

Basic Care of Rabbits

The Rabbit

The rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) is a lagomorph, not a rodent, and is a domesticated version of the wild European rabbit. They were first domesticated by 5th century monks, who raised them as a food source.

Rabbits were introduced to Britain during the 12th Century, and during the middle ages, the breeding and farming of rabbits for meat and fur became widespread throughout Europe. During the 19th century, the Victorians began breeding them for shows and competitions resulting in many new “fancy” breeds. The rabbit entered the research laboratory in the 18th and 19th century, and has since made significant contributions to the scientific community.

Rabbit social structure is a paradox. They are both

territorial and social. It is helpful to look at the wild European rabbit, the ancestor of the domestic rabbit. Rabbit warrens are groups of rabbits sharing a range. The rabbits benefit from the presence of the others because with many eyes and ears looking out for danger, it is harder for predators to sneak up on anyone. Within this range, however, each has a space which may be defended from other rabbits. Most fights are minor and quick as long as the loser retreats quickly.

Rabbits are inquisitive, intelligent, sociable, and

affectionate. There are more than 60 breeds of rabbits ranging in size, body type, and type of fur.

Rabbits are fairly easy to care for but there are specific husbandry and dietary requirements that are vital to their health and quality of life. Rabbits also need specialized veterinary care. While a rabbit may be a great pet for your family, an adult should be the primary caretaker. Rabbits can live for 7-10 years or more if well cared for.



Veterinary Care

In order to maintain the health of your rabbit, it is important to determine the presence of any problems. Since they are adept at masking the signs of illness, regular examinations are a valuable addition to preventative care. An examination by a veterinarian is crucial to keeping your rabbit healthy. Problems detected early can often be

treated more easily and effectively.

New rabbits should be examined soon after they enter the home. At this time the veterinarian can establish the current health status of the rabbit and give recommendations for proper husbandry and care. After this initial examination, annual

examinations should be maintained until the age of 5 years old. At the age of 5 years old, rabbits are considered senior. Senior patients should have a thorough physical exam and blood work every 6 months.

Routine veterinary care may help identify potential underlying health problems early and treat them successfully.

Housing

When not supervised, rabbits should be kept in a cage or a rabbit-proof room. Cages should be safe, durable, and easy to clean. Several basic types commercially available include puppy pens, bunny condos, and large rabbit cages. The cage should be large enough to allow your rabbit to move around and lie down, as well as space for food, water, and a litter box--the bigger the better. Solid flooring is recommended over wire flooring. Wire mesh flooring provides a cleaner environment and easier maintenance. However, some rabbits lack the soft fur pad on the soles of their feet and may develop sore hocks, small ulcers on the bottom of the rear feet. The rabbit should be allowed to exercise a few hours daily.

If you decide not to use a cage, a rabbit-proof room or area of the house is necessary to prevent harm to the rabbit. It is important that rabbits are not allowed to roam unsupervised in areas that could be hazardous. Ingested carpet fibers, chewed electrical cords, poisons, and other dangers are irresistible to a curious rabbit. All cords and wire should be protected or out of reach (3-4 feet) from the rabbit. All plants should also be out of reach as they can be toxic to the rabbit. Restrict access to carpet as this can cause gastrointestinal obstruction if ingested. Rabbits are natural chewers and diggers. To prevent damage to furniture and floors, use baby gates and plastic coverings for baseboards and furniture. Provide an area for the rabbit to dig and safe items for your rabbits to chew. Some safe items to chew include: plenty of fresh hay—oat hay, timothy, orchard grass hay—

untreated wood, basket with hay in it, commercially-made chew sticks, and cardboard. A digging box made of cardboard filled with shredded paper can offer plenty of fun.

Interactions between different species (dogs, cats, guinea pigs, etc.) should be discouraged. Dogs and cats can cause bodily harm to the rabbit. In addition, other species can carry bacteria and disease that rabbits have no immune defense to leading to serious and sometimes fatal infections.

Rabbits can be trained to use a litter box. Training a rabbit to the litterbox follows the same rules as with a cat. Start out with the rabbit confined to a relatively small area with the litterbox and gradually increase the freedom allowed. Placing the hay next to the litter box will encourage the rabbit to use it since many rabbits will eat hay and defecate at the same time. If the litter box is too small, the rabbit may not use it. Female rabbits are generally cleaner and easier to litterbox train.

Bedding materials must be clean, non-toxic, absorbent, relatively dust free and easy to replace. Acceptable beddings are recycled paper litter, pine wood shavings, and shredded paper. and processed ground corncob. Make sure the ground corncob is properly processed to reduce fungal spore problems. Cedar shavings should NEVER be used since they have been associated with causing respiratory and liver disease. Sawdust should also be avoided. Remove soiled bedding and stale food daily. Litter boxes should be cleaned daily. Cages should be thoroughly cleaned and

sanitized at least once weekly.

However you choose to confine your rabbit, the primary location should not be isolated from the family. Rabbits are extremely hardy and may be kept outdoors all year as long as proper shelter is provided. This practice is not conducive to making the rabbit a tame pet, however. Keeping rabbits indoors will encourage more social interaction and the rabbit will become more of a member of the family.

Finally, provide enrichment for your rabbit. In the wild, rabbits spend several hours a day foraging for food and building nests or burrows. House rabbits do not have to forage as you provide their food daily. Providing rabbits with something else to occupy their time will keep them active and healthy. Rabbits are naturally curious and smart. They are often playful and food motivated which opens up many possibilities for logic toys. A logic toy is any object that requires problem solving to get the reward which is usually food. This can be as simple as putting hay in an empty paper towel or toilet paper roll. More complicated toys can be found commercially that involve lids that need to be opened, drawers that need to be pulled, sliders that have to be pushed, balls that need to be rolled, or pegs that have to be removed.

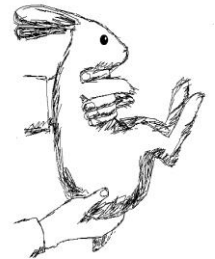
Handling

Rabbits have a slight design flaw. They have extremely powerful hind legs but a relatively fragile spine. This combination makes them very susceptible to fracturing their backs. Extreme care should be taken not to injure them during handling. They should be approached with both hands. One hand is placed under the chest and abdomen, while the other

hand supports the hindquarters. Children should be closely supervised around rabbits. Small children should not handle the rabbit. Rabbits do not like to be held and can kick, scratch, or bite when frightened which can result in serious injury to the rabbit.

While rabbits do not like to be held, regular handling

should be practiced. Handling a rabbit on a regular basis will help the rabbit learn to tolerate it. You will become more confident as well. It is important that they are used to handling. It will help reduce their stress during a veterinary visit and any treatments necessary. It makes nail trimming easier as well.



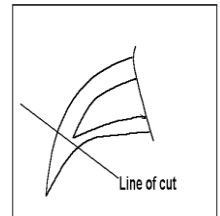
Grooming

Most rabbits will do most of their own grooming. They keep their fur clean and maintain themselves well. There are a few things they may need help with however. Their nails need to be trimmed every 2-3 months. Rabbit nails were designed for digging and as such they grow very long and very

straight. If the nail is clear, the quick can be seen as a pink area within the nail. Dark nails are more difficult. The quick should be avoided. Have one of our staff show you how to trim the nails. If you trim nails at home, you should have some styptic powder or corn starch available to stop any bleeding. Nicking a quick is

not life-threatening but it can be messy and it does hurt the rabbit.

Brushing the rabbit on a regular basis, especially when it is shedding, will help reduce the fur they ingest during grooming and can prevent problems like gastrointestinal stasis.



Breeding

Rabbits do not have a defined breeding season or a regular estrous cycle. In general, the period of a doe's receptivity is 14-16 days followed by a period of 1-2 days of non-receptivity. They are induced ovulators with ovulation occurring about 10 hours following mating. Sexual maturity is dependent on the breed. Small breed does may be able to breed as young as 4 months but medium and large rabbits may not be ready until 5 to 7 months. Bucks may not be fertile until 6 to 7 months. Gestation is 31-32 days with

litter sizes ranging from 4-12 kittens (babies). Parturition (birth) is quick, about 30 minutes. The doe nurses only once a day and spends much time away from the kittens. This should not be mistaken for neglect. Weaning occurs at 4-6 weeks old.

Rabbits have a fertile post-partum estrus and will mate within 12 hours of parturition (birth). If mating does not occur within a few days post-partum, then mating will not occur until the young are 50-60 days old.

It is relatively common for parents to get rabbits for children so that they can see the "miracle of birth". While this may seem like a good life lesson, it must be considered that good homes must be found for the litter (which can be as large as 12 kittens). Also, even very tame does may become aggressive when pregnant.

If breeding is not desired, males can be neutered and females spayed to avoid unwanted litters and potential diseases associated with the reproductive tract.



A litter of rabbits may be as large as 12...If homes cannot be assured...it is best not to undertake such a project.

Bonding

If you are planning on having two rabbits or are introducing a second rabbit, there are many things you need to consider. Bonding rabbits can be challenging. It takes time, patience, and persistence. Sometimes, it takes acceptance when two rabbits just won't get along. Even if your rabbit is gentle and calm, introducing a new rabbit may cause your rabbit to be very aggressive. Rabbits can bite, claw or swat at each other and can cause serious injuries. For this reason, all bonding must be supervised.

A good way to have your rabbits become acquainted is to place their pens/cages next to each other. By keeping a bit of space between them, you can avoid fighting. It is also useful to swap litter boxes, toys and food dishes every

few days to help get the rabbits used to each other's scent. For face-to-face meetings, choose a neutral location since bunnies can be very territorial. This can be on a slippery kitchen floor, a hallway or the bathroom. To prevent serious injury, it is absolutely crucial that you pay close attention to your rabbits when placing them together. Be prepared to break up a fight immediately. A spray bottle of water or an object like tennis racquet can be useful to separate the rabbits if a fight breaks out. Protect yourself as well. Make sure your arms and legs are covered and use gloves.

Both males and females mount in an attempt to show their dominance. Establishing dominance is important to the bonding process. Rabbits have to

know where they stand in the social order. Bonding sessions can begin at ten to fifteen minute intervals and can be increased or decreased depending on the rabbits' interactions. These sessions may be repeated many times before the rabbits feel comfortable with each other. Bonding can take several days to several months and some rabbits will not bond. The key is to remember this and be prepared to have separate housing situations if the rabbits do not bond. If you are not prepared to have 2 cages, then you may not want to get another rabbit.

Finally, a neutered and spayed rabbit tend to be less aggressive, making bonding easier and prevent mating.

All Creatures Animal Hospital

Quality Medicine in a Caring Environment



2001 N Linview Ave
Urbana, IL 61801

Phone:
217-328-4143

Fax:
217-337-3068

E-mail:
staff.allcreaturesah
@outlook.com

Website:
allcreaturesah.com



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