

a care guide for your

Rabbit (Cuniculus)



Congratulations on adopting a new rabbit! Here is what you need to know and expect from your new furry family member.

Behavior

Rabbits are wonderful companions with distinctive personalities. They are intelligent and litter-box-trainable, and they enjoy being included in their family's daily life. Rabbits do not usually like to be picked up or cuddled. But they are affectionate, and, once you learn their unique language, you may find yourself completely charmed.

Commitment

Rabbits require as much commitment as a dog or cat. They are sensitive to changes, so their daily routines should be consistent and under the care of an adult.

- **Daily care:** feed, spot-clean enclosure, supervise one to two hours exercise (minimum)
- **Weekly care:** deep-clean enclosure, grooming
- **Yearly care:** vet visit

In addition to the time commitment, owning a rabbit requires that you provide a large indoor space, keep fresh veggies on hand, keep hay in your home (which can be messy), find pet sitters when you go on vacation, and accept that rabbits naturally chew and dig—and will likely cause damage to your possessions at some point.

Diet

Water

Rabbits should always have fresh, clean drinking water, checked twice daily. Provide water in a heavy bowl. Consider offering it in a hanging water bottle as well, so your rabbit still has access to water if the bowl spills.

Hay

The majority of a rabbit's diet is hay, and it should be available to them at all times. Rabbits will eat about their own body



The Basics



LIFESPAN
8 to 12 years



DIET
grass hay, pellets, fresh greens and vegetables



HABITAT
indoors, metal exercise pen



EXERCISE
large space outside its enclosure



CLIMATE
60°F-70°F



GROOMING
nail trimming, brushing, no baths

volume in hay every day. Choose a grass hay (timothy or meadow hay), and check that it is fresh (dust-free, sweet-smelling, slightly green and with long strands). Place hay in or above the litter box to encourage good litter habits.

Pellets

Good quality pellets add nutrients to a rabbit's diet. Offer one-fourth cup per day for an adult rabbit. Choose a timothy-hay-based pellet that is high-fiber and low-protein, with no seeds, nuts or colored pieces.

Fresh greens

Rabbits should get 2 cups of fresh greens every day. Good options include beet tops, cilantro, escarole, radicchio, carrot tops, mustard greens, watercress and romaine lettuce. Occasionally, it is okay to offer kale, collard greens or parsley. Introduce any new items to their diets slowly.

Fresh vegetables and fruits

Healthy rabbits can have up to 3 teaspoons per day of vegetables and fruits. These make great treats for bonding and training. Good choices include squash, zucchini, carrots, parsnips, bell peppers, apple, orange, peach, pear, papaya, pineapple, blueberries, raspberries, strawberries and melon.

Habitat

Rabbits must live inside. There are simply too many dangers outside for a rabbit to thrive and survive. They are also social animals and want to be part of the family.

Most cages and hutches are not large enough to house a rabbit. The best option for rabbit housing is a metal exercise pen (usually sold for dogs) set up in a formation that allows the rabbit to hop a few times in each direction (at least 8 square feet for a single rabbit). Depending on how high the rabbit can jump, the pen may need to be

3 feet to 4 feet tall. Linens, foam mats, tarps or vinyl can be laid down to protect floors. If you do choose to house your rabbit in a large cage, be sure the cage has a solid floor. Wire grids can cause painful sores on a rabbit's feet.

Your rabbit's enclosure should include at least one litter box, food and water bowls, a refuge where the rabbit can get out of sight (cardboard boxes with multiple holes cut out work well), soft places to lie down and toys for enrichment.

Exercise time

Your rabbit should get at least one to two hours daily outside its pen in a larger space (at least 24 square feet). Rabbits are healthiest when they have lots of space to run, jump, play and interact with you. Make sure any room your rabbit visits is "bunny-proofed." Hide electrical wires, remove toxic house plants, block any small spaces you don't want them to squeeze into and supervise to prevent unwanted chewing or digging.

Rabbits are crepuscular—they are most active at dawn and dusk. This is when they are most likely to want to play.

Temperature and humidity

Rabbits prefer cooler, less humid environments; 60–70 degrees is optimal. Temperatures above 75 degrees can cause heat-related stress or heatstroke. On hot days, help your rabbit stay cool by turning on a fan or giving it cool tiles to lay on or frozen water bottles to lay by. Avoid exposing your rabbit to cold or freezing temperatures, which can cause hypothermia.

Socialization

Rabbits do best if you sit down on the ground and let them come to you. Most rabbits like to be gently stroked on their cheeks, forehead, shoulders and back. If they are enjoying your attention, they may lower their heads, lightly grind their teeth or give you nudges or licks.

Remember that rabbits are prey animals and are easily startled. Speak softly to announce your presence, stay low to the ground when approaching them and move slowly.

When a rabbit is new to a house, it may take a couple of days

before it is comfortable interacting with you. Build trust by not chasing or cornering your rabbit and not forcing contact before they are ready.

Most rabbits are happiest with a rabbit companion. Consider adopting a pair or a friend for your current rabbit. Note that new rabbits cannot be housed together immediately, due to the risk of fights/injury. The bonding process is slow and can take a couple weeks and should only be initiated once both rabbits are spayed/neutered.

Handling

Most rabbits do not like to be picked up and will struggle if lifted off the ground. When it is necessary to pick them up, support their chests and hind ends and hold securely against your body. Rabbits are extremely fragile—dropping, or allowing them to twist and kick, can cause significant trauma.

Interaction with children and pets

Children should always be carefully supervised when interacting with rabbits. If rabbits are approached

too quickly or loudly, they may become frightened and run away or bite. Thus, children must be able to behave calmly and quietly and should be instructed to leave the rabbit alone if he hops away or hides. Young children should never be allowed to pick up a rabbit, due to the rabbit's physical fragility.

Rabbits can coexist peacefully with some other pets, if proper care is taken. Exercise caution, introduce animals to each other slowly in a neutral space, and never allow them to interact unsupervised. Cats should have their claws trimmed to avoid injuries, and dogs should be restrained. If any aggression or harassment occurs, stop the interaction

immediately. A pet with a high prey drive should never be allowed to interact with a rabbit.



Grooming

Rabbits are naturally clean and groom themselves. Never give a rabbit a bath; it can die from shock.

Rabbits shed their fur and need to be brushed one to two times per week. They go through a larger shed every three months or so and should be brushed daily during this time. This keeps them from ingesting the loose fur, which can lead to illness.

Rabbits need to have their nails trimmed every four to six weeks. Use a small pair of trimmers (advertised for cats), being careful to cut only the clearer portion of the nail (avoiding the quick). Keep a styptic powder on hand in case the quick is clipped. Alternately, rabbit vets may offer nail trimmings.

Toys and habitat enrichment



Every rabbit has a different personality—and different preferences when it comes to toys and play. Some commonly enjoyed rabbit toys include:

- Wooden toys (toy blocks, dried apple tree twigs)—for chewing.
- Wicker baskets (untreated), woven hay mats or phone books—for shredding.
- Cardboard boxes—for exploring, shredding.
- Paper towel or toilet paper tubes—hide hay or treats in these for mental stimulation.
- Box of shredded paper or dried leaves—for digging (supervise to ensure they do not eat any).
- Hard, plastic baby toys; plastic slinkies; or balls—for tossing/nudging around.

Rabbits generally don't prefer large open spaces, but they greatly enjoy playing among platforms, tunnels, shelters and partitions. Get creative with their space!

Most important is including a refuge, or "bolt-hole," in the habitat that the rabbit can retreat to if it is feeling afraid, stressed or unwell or simply wishes to withdraw from social contact. This is a natural escape response, so rabbits without some kind of "bolt-hole" are likely to be stressed. Cardboard boxes with at least two holes cut into them work well. Make sure refuges allow the rabbit to get completely out of sight.

Litter box training

Yes, rabbits can be litter-box-trained! Rabbits naturally choose one or a few places (usually corners) to deposit their urine and most of their fecal pills. Urine-training is as simple as putting litter boxes where the rabbit chooses to go. Fecal pill training success varies by individual, but the rabbit can be trained to improve.

Litter boxes should be uncovered and large enough for a rabbit to lay down in. Using multiple litter boxes may increase success. Put hay in/above the litter box to encourage use. Clean boxes often (white vinegar works well).

It's important to use bunny-safe litter—one that is made of paper, softwood or citrus. The Seattle Animal Shelter uses natural paper bedding or wood pellets. Never use clumping varieties, clay, pine, shavings, aromatic litters or pellets with additives, as rabbits often ingest some of their litter.

Rabbits will naturally drop fecal pills around their pens to mark their territory. To encourage them to use their litter box consistently for fecal pills, affirm that their enclosure will not be invaded by others. Allow the rabbit to exit the pen on its own, and herd it back in gently (or tempt in with treats). Do not clean the enclosure when the rabbit is inside.

Vet care

Find a rabbit-savvy vet, and take your rabbit in for an initial checkup. Rabbits generally do not need shots, but they should have annual wellness exams. Make sure that the vet is familiar with rabbits and sees them often.

Rabbits should be spayed or neutered when they reach sexual maturity (4–6 months). This helps prevent against common cancers and eases undesirable behaviors (marking, spraying urine, aggression, etc.).



Signs of illness

As prey animals, rabbits do their best to hide any symptoms of illness or injury. Thus, people who live with rabbits need to be particularly attuned to subtle changes in their rabbit's behavior, activity level and droppings. If you ever have a question about your rabbit's health, call your vet.

If your rabbit is not eating or pooping or is having diarrhea, this is a life-threatening emergency. Go to a vet immediately.

Other symptoms to watch for include, but are not limited to:

- Increase or decrease in appetite or drinking.
- Fecal pellets that are small or unusually shaped.
- Lethargy, change in activity level, "hunching" in a corner or unusual sitting positions.
- Discharge from the nose, runny eyes, sneezing, coughing or difficulty breathing.
- Wet chin or drooling.
- Loss of balance or tilted head.
- Very cold or hot ears.
- Loud tooth-grinding.
- Bald or flaky patches of skin.

Supplies needed

- Pet carrier
- Enclosure (exercise pen, rabbit-proofed room, or very large custom cage)
- Linens/mats (to cover/cushion bottom of the enclosure)
- One to two litter boxes (large, uncovered)
- Litter (paper, softwood or citrus-based)
- Refuge (spot where rabbit can get out of sight, cardboard boxes work well)
- Two heavy bowls (for food and water)
- Timothy hay (place in litter box or in hay feeder above)
- Food pellets
- Fresh greens
- Nail trimmers, styptic powder and brush (for grooming)



References and further learning

- The House Rabbit Society (www.rabbit.org)
- The House Rabbit Handbook: How to Live With an Urban Rabbit by Marinell Harriman
- "How to Take Care of a Pet Rabbit" videos by Amy Sedaris and Mary E. Cotter, Ed.D., LVT (www.howcast.com/guides/1187-how-to-take-care-of-a-pet-rabbit)
- The Language of Lagomorphs: Your Guide to Rabbit Communication (www.language.rabbitspeak.com)
- The Bunny Lover's Complete Guide To House Rabbits: The Ultimate Handbook for Successfully Living Indoors with a Pet Rabbit by "The Bunny Guy"
- Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (www.rspca.org.uk)



Seattle Animal Shelter

2061 15th Ave. W., Seattle, WA 98119

206-386-PETS (7387) www.seattleanimalshelter.org