

# How to Care for Your Rabbit

The Responsible Animal Care Society (TRACS) would like to thank you for adopting one or more rabbits. For company for each other, we'd recommend two bunnies, sterilized. Sisters get along great together. It's really sad to see a bunny alone, particularly if their humans don't have a lot of time to spend with them. Rabbits are very sociable animals and form close bonds.

We hope that the following guidelines will help you to keep your rabbit healthy and happy for many years.

## What do I need to care for my rabbit?

- Cage or enclosure
  - Bedding and litter
  - Rabbit food and water
  - Toys
  - Rabbit care items

## Cages and Enclosures

Every effort should be made to give your rabbit space and exercise....they can exercise themselves if the enclosures are big enough. While we discourage cages in favour of enclosures, it sometimes may be necessary for a cage -- the bigger, the better.

The suggested minimum cage size for an individual rabbit is 2 feet by 5 feet.

Enclosures should be fine wire mesh, 1/2" square for baby bunnies; 1inch square is alright for adults. Ideally, there should be a top to avoid predation, so 6 foot fencing is handy. The floor of the enclosure should be completely covered with strong wire mesh to avoiding digging out (the mesh can then be covered with soil for their digging pleasure) OR the fence should be buried in the ground to a depth of 1 foot.

Hutches should be raised off the ground to avoid moisture build-up, so a gently sloping ramp works well. The hutch should have an enclosed area with straw for bedding and an entrance big enough to allow the bunny to pass through. The top or side wall should be constructed so that it can be opened for easy cleaning. The outdoor area of the hutch can contain a food bowl and a water bottle or bowl, and should be easily accessible for filling.

Many rabbit cages are made with wire floors over pull out pans, designed to make cleaning easier. However, wire floors can be uncomfortable, so it is best to get a cage without wire floors. Wire floors can be covered with wood or a grass/sisal mat.

The door to the cage should be about large enough to get the rabbit, litter box, food bowl and other items, through easily. A side door is probably best, as a top-opening cage makes getting the rabbit in and out a little harder. It is best if the rabbit can get in and out on its own. The opening should have smooth edges, or plastic guard strips over the edges of the wires so the rabbit is not injured getting in and out.

You can also be creative and construct your own cage. All sorts of materials are available at hardware stores, and homemade cages are much roomier than store-bought cages.

It is important to allow your rabbit some time each day to run around indoors, outdoors, or both. Most rabbits can be litter

trained, so they can exercise indoors. You will need to bunny proof your area, especially if wires and cords are accessible.

Rabbits enjoy being outdoors and munching on grass. If you allow your rabbit to be outside, make sure the grass is untreated. Also be sure your rabbit is in an enclosed space and is protected from predators and the elements. It is best to only let your rabbit outside with supervision.

## **Bedding and Litter**

Rabbit cages should be covered with a layer of bedding. Straw or hay is a good bedding material. Grass/sisal mats are also options. Fleece blankets, towels or carpets make comfortable mats, as long as your rabbit is not unravelling and eating them.

Cedar and pine shavings should be avoided due to concerns over the aromatic oils they release. If wood shavings are used, hardwood such as aspen is the best choice.

Most rabbits can be litter trained, although babies take longer to train than older bunnies. Also, rabbits that are spayed or neutered are more easily trained. House Organic litters, made from alfalfa, oat, citrus or paper are recommended. Stay away from litters made from softwoods, like pine or cedar. You can also use hay as litter. It is helpful to put several layers of newspaper under the hay, to absorb urine.

Clean the litter box every day or two, to encourage your rabbit to use it. Use white vinegar to rinse the box out, and soak for a couple of hours, if need be.

## **Food and Water**

### **Water**

You will need to purchase a special water bottle that attaches to your rabbit cage. Provide your rabbit with clean water at all times.

Wash and refill the bottle daily, even if it is not empty. Water bottles do not function when the temperature is below freezing

(outdoor rabbits). In this case, a heavy bowl is best with water freshened up several times a day. Or a heated water source works, too.

## Food

Rabbits need three types of food: hay, pellets and fresh produce.

Hay is an important part of the rabbit diet as it aids in digestion and helps prevent gastrointestinal disorders. Alfalfa and clover are fine for young bunnies, but are too high in protein and calcium for older rabbits. By about 6 months of age, the amount of alfalfa and clover should be reduced and by one year, your rabbit should receive only grass hays such as Timothy or oat hay.

Pellets are rich and balanced in nutrients, and provide a boost of nutrition for rabbits. However, they are high in calories and may promote obesity and related health problems, when overused. Many experts recommend restricting the amount of pellets fed, and compensating with fresh vegetables and grass hays.

Choose a fresh, good quality pellet. For adults, the amount should be carefully regulated, depending on the size (weight) of the rabbit. As a rule, give about 1/4 cup for rabbits 5-7 lb, 1/2 cup for 8-10 lb rabbits, and 3/4 cup for 11-15 lb rabbits per day. Baby rabbits can have pellets available at all times, decreasing to 1/2 cup per 6 lb. of body weight by around 6 months.

Buy pellets as fresh as possible and store them in a cool dry place.

Produce is an important and especially enjoyable part of your rabbit's diet. Depending on the size of the rabbit, 2-4 cups of fresh veggies should be given per day. A variety must be fed daily to ensure a balanced diet. If a rabbit is used to eating mainly pellets, the change must be made gradually to allow the rabbit's digestive system time to adjust. Suggested vegetables include parsley, broccoli, collard greens, mustard greens, dandelion greens, turnip greens, endive, romaine lettuce, kale, spinach,

carrots and carrot tops. However, kale, spinach and mustard greens are high in oxalates so their feeding should be limited to 3 meals per week. Beans, cauliflower, cabbage, corn, iceberg lettuce, rhubarb and potatoes may cause problems and should be avoided. Wash vegetables well, and only feed dandelions that are known to be pesticide free.

Vegetables should be introduced to bunnies around 12 weeks of age, in small quantities and one at a time. As more vegetable are added watch for diarrhea and discontinue the most recently added vegetable if this occurs. Over time, the amount of vegetables fed is increased, and the amount of pellets decreased, so that by 1 year of age the adult feeding recommendations are followed.

Rabbits enjoy treats, but these should be restricted. Fresh fruit is favourite - - 1-2 tablespoons is generally plenty. Treats sold in pet stores marketed for rabbits are generally unnecessary and in some cases could cause digestive problems due to their high carbohydrate or sugar content. They are best avoided.

## **Care and Handling**

Rabbit teeth and nails grow constantly and must be cared for. Teeth must grind against each other in order to remain at a proper length. If the teeth are misaligned, the rabbit's teeth will need to be clipped periodically so she can eat -- usually every two or four weeks. This can be done by a veterinarian or someone skilled in the practice. Rabbit nails need clipping from time to time. Your vet can do this or you can cut them beyond the blood vein in the nail with a rabbit nail clipper.

One of the biggest health concerns in rabbits is hairballs. Rabbits shed their coat every three months, and ingest significant amounts of fur while grooming. While shedding, your rabbit should be brushed daily. Rabbits can't vomit hairballs. The hair forms a mass that fills the rabbit's stomach and can kill her or make her very ill. Preventing hairballs is crucial for all rabbits. A

daily ration of hay and adequate exercise are important preventative procedures.

All rabbits should have a yearly examination by a veterinarian. You should also seek help if your rabbit shows any of the following symptoms of ill health: sneezing or sniffing, discharge from the eyes or nose, diarrhea, decreased food intake, change in urine or feces, tilted head or weight gain or loss.

Avoid the use of dog products on your rabbit including shampoo and flea powder.

Having your rabbit spayed or neutered is highly recommended, even if they are an "only" rabbit. Unspayed female rabbits often develop ovarian or uterine cancer between two and five years of age. A house rabbit can live eight to ten years. When done by a qualified veterinarian, the risk to your rabbit is small compared to the benefits. Male rabbits benefit from neutering in that aggressive behaviour is calmed and they will no longer spray urine to mark their territory. In addition, altered pairs of rabbits can enjoy the companionship of a pair bond without the resulting offspring, so many of whom never find homes.

## **Toys**

Rabbits enjoy having something to safely chew on and need to chew to wear down their teeth, which grow. They also enjoy having places to hide.

There are a wide variety of hard plastic baby toys and rabbit toys available, although one doesn't need to invest much to come up with great toys for rabbits. Cardboard paper towel or toilet rolls work well, as do cylindrical cardboard oatmeal containers with both ends cut out. Paper bags or cardboard boxes make fun hiding places that double as chew toys. Untreated scrap wood or firewood with bark and small tree branches can also be used (avoid cherry, peach, apricot, plum and redwood, as they can be toxic to rabbits). Untreated wicker baskets or other wicker items, shredded paper, pine cones and rubber balls are good choices as well.

For further information, you may wish to visit the following websites:

<http://www.paws.org/>

<http://www.sPCA.bc.ca/>

<http://www.rabbit.org/>

<http://www.vrra.org/>

[http://exoticpets.about.com/od/rabbitcare/Care\\_of\\_Pet\\_Rabbits.htm](http://exoticpets.about.com/od/rabbitcare/Care_of_Pet_Rabbits.htm)