

# **BASIC RABBIT HOUSING AND CARE**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Unlike a cat or a dog, a rabbit is a more delicate pet to own, and requires more maintenance. Many hygiene-related problems and diseases can be related to your rabbits housing environment. Poor housing may lead to arthritis, boredom, and depression in your rabbit. Before making a commitment to own a rabbit, first be sure you're committed to providing the adequate housing and maintenance he/she will need.

## **HOUSING**

Rabbits can be kept indoors and outdoors. An indoor rabbit should be caged most of the time when not supervised. Outdoor rabbits should be housed in properly constructed hutches that provide shade and shelter from wind and cold/hot weather.

### **Indoor Housing**

- NEVER choose a glass aquarium for your rabbits housing, they are poorly ventilated and are potentially dangerous.
- Avoid cages with wire flooring. If wire flooring is necessary, provide a solid substrate such as a mat or cardboard for the rabbit to rest on. Be sure the substrate you choose can either properly cleaned/disinfected or replaced.
- The cage size should be no less than 4x in length and 2x in width of the length of your adult-sized rabbit. The cage should be even larger for rabbits confined for longer periods of time.
- The cage should be large enough to allow division into sleep, activity, litter, and food/water areas.
- Bedding should be provided in the cage. The most appropriate types of bedding include washable blankets or towels (if the rabbit does not ingest these) and clean straw. Cedar/pine shavings should not be used as the volatile oils in these wood shavings can be hazardous to your rabbit's health.
- Because rabbits are a "prey" species they seek hiding places when frightened, and therefore should have a "hiding box" in the cage and outside the cage. This box may be constructed of cardboard, wood or PCV material.
- Rabbits generally have clean habits, and deposit their feces and urine in the same place each time. Place a litter

box in an appropriate area in the cage, away from food and bedding. Appropriate litters include shredded newspaper or recycled paper pellets. Never use cat litter, corn cob or cedar/pine shavings as a choice for litter substrate.

- Make sure your house is “rabbit proof” when you let your rabbit out to exercise. They will inevitably chew on wires and house plants. Many house plants are toxic to rabbits. Providing toys for your rabbit to chew on in and out of the cage is a good distraction, and a healthy habit.

### **Outdoor Housing**

- An outdoor cage should have enough length for the rabbit to complete three full hops (5-6 feet), and tall enough for the rabbit to stand on its hind feet.
- The cage/hutch should provide adequate shelter from wind and sunlight. Rabbits are very heat sensitive.
- Although your rabbit may graze your lawn, you should always be sure he/she does not have access to any toxic plants, pesticides or fertilizers.
- Wire flooring should be avoided, however if this is the only option, be sure to provide a solid surface for your rabbit to retreat on.
- A rabbit run is another outdoor option. Your rabbit will want to dig so at least 1 foot of concrete or wire mesh barrier must be provided to prevent escape. A rabbit run must also provide adequate shade, and hiding areas.
- Rabbits are prey animals. Providing a strong, continuous barrier such as with wire mesh on all outdoor cages is vital to protect your rabbit from predator attacks.

### **WATER**

Select either a sipper bottle, water bowl, or both for your rabbit to drink from. Water should be changed daily, and bottles/bowls should be washed daily with hot soapy water.

### **CAGE CLEANING**

On a daily basis, clean up spills, stale food, shed fur, and messes inside the cage. Change the litter pan daily and replace with fresh litter. Once weekly remove your rabbit from the cage and do a thorough cage cleaning. Take out and wash litter pans, and space boards. Wash bedding and throw away old toys.

### **SPAYING AND NEUTERING**

If you don't plan to breed your rabbit(s) spaying or neutering is strongly recommended. Spaying a female rabbit is very important to her overall health and longevity. Females can be spayed as early as 4-6months of age. Spaying early will usually prevent most of the

common reproductive cancers of rabbits including ovarian cancer, uterine cancer, and mammary cancer. The majority of female rabbits will develop one of these types of cancers by the time they are 4 years old if they are not spayed.

Male rabbits can be neutered as early as 4-6 months of age. Neutering your male rabbit may decrease urine spraying and aggressive behavior. Both genders are usually calmer, more friendly, less destructive, and easier to litter-box train if they have been altered.

### **ORAL CARE**

Observe the front teeth (incisors) regularly as rabbit teeth grow continuously. Good dental care may require a trip to the Veterinarian for an oral exam, teeth trimming or even a dental procedure. Your rabbit should always be able to close his mouth completely without any exposure of the front teeth. However, many rabbits have problems with the “cheek teeth” (premolars and molars) further back in the mouth. Signs of these problems include: decreased appetite, dropping food from the mouth, drooling, head or face pain/swelling, discharge from the eyes or nose, and weight loss. If your rabbit has not eaten in 12 hours it is essential he/she see a veterinarian immediately. Due to the nature of a rabbit GI tract, good mobility is essential for normal health.

### **FOOT CARE**

Rabbits don't have foot pads like dogs and cats. The bottoms of their feet are normally covered with a thick layer of hair. Observe your rabbits feet regularly and seek medical care immediately if there are worn areas, sores, or wounds on the feet. Problems with the feet are exacerbated by wire cage bottoms, lack of exercise, and poor hygiene such as a rabbit sitting in fecal and urine waste.

Check your rabbits toenails often. Many rabbits need their toenails clipped. You can have a veterinarian teach you how to trim the nails, or you can bring him/her to your veterinarian when they have grown too long.

### **MEDICATIONS**

Please consult with a veterinarian before giving ANY medications (especially antibiotics) to your rabbit. Many human medications can be toxic to rabbits.

### **HANDLING**

If you are unclear about correct handling of a rabbit, consult a veterinarian with rabbit experience. It is very important to support your rabbit's back legs when picking him/her up. Rabbits usually like to be carried with their rear end tucked into the crook of your arm, while always supporting them from above and below. Rabbits have a very

delicate skeleton, and very powerful rear legs, and may easily injure their backs if they jump from a high place or struggle vigorously. Rabbits may also scratch and bite so proper handling and supervision is essential.