



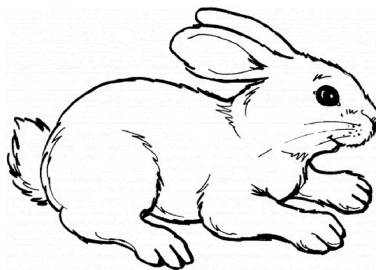
MONTGOMERY
ANIMAL HOSPITAL

Rabbit Care Guidelines



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Introduction to Pet Rabbits

Rabbits make great pets with the proper care. They are friendly, intelligent, quiet, and full of personality. However, they do require more care and consideration than most people know before doing some research.

Rabbits usually live 8-12 years. They require some space to move around and exercise- the more time to do this, the better- but they can either be free roaming house pets or kept in appropriate enclosures if they are given daily exercise under supervision.

Rabbits can be litter-box trained, especially if they are free roaming. They produce frequent poop as small, dry pellets that are easy to clean. They will likely defecate occasionally while roaming around even if litter box trained.

Rabbits are very social, and enjoy the company of other rabbits. They can be individual pets, but tend to be happier when they have at least one other bonded rabbit with whom to socialize. The British Veterinary Association (BVA) recommends rabbits to be housed in pairs or groups for their welfare.

Rabbits tend to hide signs of disease until they are very, very sick. This is because they are prey animals, and in the wild showing signs of illness can make you a target for predators. Regular veterinary check-ups are important to help monitor for signs of disease.





Diet

Hay: Grass hay should make up the majority of your rabbit's diet. It provides almost all the essential vitamins, minerals, and proteins your rabbit needs, and the chewing promotes proper wear of the teeth and good mental stimulation. Good varieties for adult rabbits include *timothy, meadow, oat, rye, barley, or Bermuda grasses*.

Legume hays (*alfalfa, clover, pea, bean, or peanut*) are very high in calories, protein, and calcium, and should only be fed as a treat, if at all. This is with the exception of young (0-6 month old) rabbits. Young rabbits should receive alfalfa hay, which has a higher protein and calcium content that is good for growth. They can transition to grass hays around 6 months of age.

Rabbits should have hay available to them at all times and consume a loose pile roughly the size of their bodies each day. Hay should smell fresh. Never feed damp or moldy hay. Oxbow and Kaytee are good brands readily available in pet stores.



Greens: Fresh greens are a good source of water and micronutrients for your rabbit. They are the second-most important component of your rabbit's diet after hay. In general, the darker the green, the more nutritious. Avoid iceberg lettuce as it is extremely low in nutrients. Feed a variety (at least 3 types) of greens every day for a balanced diet. Feed up to one packed cup of greens per 2lbs of rabbit per day.

Suggested greens: baby greens (salad mix counts as one type), beet tops, bok choy, basil, broccoli (top and leaves), Brussels sprouts, cabbage (red, green, Chinese), carrot tops, celery leaves, chickory, collard greens, dandelion leaves and flower, dock, endive, escarole, kale, lettuce, mustard greens, parsley, radicchio, rainbow or Swiss chard, water cress.

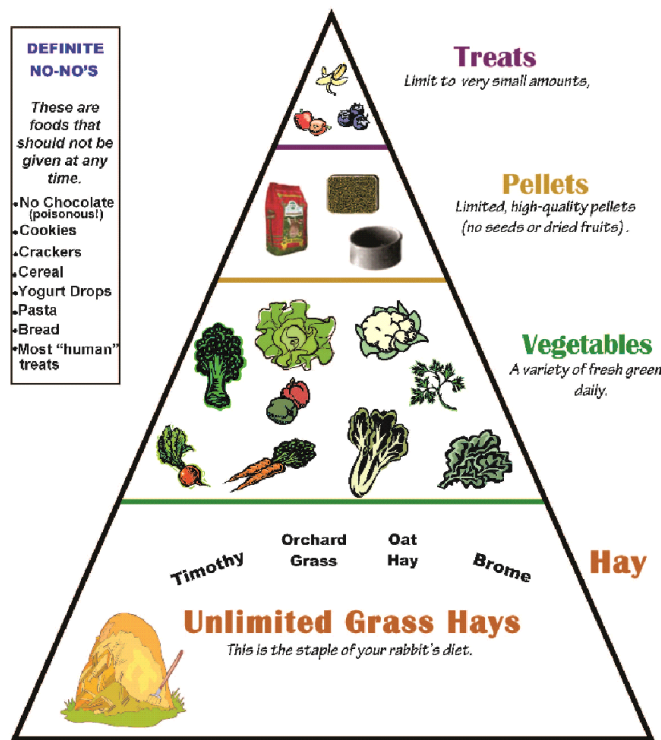
Fruits and Vegetables: A small amount (1-2 tbsp) of fresh fruits and vegetables can be offered daily to stimulate your rabbit and is a good way to check on your rabbit's appetite. If he or she won't eat a treat food that usually gets gobbled up, that might indicate they are feeling sick. Avoid starchy and fatty foods as they can cause serious GI disease and obesity: no corn, peas, grains, nuts, seeds, or sugary foods.

Suggested treats: apple, banana, bell pepper, berries (including strawberry tops), carrot, flowers (only if organic and from your garden: nasturtiums, pansies, roses, and snap dragons), grapes, kiwi, mango, melon, peach, pear, pineapple, squash.

Pellets: A rabbit eating a variety of hay, greens, and occasional fruits and vegetables **DOES NOT NEED pellets at all**. If you do choose to offer them, they should comprise only up to 10% of your rabbit's diet. Pellets do not allow the rabbit to perform normal chewing activity and your rabbit does not feel full after eating. This leads to overeating and obesity, and can also lead to behavior problems like chewing on furniture as the rabbit tries to satisfy his or her need to chew. They are very dry and rabbits often do not drink enough water to compensate. Pellets are best used as training tools or on a rare day when hay or varied greens are unavailable. For those occasions, choose a grass hay pellet (like timothy) and avoid the mixes with fruit or nuts. Never offer your rabbit more than 1/4 cup pellets in a day (1/8 cup for rabbits less than 5lbs).

Water: Water should be plentiful and changed daily. It can be offered either in a bottle or a heavy bowl that won't tip over. A variety of sources is best. Rabbits eating lots of greens may not drink much water.

Rabbit Food Pyramid

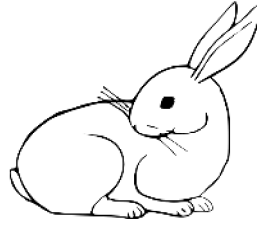


Thanks to the San Diego House Rabbit Society for the graphic.

Cecotrophes: Rabbits have a GI tract that is well adapted to digesting food that many other animals could not. One way they survive is by creating cecotrophes, a type of stool that is packed with nutrients. Cecotrophes are larger and softer than normal droppings, green-ish in color, coated in mucus, and have a strong odor. Healthy rabbits will generally eat cecotrophes directly from the anus, so you may rarely see them. If you note a large number of cecotrophes in the cage this is not normal and your rabbit should be seen by a veterinarian.



To the left: a normal cecotroph
To the right: normal rabbit feces



Housing

Rabbits need room to exercise safely for at least a few hours every day. This promotes good GI tract function, healthy bones and muscles, and provides mental stimulation to decrease inappropriate chewing and aggression.

Cage/Hutch: This home base needs to be tall enough for the rabbit to stand up on his hind legs, have an area to rest, food and water, and a litter box. The specific size will vary based on the size and breed of your rabbit.

The cage needs to be easy to clean and resistant to chewing, so metal is usually the best choice. Provide a variety of surfaces for foot health. The litter box should have low sides so the rabbit can easily jump in and out. Place the box where your rabbit has eliminated, and then put some of your rabbit's droppings in the box and even some hay to help train your rabbit where to go. Pelleted and soft litters are the best substrates for the litter box. Cat litter can cause life-threatening impactions if eaten by your rabbit. Avoid cedar and pine shavings because they release aromatic oils that can cause respiratory problems.



Rabbits do best in cool temperatures, so place the cage out of the direct sun from windows or in a shaded outdoor area. Rabbits can die of heat stroke. Outdoor hutches must be secure from predators and provide shelter from rain, heat, and cold. Straw bedding can be used for insulation in the winter, and make sure that the water does not freeze.

A hiding area can be a clean litter box, cardboard box if replaced when chewed, straw baskets, or tubes. Be creative. Use washable bedding like fake fleece or dish towels. Avoid carpet squares since they will cause obstruction if eaten.

Exercise Area: The easiest way to allow your rabbit to roam safely is to use the fencing panels sold for dogs. They should be 3 ft high for small rabbits and 4 ft for giant breeds. The pen will keep your rabbit away from electrical cords, furniture, and other pets. The pen can also be used outside to let your rabbit have access to grassy areas. Never leave your rabbit outdoors unattended.



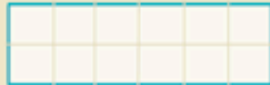
Alternatively, allowing your rabbit to be free in the house can be a wonderful way to interact with your pet as long as you pay special attention to your rabbit's safety. Block all escape routes, remove toxic substances from within reach, and prevent access to electrical, computer, and phone cords. Ensure that no other animals are loose in the house who could harm your rabbit.

Toys: Rabbits love to chew. Wooden chew toys for birds, untreated baskets, cardboard toilet paper tubes, and shredded paper are all good choices. Hiding treats or hay within cardboard can imitate foraging in the wild and provides good mental stimulation for your rabbit. Many rabbits also enjoy small objects that make noise or can be nosed around, like metal jar lids, hard plastic baby toys, or balls.



Rabbit Housing Size Guide

MINIMUM SPACE



+




Living Space
12 sq. ft
(1.1 sq. m)

Exercise Space
32 sq. ft
(3 sq. m)

To calculate the floor space, multiply length by width
e.g. 6' x 2' = 12 square feet

EXAMPLES

Living Space	Exercise Space	Total
 Hutch 6' x 2'	 Run 8' x 4'	44 sq. ft.
 Shed 6' x 4'	 Aviary 6' x 6'	60 sq. ft.
 Dog Crate 4' x 3'	 Wire Pen 6' x 6'	48 sq. ft.
 Spare Room 12' x 10'		120 sq. ft.

Ideally the living space and exercise space should be one large area, or two areas your rabbit can move between freely, for example cage connected to a pen or a hutch linked with a tunnel or ramp to a secure run.

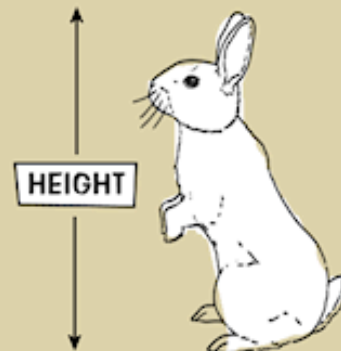
MINIMUM DIMENSIONS



The length of your rabbit when fully stretched out resting.
2' (60cm) for small/medium
3' (90cm) large/giant



The distance your rabbit covers in 3-4 hops. One hop is about 18" (45cm) for a small rabbit, or 2' (60cm) for a large rabbit.



Tall enough for your rabbit to stand on its back legs without touching the roof. About 2' (60cm), or 3' (90cm) for giants.

Understanding Your Rabbit's Habits - www.theRabbitHouse.com

Veterinary Care



At a minimum, rabbits need to see the veterinarian every year for a full physical exam. We recommend bi-annual exams every 6 months because rabbits are so good at hiding signs of disease. Regular exams and early detection are important.

Spay/Neuter: Female rabbits should be spayed to prevent the development of uterine cancer. The ideal time to spay your rabbit is when she is between 4-6 months old, but older rabbits should be spayed as well. Male rabbits can become more aggressive and start spraying urine to mark their territory, usually when they're between 8-18 months old. Neutering your male rabbit when he's 4 - 8 months old is the best way to help prevent these unwanted behaviors. Once the behavior is learned, neutering can decrease spraying but may not eliminate it entirely.

Spaying and neutering is recommended, but it is also important to consider the risk of anesthesia in rabbits. Studies show that somewhere between 1 in 20 to 1 in 50 rabbits will have severe complications from anesthesia, up to and including death. We want to be transparent about this risk so that you can make a choice you are comfortable with. We take every measure to make rabbit anesthesia as safe as possible and have rarely had complications, but they can happen even with our best efforts.

Vaccination: There is one vaccine available for rabbits in the U.S. It is for the condition "Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease (Virus)", abbreviated RHD or RHDV. This is a contagious disease that causes sudden death. It is found in many countries around the world, both in wild and domestic rabbit populations. It is transmitted through direct contact, contact with contaminated materials like food or bedding, or even in some cases through insects. It is present in the U.S., and we recommend vaccinating all rabbits for RHD. It is especially important to vaccinate your rabbit if they go outside at all. There are no specific treatments, only prevention.



Dental disease: Dental disease can come from the shape of your rabbit's jaws (if the teeth do not align properly) or can be acquired by improper diet or disease. These conditions require life-long care because rabbit teeth grow continuously throughout their lives. Proper veterinary exams and then treatment- usually under anesthesia- will be critical to keeping your rabbit alive and healthy. Rabbits with dental disease often need to be re-examined every 2-3 months depending on severity. Dental disease is extremely common in pet rabbits, and is best (and most cheaply) treated well before it becomes so severe that your rabbit stops eating.



When to call:

Appetite and Stool Production: Keep track of your rabbit's stool production. It's often easier to tell that your rabbit is producing less stool than if he or she is eating slightly less hay. If your rabbit's stool production or appetite slows down for a day but he or she is acting normally (active, alert, and pooping), then it is generally safe to wait a day. Decreased appetite or stool production for 2 days or if your rabbit is acting sick (quiet, listless) means it's time for veterinary care. Liquid stool is never normal in a rabbit and requires immediate medical care.

Respiratory signs: a rabbit should have a clean dry nose and bright eyes. If your rabbit is sneezing, coughing, has a runny or crusty nose, or excessive tears or eye 'gunk' then we need to see him or her. Rabbits are very sensitive to fumes in the air. Keep your rabbit away from perfumes, air fresheners, cleaning products, etc.

Urinary signs: Normal rabbit urine can be yellow to dark orange-red in color, and can be clear or cloudy white. If your rabbit is straining to urinate, has bloody urine, stops urinating, or has other changes to urinary habits; then he or she requires medical care. Bladder stones and other urinary issues are unfortunately very common in rabbits.



Additional Resources



The House Rabbit Resource Network
<https://rabbitresource.org/>



Association of Exotic Mammal Veterinarians
<https://aemv.org/>



Veterinary Partner
veterinarypartner.com



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www.MontgomeryAnimalHospital.com

If you have questions, we are only a phone call away (513-791-7912).

Thank you for allowing us to care for your pet.

