



Kulshan Veterinary Hospital

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Rabbit Husbandry and Care



Rabbit Husbandry and Care Instructions

INTRO: *Rabbits can make excellent long-term pets.*

Rabbits, like dogs and cats, can make wonderful pets. They are curious, affectionate, and playful companions, and are relatively clean and easy to care for. With a **lifespan of 8-12 years**, it is important that rabbits are provided with optimal care and husbandry, so that they can be healthy and happy pets. From soft Rex breeds to wooly Angoras, from Netherland Dwarfs to Flemish Giants, pet rabbits come in all different breeds and sizes. Careful research prior to bringing home a rabbit can help determine which type of bunny will fit in best with your lifestyle.

HANDLING: *Handle with care; always support a rabbit's back end.*

Bunnies make wonderful pets, but they must be handled with care. Since they are prey species, rabbits can startle easily, and their first instinct is to run away. The muscles in a rabbit's legs are strong enough that when held incorrectly, **a rabbit can break its own back** while trying to escape. When holding or carrying your rabbit, **make sure that his back end is well-supported**; never pick your bunny up by his ears. Children should always be directly supervised when handling or petting rabbits. If you have any questions or concerns about handling your rabbit, ask your veterinarian about safe handling techniques.

HOUSING: *Safe, sturdy, and easily cleaned.*

Rabbits may be kept indoors or outdoors. Regardless of where they are kept, rabbits have certain caging requirements. **Cages should be as large as possible**, measuring at least 2 ft x 2 feet x 1.5 feet tall for smaller rabbits; larger rabbits should be housed in proportionately larger cages. Many rabbits enjoy having low shelves available to sit or lay on, and they should also have a **hiding place available** to them at all times. **Cages should be sturdy and easily cleaned and disinfected.**

Cages should be **well-ventilated** (not glass aquariums), and **easily cleaned**. Since rabbits are prone to heat stress, **optimal temperature range is 60-75 degrees**. To avoid heat stress, their cage or primary living area should be located in a cooler area of the house. They should also not be in a damp or humid area, as this significantly increases risk of respiratory disease.

Outdoor hutches must be constructed in a manner to provide **shelter from the elements**, as well as **protection from predators**. Raised hutches are common, but the flooring should be constructed in such a manner that predators cannot reach through and grab rabbits from below, from the sides or above. If temperatures are above 75 degrees or below 60 degrees, outdoor rabbits may need to be sheltered inside.

Rabbits housed indoors have other special considerations as well. **Rabbits love to chew on anything, including electrical wire and carpet.** Any room where rabbits are allowed to roam should be **rabbit-proofed**. All wires should be out of rabbit reach, and rabbits should be **supervised at all times** to ensure they do not eat or chew anything inappropriate.

Many caged rabbits are prone to a condition known as “sore hocks”. **Sore hocks** occurs when rabbits are housed on wire or mesh-bottomed cages; they develop sores on their feet, and must be treated by a veterinarian to prevent or treat infection. To prevent sore hocks, it is recommended to **keep rabbits on a flat solid surface or to provide a resting area that is solid flooring or padded with straw or hay**. Some sources say that rabbits should be kept on wire or mesh to prevent ingestion of feces. As part of their normal digestive system, rabbits produce cecal pellets or “night droppings”. These cecal pellets are produced in the cecum, are generally softer and greener than normal feces, and are consumed directly from the anus. Consuming these cecal pellets allows the rabbit to further digest and glean additional vitamins and nutrition, and is vital to maintaining the rabbit’s health.

Regardless of type of housing provided, rabbit cages should be **completely cleaned on at least a weekly basis**. Wood should be avoided in caging, since 1) it is very porous and difficult to disinfect, 2) it is difficult to rinse cleaning agents out of wood, and 3) rabbits will chew on wood surfaces. After cleaning all surfaces in the cage, rinse thoroughly and allow to air dry, preferably in direct sunlight. **White vinegar** works very well for cleaning litter boxes or urine staining.

LITTERBOX: *Large enough for lounging, paper-based litter; clean often.*

Rabbits are intelligent animals and take well to litter box training. Rabbits that are given free range indoors can often be trained to return to their litter box to urinate or defecate. For rabbits that are not let out of their cages, litter boxes can help dramatically with cleaning and cage hygiene. Litter boxes often become **avored lounging areas**, and should be **cleaned regularly with white vinegar**. Litter boxes should be large enough to accommodate lounging, and tall enough to prevent rabbits from urinating over the sides.

A few good litter box substrates include **Carefresh, Cat Country, Critter Country, Yesterday’s News, and Papurr**. Carefresh is a recycled paper product sold in pet stores and marketed towards small mammals, is very absorbent, and helps with odor control. However, if your rabbit shows a tendency to eat his litter, it should be removed. You can also use **hay** as a litter box substrate, although it needs to be changed out and cleaned much more frequently than Carefresh. Softwood shavings, such as pine and cedar, have been linked with liver failure in rabbits and should be avoided.

FEEDING: *80% Timothy hay, plenty of fresh veggies, limited timothy pellets.*

Rabbits are grazers, and have a digestive system similar to that of a horse. **Unpressed hay should be offered free-choice and unlimited every day, and should constitute roughly 80% of a rabbit’s diet**. Alfalfa hay is good for growing, pregnant, or lactating animals, but it has too much calcium for non-breeding adults and may contribute to formation of bladder stones. **Grass hays are a much better choice for adult rabbits, especially Timothy hay**. Remember to store hay in a cool, dry, well-ventilated place, and discard any questionable or damp hay.

A good quality rabbit pellet should also be offered. Most pellets are made from alfalfa hay, and thus have too much calcium. **Look for diets that are made from Timothy hay**; if the bag does not specifically say, you can assume that they are made from alfalfa. If adult rabbits are fed a diet with too much pelleted food, they will quickly become obese. The amount of pellets offered should be limited to roughly **¼ cup (4 tablespoons) of pellets per 6 lbs body weight** of your rabbit daily. Different rabbits may have different metabolic requirements, so when in doubt, ask your veterinarian to evaluate your rabbit’s weight and help you to formulate individual feeding guidelines.

Rabbits should also be offered a variety of fresh vegetables daily. **Romaine, green or red-leaf lettuce, parsley, carrots, celery, and broccoli** are all excellent additions to your rabbit's diet. **Clover, dandelions, green pepper, basil, peppermint and raspberry leaves, bok choy, and pea pods** are also great foods to add. **Dark leafy greens, such as kale and spinach, should be given in small quantities, as these vegetables may contain too much calcium.** Rabbits should be given **1-2 cups veggies per 6 lbs body weight daily.**

Less sugary fruits such as apple slices (remove core and stem), blueberries, strawberries, melon, papaya, and pineapple may also be given in small quantities. Sugary fruits such as grapes and bananas should be very limited. Commercial treats may be given sparingly, but you may find that giving your bunny healthy foods such as carrots or parsley is in itself a good treat. Any treat, including yogurt treats, contains lots of sugar. If you are going to feed your rabbit treats, it should be limited to no more than once daily.

Foods to be avoided include nuts, fruit seeds/pits/stems, salty or sugary foods, breakfast cereal and other grains, and various potentially toxic plants. If you are unsure whether or not something is safe to feed to your bunny, don't feed it! Or ask your veterinarian first.

For rabbits fed a balanced diet such as that outlined above, supplements are unnecessary. However, bunnies that are shedding may benefit from being given laxatone to prevent/reduce hairball formation. Some sources suggest that giving pineapple and papaya may help break down hair in stomach, but the evidence is inconclusive. Plain, unflavored **yogurt** may also be given to help maintain healthy gut flora. Salt blocks, while not harmful, are not necessary for most rabbits.

WATER AND BOWLS: *Offer plenty of fresh water, use only sturdy bowls.*

Rabbits can drink a lot of water, and should always have **plenty of fresh water available** to them. Since rabbits enjoy knocking over or chewing on bowls, bowls should be sturdy ceramic. Rabbits also do very well when offered water in a suspended water bottle. Bowls and bottles should be **thoroughly cleaned at least weekly.**

MENTAL HEALTH: *"A bored rabbit is often a naughty rabbit."*

Rabbits are playful and affectionate creatures that **need plenty of interaction and activity.** Bunnies enjoy being brushed and petted, and require daily exercise. If you plan on taking your bunny outside, it is important that they be protected from predators and from the environment. Some rabbits may enjoy being taken outside on a harness; other bunnies love to graze in the sunshine. Whatever method you choose, it is important that your rabbit be **supervised when outside.** Outdoor pens should be covered, not only to provide some relief from direct sunlight and possible heat stroke, but also to protect your bunny from birds of prey.

Suitable bunny toys are either sturdy or digestible. Given the chance, rabbits will joyfully toss toys around as they rearrange their cages. Hard plastic baby keys or sturdy cat toys can make good toys. Also chewable items, such as cardboard paper towel rolls, cardboard boxes filled with hay, or rabbit-safe wood chew sticks help to keep their teeth healthy and well-worn. Try putting pellets in a cardboard egg carton, and watch your bunny go to town trying to get to his favorite snack. Rabbits also like shredding paper, and love the chance to destroy old phone books. Non-coated, natural wicker baskets also can provide a comfortable resting place and a great chew toy.

HEALTH CONCERNS: *When in doubt, call the vet!*

Rabbits, like dogs and cats, should be taken to a veterinarian for a **yearly wellness check**. No vaccinations are required for rabbits, but a veterinarian can help answer husbandry questions and a careful physical exam can detect problems early on. **Spaying and neutering your rabbit is recommended** at 4-6 months of age. Spaying or neutering can reduce urine spraying and prevents uterine cancer, the most common tumor in rabbits.

As prey species, rabbits tend to hide any sign of illness until they are too sick to hide anymore. This means that if you think your rabbit is sick, do not wait to take him to a veterinarian! Decreased activity, drop in appetite, drop in stool production, dull eyes, salivation, teeth grinding, discharge from eyes or nose, or listlessness are all indications that your rabbit may be very sick and should see a veterinarian immediately. Never try to medicate your rabbit without the help of a veterinarian, as many antibiotics that are safe for other animals can actually be very harmful to rabbits.

MORE INFORMATION: *How can we help?*

For more information, please give us a call at **(360) 354-5095**. **Dr. Erin West and Dr. Dorrie Jordan** all have a special interest in exotic pet medicine, and would be happy to help evaluate your pet's health and discuss your pet's husbandry.

Another excellent resource for information on rabbit care and husbandry is the House Rabbit Society website and publications. The House Rabbit Society website is: **www.rabbit.org**.

