

Responsibility involves providing proper housing, nutrition, grooming and veterinary care

Domestic rabbits are delightful companion animals. They are inquisitive, intelligent, sociable and affectionate, and well-cared-for indoor rabbits can live for 7 to 10+ years. Adopting a rabbit, therefore, is a long term commitment.

Rabbits and Children

Our culture is so filled with images of children and rabbits together (the Easter Bunny, Peter Rabbit, etc.) that many parents see rabbits as low-maintenance starter pets for kids. Nothing could be further from the truth. Rabbits are physically delicate and fragile, and require specialized veterinary care.

Children are naturally energetic and loving. But “loving” to a small child means holding, cuddling, or carrying an animal around – precisely the things that frighten most rabbits. Rabbits can’t cry out when distressed. Instead they may start to scratch or bite to protect themselves from well-meaning children. Thousands are abandoned to animal shelters for this reason. Many rabbits are also dropped accidentally by children, resulting in broken legs and backs. While rabbits may be appropriate family companions, an adult should be the primary caretaker.

Housing and Exercise

Many people think that rabbits don’t require much room for housing or exercise. Not so! Rabbits have powerful hind legs designed for running and jumping. They need plenty of out-of-cage exercise time, as well as a cage that allows them to move freely. The minimum recommended cage space for a single rabbit is 2’ x 2’ x 4’. Although wire-bottom cages are common, they can ulcerate a rabbit’s feet. If you have a wire cage, cover the bottom with a piece of wood or corrugated cardboard. Better yet, buy a cage with a floor.

Your rabbit needs a safe exercise area with ample room to run and jump, either indoors or out. Any outdoor area should be fully enclosed by a fence. Never leave a rabbit unsupervised outdoors – even for a few minutes! Cats, dogs and even predatory birds can easily get around fencing material. Also, rabbits can dig under fences and get lost.

You can rabbit-proof an indoor area by covering all electrical wires and anything else your rabbit is likely to chew. Recommended exercise time for indoor rabbits is several hours per day.

Diet

- The most important component of your rabbit’s diet is grass hay (such as Timothy or Brome), which keeps the intestinal tract healthy; feed it free-choice, daily.
- In addition to hay, rabbits are also fed commercial rabbit pellets and fresh, dark-green leafy vegetables. Until they are fully grown (around 6 months), rabbits can have all the pellets they want. After that, assuming the animal is also getting hay and vegetables, pellets should be limited to 1/8 to 1/4 cup per day per 5 lbs. body weight. Pellets should be fresh and plain, without seeds, nuts or colored tidbits.
- Fresh water (bottle or bowl) should always be available.

Litter Training

Rabbits are very clean by nature, and will do their best to keep their living quarters clean. Most rabbits will choose one corner of the cage as their bathroom. As soon as your rabbit’s choice is clear, put a newspaper-lined litter box in that corner; fill it with Timothy hay (or any other grass hay – not alfalfa). Pelleted-newspaper litters are also acceptable. If the litter box is changed daily, your rabbit’s home will stay fresh and odor-free. Don’t use pine or cedar shavings! The fumes may affect your rabbit’s liver enzymes, which can cause problems if the animal needs anesthesia for surgery. Avoid using clay cat litters (both clumping and non-clumping); these may result in respiratory or gastrointestinal problems.

Indoors or Outdoors?

Many people think an outdoor hutch is the best way to keep a domestic rabbit. Rabbits, however, are highly social animals, and a backyard hutch forces them to live in unnatural isolation. Furthermore, rabbits can die of heart attacks from the very *approach* of a predator or vandal. Domestic rabbits do best indoors where they have plenty of interaction with family members.

Handling and General Care

- Pick up your rabbit by supporting his forequarters with one hand and his hindquarters with the other—failure to do so can result in spinal injuries to the rabbit. Never pick up a rabbit by his ears; this can cause very serious injury.
- Brush your rabbit regularly with a soft brush to remove excess hair and keep his coat in good condition. Ask your veterinarian how to clip your rabbit’s nails.
- Rabbits should be spayed or neutered by a veterinarian experienced with rabbit surgeries. Spaying or neutering prevents breeding, spraying (males) and uterine cancer (females). To find a qualified rabbit veterinarian, search the House Rabbit Society web page at www.rabbit.org.
- Rabbits should not be housed with other rabbits unless all are spayed/neutered and they are introduced in neutral territory under careful supervision. Introductions are often difficult and injuries can result.
- If your rabbit stops eating or moving his bowels for 12 hours or longer or has watery diarrhea, seek expert veterinary care *immediately*.

Written for the ASPCA by Mary E. Cotter, Ed.D., Licensed Educator, House Rabbit Society

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- House Rabbit Society, Box 1201, Alameda, CA 94601, (510) 521-4631, www.rabbit.org
- “House Rabbit Handbook”; Marinell Harriman; 3rd ed., Drollery Press; Alameda, CA; 1995.
- “Rabbits”; Michaela Miller; Heinemann Interactive Library; Chicago, IL; 1998.
- “ASPCA Pet Care Guides for Kids – Rabbit”; Mark Evans; Dorling Kindersley; London, England, 1992.
- In case of accidental poisoning, call the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center 24-Hour Emergency Hotline: (888) 4ANI-HELP (426-4435). A consultation fee applies.



The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
National Headquarters • 424 E. 92nd St. • New York, NY 10128-6804 •
(212) 876-7700 • www.aspc.org

Midwestern Regional Office • 1717 South Philo Road, Suite 36 •
Urbana, IL 61802 • (217) 337-5030 • www.aspc.org/apcc

TM and © are protected by The ASPCA. ©2004 The ASPCA