

RABBITS

~by Dr. Kay Bishop; APS of Durham Veterinarian



Life Span: 8-10 years if fed an appropriate diet and provided exercise and a clean environment.

Behavior: The rabbit is a prey species; therefore much of its behavior in feeding, playing and reacting to danger is related to this background. Their typical response to perceived danger is “freeze or flight,” becoming very still and flattened or making a sudden dash for cover when frightened. Rabbits are also very territorial and do not react well to new rabbits entering their environment, often leading to aggression and

fighting.

Handling: The rabbit skeleton is relatively light and delicate, and is surrounded by large heavy muscles. Injuries are common when rabbits are not properly restrained during handling. If the hind feet are not supported sufficiently and the rabbit kicks out with its hind feet, a broken or dislocated spine can result. The “football hold” is a safe way to carry a rabbit and is performed by cradling the rabbit in one arm with the head nestled into the crook of the holder’s elbow, and the hind feet supported in the palm of the hand. The free hand can be placed over the rabbits back for additional security. Never lift or restrain a rabbit by the ears.

Housing

Cage: The cage should be at least 3 times the rabbit’s length and high enough for the rabbit to comfortably sit up on its hind legs. The cage must be well ventilated, made of material resistant to chewing, and easy to clean.

Cage Flooring: Flooring should either be solid, or if wire mesh is used, then solid resting platforms must be provided. Rabbits housed exclusively on wire mesh often develop foot infections that are difficult to treat. If wire mesh is used, the holes must be small enough to ensure the rabbit’s feet cannot fit through to avoid fractures of the feet and legs.

Litter: Most rabbits are easily litter box trained, especially if started at a young age. A pelleted organic litter (pine or recycled newspaper) should be used instead of clay kitty litter (ingestion can result in fatal gastrointestinal impaction).

Hide Box: Rabbits should be provided with some sort of dark shelter in the cage that simulates the security of a burrow. This can be easily provided using a cardboard box with a hole cut in the side.

Cage Location: The cage should be placed in a relatively quiet area out of direct sunlight. Outdoor housing is not recommended.

Play Pens: A large, safe exercise area can be provided using puppy exercise fencing. This can be placed around the cage or outside. Rabbits need several hours of exercise a day to promote normal bone density and muscle tone, and prevent boredom.

Toys: Rabbits like to chew and should be provided with a variety of safe toys, including untreated grass and wicker baskets, untreated wood scraps, untreated dried tree branches, and cardboard boxes.

Rabbit Proofing: Remove access to electrical cords, houseplants, and chemicals. Cover carpeting with sheets of Plexiglas to prevent damage from digging. Cover furniture with heavy cloth to prevent damage. Block all potential escape routes, and place several litter boxes in the area.

Diet

One of the most common causes of illness and poor health in pet rabbits is feeding an improper diet. Rabbits require high amounts of dietary fiber supplied in the form of hay and fresh greens to stay healthy. Foods high in sugars and starch should be avoided.

Pellets: Commercially produced pellets are not appropriate as the complete diet for the pet rabbit. For rabbits eating appropriate amounts of hay and fresh greens (see below), pellets generally should be restricted to 1/8 cup per 5 lbs. adult rabbit per day. Rabbits fed free-choice pellets are at increased risk of overeating, obesity and diarrhea. Young, growing rabbits should eat an alfalfa based pellet, while adults should be fed a timothy based diet (Kaytee, Timothy Complete or Oxbow Bunny Basics).

Hay: Clean, fresh Timothy or grass hay should be available at all times. Alfalfa hay is not recommended for most adult pet rabbits, as it is too high in calcium content and calories, but can be offered along with grass hay to young rabbits. The bulk and roughage provided by feeding hay is very important to the health of the rabbits digestive system, and helps to keep the continuously growing teeth worn down to prevent dental disease.

Vegetables: A minimum of 1 cup fresh, tightly packed mixed leafy greens per 4 lbs of rabbit per day. The mix should include at least three different types of greens or vegetables each day.

Examples of leafy greens include kale, collard greens, romaine lettuce, dandelion leaves, mustard greens, Swiss chard, endive, beet greens, carrot tops, alfalfa sprouts. Other high-fiber foods that can be fed daily in smaller amounts include bell peppers, pea pods (not the peas), pears, peaches, apples, pineapples, mango, and Brussels sprouts. Grapes and bananas should not be fed because they are too sugary and distract the pet from eating healthful foods.

Water: Clean, fresh water should be available at all times in either a water bottle or bowl. These containers should be washed daily in hot, soapy water.

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Health Care

Physical Exam: The first exam should take place soon after the time of adoption. Annual or semi-annual exams thereafter are recommended, depending on the age and health of the rabbit.

Intestinal Parasites: An examination of the feces is performed at the time of the first exam to check for intestinal parasites. This test is then performed on an as needed basis at subsequent exams.

Dental Exam: A thorough exam of the oral cavity and teeth are an essential part of any physical exam. All of the rabbit's teeth are continuously growing, and regular trimming and/or filing may be necessary if abnormal wear occurs. Oral exam is difficult due to the small size of the mouth, large tongue, and cheek folds. Sedation may be required to perform a complete exam and correct any problems. Signs of tooth problems include excessive salivation (usually noticed as wet fur on the chin and neck), reluctance to eat, and dropping food from the mouth. Any of these signs should be immediately reported to your veterinarian.

Lab Work: Routine, screening lab work is recommended on an annual basis starting at 5 years of age. This is done to monitor organ function and screening, and to detect early signs of illness.

Fleas: Rabbits can be dusted with flea powder containing 5% Carbaryl once a week to prevent flea infestation. Advantage®, a product labeled for use in dogs and cats but not specifically for rabbits, has been used safely in rabbits. However, owners must be aware that this is an extra-label usage and adverse reactions could occur.

Shopping List

Housing

- Cubes & Coroplast cages are strongly recommended (www.guineapigcages.com)
- Exercise outside of the cage is essential—make sure to rabbit-proof carefully!

Basics

- Bedding/Litter (Aspen shavings, Yesterday's News--no pine or cedar!)
- Hide Box (Pet carrier with door removed, large box, Igloo, or covered cat bed)
- Ceramic food dishes (2)
- Large water bottle
- Corner litter pan (large)
- Large regular litter pan (uncovered)—this will be a potty and hay box
- Timothy hay
- Pellets (Kaytee Timothy Complete or Oxbow Bunny Basics)
- Fresh greens, veggies, and occasional fruits
- Soft bristle brush
- Nail trimmers
- Toys (hanging wooden bird toys, cardboard boxes, old phone books and magazines, paper bags, untreated wooden spoons, untreated wicker baskets, some hard plastic cat toys, Nylabones, etc.)

Feeding Instructions

- 1/4-1/3 cup pellets (timothy-based)
- Free choice grass hay—not alfalfa
- 1-2 cups fresh salad (base of leafy greens--kale, romaine, parsley, mustard or collard greens, etc; plus small amounts of other low starch veggies--cucumber, bell peppers-all colors, pea pods, broccoli, etc; very small amounts of fruit--apple, berries, kiwi, mango, pear, etc.)
- Fresh water (refill the bottle with fresh water every day or two; thoroughly scrub the bottle, sipper tube and rubber ring once a week in hot, soapy water.)

