember that the door should be large enough for a litterbox to slide through.

**Construction:** It's very important to inspect any wire or plastic on the cage for sharp, unfinished edges or corners that could hurt your bunny. In addition, to prevent the rabbit from slipping or your rabbit's foot from getting caught, ramps and shelves should be sturdy and made from non-slip material without large exposed holes. Solid-walled cages (including glass or clear plastic) should not be used: they do not allow for enough ventilation or for the rabbit to feel a part of his surroundings.

**Special considerations:** Wire Bottom cages are NOT recommended.

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**IMPORTANT:** Don't choose a material for a resting surface that your rabbit will snack on (unless it is safe for chewing like cardboard or newspaper). If you find that your rabbit likes to chew, do not leave a towel or synthetic sheepskin in the cage with the bunny when you are not supervising. A bunny that loves to chew may gnaw holes in these objects and possibly develop a blockage - or even get his head stuck in a hole and strangle himself.

## NECESSITIES

**Food, water and hay containers:** For food and water, choose heavy ceramic crocks that can't be chewed or easily dumped. For water, you can use a bottle, if your rabbit will drink from one. If you do use a water bottle, be sure to change the water and clean the bottle regularly. Also, note that some rabbits tend to drink more out of a bowl than out of a bottle. Your rabbit's hay container could be anything from the end of the litterbox opposite to where the rabbit eliminates, to a traditional hay hopper or a hay bin (such as a stackable Rubbermaid bin).

**Litterbox:** Traditional cat litterboxes as well as plastic Rubbermaid-type tubs, and tubs from restaurant supply stores, make excellent litterboxes. The size of your bunny should dictate the size of the litterbox.

## SOME CAGE OPTIONS

### Solid Plastic Bottomed Rabbit

#### Advantages:

- Easy to clean.



#### Disadvantages:

- Rabbits that are not litter trained will be sitting in urine and feces.
- Too Small. Rabbit will quickly out grow its home.

## Metal Dog Crates/ X-Pens

#### Advantages:

- Easy to clean.
- A solid platform shelf (supported by notched dowels) can be added to medium/large dog kennels for extra space.
- Kennels collapse flat for easy storage.

#### Disadvantages:

- Stainless steel tray bottoms in crates provide no traction and need to be covered to prevent splay leg. (Note: Splay leg is a condition that causes the rabbit's legs splay out to the side. It is caused by weak or weakened connective tissue.)  
\*See NIC section for flooring options.\*
- Small breeds/babies may be able to escape or may get their heads caught between the bars and seriously injure themselves or be able to escape. When using these cages for small breeds or babies, it is recommended that you secure hardware cloth or screen around the outside of the cage with cable ties.



## CUSTOM BUILT CAGES

You can construct a cage or pen to meet your rabbit's needs. Some rabbits like to chew therefore a cage constructed with a wooden frame could easily be demolished. Never make a cage using chicken wire: a rabbit can chew through this thin wire and cut his mouth.

## NIC Cages

The Neat Idea Cubes (NIC) are 14x14 inch square metal grid panels that are used primarily for making shelving units. You can find these panels at some office supplies stores, Wal-Mart, Home Depot and Costco. These panels can be easily pieced together into a custom cage using plastic multi-purpose cable ties (zip-ties). The height, width, and length of the cage, as well as number and position of platforms and openings (e.g., top opening for easy cleaning) can be adjusted to suit your needs.

#### Advantages:

- Depending upon materials used, NIC cages can be cost-efficient compared to other large rabbit cages.



#### Disadvantages:

- These cages can be messy, we recommend a chloroplast liner for the bottom of the cage.
- These cages do not have floors. Some flooring options include grass mats, cardboard, thin plywood, linoleum, carpet runners or hard plastic floor protectors (from office furniture stores). Do not choose carpet or linoleum (if edges are left exposed) if the rabbit is prone to chewing. Whatever flooring option you choose, it's a good idea to fasten the walls to a sturdy flooring material to make the cage more stable. Office paper binder clips work well for this purpose.

## A FINAL NOTE

There are so many different options for housing your rabbit. Regardless of which you choose, it is important to remember that the area should feel like "home" to the rabbit. To help your rabbit settle in, start by setting up the cage in a room where the rabbit can exercise. The rabbit will soon learn that the cage is the place to go for food, water and the litterbox. Soon enough, you will find that your rabbit has accepted the cage as his personal space. However, if the cage is set up poorly, or is too small, your rabbit will see the cage as a place of confinement, rather than as a place to call home.

# 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

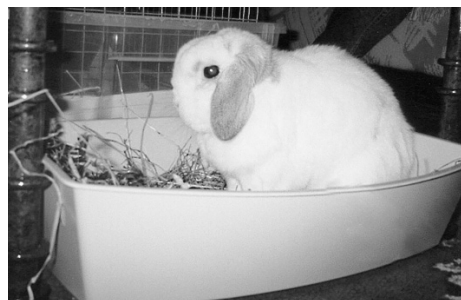
To litter train your rabbit, start by placing a litterbox inside your rabbit’s cage or pen, in the corner that he has chosen as his “bathroom” corner.

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 him 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 pellets made from compressed hardwoods. Wood stove pellets are sold at home improvement stores or stores that sell wood stoves. Stall bedding for horses is available at tack shops or farm stores.
3. Products made from recycled, shredded or compressed newspaper, e.g., Yesterdays 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, Yesterdays 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. Pine and cedar shavings should be avoided.
- 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. We recommend using caution when using litters made from corncobs.



## Spaying and Neutering: Why it's so important



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It happened almost overnight: your cute, well-mannered little rabbit reached puberty. Suddenly, your baby has become unmanageable. He has taken an unexpected 'interest' in your ankles. The circling and honking are certainly very cute, but the nipping and mounting definitely must stop. Plus, your rabbit has seemingly forgotten why you've provided him with a litterbox. Sound familiar? Read on to find out what you can do to help your rabbit return to his sweet, well-mannered self.

### BEHAVIOURAL BENEFITS

Upon reaching sexual maturity (at 3-4 months for small breeds and 4-6 month for larger breeds), a rabbit's behaviour becomes driven principally by his or her hormones. While the courtship behaviour (honking and circling) exhibited by an unaltered rabbit is cute and endearing at first, most of the changes your rabbit will go through after reaching sexual maturity are considered to be unacceptable. *For example:*

1. Your rabbit may start spraying urine to mark territory. Even female rabbits may do this. If you have ever been the object of your rabbit's affections and been 'marked' with urine, you know that it is not a pleasant gift. In addition, high hormone levels of unaltered rabbits give their urine a foul odour.
2. Your previously litter trained rabbit may suddenly stop using his litterbox. The urge to mark territory can be overwhelming for an unaltered rabbit. In addition to spraying, your rabbit may start to drop feces around his area to mark territory.
3. Your previously cute, cuddly rabbit may suddenly become aggressive. Females may become especially 'nest' or 'cage' protective and start lunging, nipping and growling.
4. Chewing and digging activities may become intensified. Note that chewing and digging are

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normal rabbit behaviours, but these activities sometimes become intensified in unaltered rabbits. 5. Your rabbit may start incessantly mounting things such as other pets, your legs, your feet, etc. Rabbits - especially males - may become increasingly interested in family members, other pets or inanimate objects in a new, sexual way. Some females will mount, too. Your rabbit may start honking and circling the object of his or her affections. Honking and circling are rabbit courtship behaviours. Some rabbits continue to honk and circle even after being altered.

6. Same-sex siblings or other previously bonded pals of the same sex may start to fight to establish dominance. Changes in behaviour associated with sexual maturity affect your unaltered rabbit's ability to keep friendships or make new ones. Altered rabbits of the same sex are much more likely to live in harmony than their unaltered counterparts.

We know that spaying and neutering deters, if not eliminates, most negative behaviours associated with sexual maturity within 3 months. It is unfair to surrender your rabbit to a shelter or to an outdoor or basement hutch because he or she has become a hormonally-charged nuisance. Have your pet spayed or neutered and give him a chance to remain an important member of your family.

### HEALTH BENEFITS

Unspayed female rabbits have a very high chance of developing uterine, mammary or ovarian cancer during their lives. Statistics indicate that up to 85-90% of all unspayed females will be affected by cancer, by age 3. The incidence of testicular cancer in unneutered males is lower, but does occur. By contrast, spay and neuter surgeries, if performed

by a rabbit savvy veterinarian, carry little risk (success rates should be close to 100%). For more information, see our handout on finding a rabbit savvy veterinarian.

### PREVENTING UNWANTED LITTERS

In addition to the many health and behavioural benefits of having your rabbits spayed or neutered, there is also the benefit of preventing pregnancies. Female rabbits do not come into heat in the same way dogs do. They are able to become pregnant at any time.

Often people will decide to get two litter mates, supposedly of the same sex, so that their

new pet will have company. However, it is extremely difficult to accurately determine the gender of young rabbits before the male's testicles descend (at approximately 12-14 weeks of age).

Many times, the unsuspecting owners will actually have two rabbits of the opposite sex. Within months, they will mostly likely have experienced the birth of a number of new litters, which often results in the offspring being surrendered to shelters or 'set free' in a park and left to fend for themselves.

Please note that house rabbits are domestic prey animals who have no natural instincts of how to care for themselves in the wild. They are easy targets for cats, dogs and wildlife and are unable to distinguish between safe and toxic plants. Most will die shortly after being released. This sad scenario is easily avoided by having your pets spayed and neutered.

You should only trust an experienced rabbit vet to assess the gender of a young rabbit, although there are times when even a vet will have difficulty until the rabbit is older. The best way to ensure that unwanted litters don't occur is to NEVER introduce two unaltered rabbits, no matter what the age. Baby rabbits need to stay with their mother until they are weaned at 8 weeks old. Cute little babies may look small but they are able to conceive by 12-14 weeks old. ALL siblings should be separated from one another after they have been weaned and until they have been accurately sexed and spayed or neutered. Leaving "baby" siblings together, or trying to

separate all the girls from the boys is a mistake that many people make. It only takes one wrongly sexed rabbit to create a number of new litters. DO NOT take this chance.

Finding homes for unwanted litters is not an easy task, and often leads to more rabbits being surrendered to shelters. For every litter that is produced, a number of shelter rabbits are euthanized because there are simply more rabbits in need of homes than there are homes willing to adopt them.

**Male rabbits are still fertile up to a month after being neutered and should remain separated from unaltered female rabbits during this time.**

### A FINAL NOTE

If your rabbit is not spayed or neutered, please consider having this very important surgery performed on your pet. Your rabbit will not become fat and lazy or lose his personality after the surgery. In fact, your bunny will be happier and healthier for it. In addition, you will be able to allow your rabbit to enjoy the company of another without contributing to the domestic rabbit overpopulation problem. By having your pet spayed or neutered, you will be indirectly saving the lives of shelter rabbits by not producing new litters.



## Finding a vet for your rabbit.



**Contact Us:**  
[info@ontariorabbits.org](mailto:info@ontariorabbits.org)

**Website:**  
[www.ontariorabbits.org](http://www.ontariorabbits.org)

Veterinarians who primarily examine and treat cats and dogs may not be adequately trained and experienced in rabbit health issues or rabbit medicine to properly treat your pet. Rabbits have some unique characteristics and bodily processes, therefore finding a veterinarian who is knowledgeable in these areas is crucial to your pet's health and well being. In addition, it is important to build a rapport with your veterinarian through regular bunny wellness check ups even before your rabbit becomes ill.

### WHERE TO START?

The first step to finding a suitable veterinarian for your rabbit is to decide what characteristics you consider to be important in a veterinarian. Of course, up-to-date knowledge about rabbit health issues is very important, but there are also other equally important qualities to look for when choosing a veterinarian. A veterinarian should be able and willing to learn, should be willing to listen to you when you describe symptoms, should suggest treatment options, and should allow you to consider those options based on your own knowledge of your pet's personality and behaviour. After all, you know better than anyone what is normal for your rabbit.

You also have to be able to communicate with your veterinarian. Knowing you and your rabbit will help your veterinarian decide which treatment options are best when your rabbit is ill.

After you decide what qualities you consider to be important in a veterinarian, you should to set up a consultation with several veterinarians. Check your local yellow pages for veterinarians who mention "exotics" in their advertisement. Phone them and arrange to speak to them at their convenience or make an appointment with the veterinarian in person. You may even want to take your rabbit in for a bunny wellness check up and speak to the veterinarian at that time. This will give you an opportunity to see how the veterinarian and clinic staff interact with you and your rabbit before an emergency happens. If you are comfortable with the veterinarian and clinic, and have been able to "screen" them during a regular check up,

chances are that you will feel more at ease taking your bunny there when he is ill.

It is important to take an active role in your rabbit's health by being familiar with rabbit health issues and knowing the basics about rabbit health care.

### KNOW THE FACTS

#### Indoor or companion rabbits vs livestock rabbits:

There is no right numerical answer to the question 'how many indoor or companion rabbits do you have as patients', but obviously, the more indoor or companion rabbits the veterinarian sees during the year, the better. Don't assume that just because the veterinarian treats livestock rabbits that he or she would be a good choice for your pet. Livestock rabbits are a business: companion rabbits are family members.

**Spaying and Neutering:** Even a really qualified veterinarian will occasionally lose a patient, usually because of an undiagnosed problem, but veterinarians should have high success rates (very close to 100%) with spay and neuter surgeries.

Other facts about spaying and neutering that you should know include:

1. Both the ovaries and the uterus should be removed during the spay to prevent ovarian and uterine cancers and to decrease negative, hormonally driven behaviours.
2. Closed neuters are preferable to open neuters.
3. Pain medication should be given after spays/neuters and other major surgeries. Rabbits that are in pain recover much slower than those that have been given pain medication after a major surgery. Common analgesics currently used in rabbits include opioid derivatives [i.e., butorphanol (torbugesic) or buprenorphine] and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs [NSAIDs; i.e., aspirin, flunixin (banamine), ketoprofen (anafen) or Meloxicam (Metacam)]. **Anesthetic:** Isoflurane gas is the safest anesthetic for rabbits. The rabbit should be masked unless the veterinarian has a lot of experience with intubating. Intubating is more difficult because rabbits have small tracheas.

**Surgical Procedures:** Rabbits cannot vomit. Therefore, they do not need to be fasted overnight before surgery. Some veterinarians like to remove food from the rabbit's cage an hour before surgery, and this is acceptable. Because rabbits are not fasted, their mouths should be rinsed of all food debris before being anesthetized. **Rabbit Safe Antibiotics:** Before prescribing antibiotics, a culture and sensitivity test should be performed to determine which bacteria, if any, is causing the illness. Giving an antibiotic, such as Baytril, for all ailments before investigating the cause contributes to the existence of resistant bacteria. Sometimes a veterinarian may start a rabbit on an antibiotic while waiting for the culture and sensitivity test results.

Antibiotics from the penicillin family, including Amoxicillin and Clavamox, should never be given orally to a rabbit. These antibiotics can destroy the beneficial intestinal flora, possibly causing death. Some forms of Penicillin can be used on rabbits if given as an injection, but it is considered more of a 'second line' antibiotic choice.

**GI Stasis:** Avoid a doctor who suggests surgery to treat gastrointestinal (GI) stasis, unless all other options have been exhausted. Motility drugs, such as Reglan (Metoclopramide) or Propulsid (Cisapride) can be used to help get the gut moving again if



there isn't an obstruction. If there is a complete obstruction -which can be diagnosed by an x-ray-prolonged ~~of~~ gut motility drugs may cause the gut to rupture.

Keeping the rabbit well hydrated with sub-cutaneous fluids is also very important in treating a GI slowdown. Some veterinarians will also choose to use enzymes, such as Papain and Bromelain (commonly found in Papaya and Pineapple), which may help break down mucus binding the obstruction, or more powerful, animal-derived enzymes, which are thought to break down proteins, carbohydrates and fats. Other veterinarians feel there is no real evidence that the use of enzymes will help to break up these masses.

**Teeth:** Rabbits can develop molar spurs (sharp edges) that may cause painful abrasions to the cheek or tongue. If your rabbit's eating habits change, it may be a sign that the rabbit has developed a problem with his teeth. The veterinarian should use an otoscope or speculum to check the molars, which are deep inside a rabbit's mouth. If molar spurs have formed, they need to be clipped or ground down (performed under a general anesthetic) or filed. Rabbits with maloccluded or mis-aligned incisors need to have their teeth trimmed regularly or the incisors removed. Teeth should be checked during each bunny wellness visit. A rabbit with a history of tooth problems should be checked more frequently to catch problems early. **Weekly maintenance checks:** Even if you take your rabbit to the veterinarian regularly for check ups, it is important to perform regular "maintenance" checks at home. Because rabbits hide symptoms of illness, these checks will help you catch problems early on. You should check your rabbit's ears, eyes and incisors, as well as feel for lumps and bumps, etc. weekly. **Continuing Education:** Rabbit medicine is an ever-changing, evolving field. It is important that veterinarians continue to learn about the latest treatments either by reading, consulting with other veterinarians or by attending conferences. Remember that rabbits have traditionally been thought of as "disposable pets." This attitude is changing and, as we take more of an active interest in our pets' health, more rabbits are reaching a ripe old age. Nonetheless, rabbit medicine continues to change and evolve, and there is still so much we do not know about our furry little friends.

### THINGS TO REMEMBER

If you do not feel comfortable with a particular veterinarian, continue your search. Do not choose a veterinarian based on the cost of treatment or the proximity of the clinic to your house. Although a recommendation from another person is helpful, do not base your opinion solely on their recommendation. This is an important decision. You need to choose a veterinarian who is right for you and, of course, for your bunny. You can find a link to Ontario veterinarians that are known to treat rabbits on our web site at <http://www.ontariorabbits.org>