








# Rabbit Care Guide

## INTRODUCTION

Bunny Buddies is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization, primarily serving the Greater Houston area. We are dedicated to house rabbit rescue, education, and advocacy. We do not presently own or operate a shelter, but function as a network of foster homes and volunteers. A Capital Campaign was kicked off in November of 2014 with hopes of opening a rabbits-only shelter by the end of 2017.

-  We strive to offer opportunities for education in house rabbit care from an introductory level to advanced, as well as opportunities for socializing and networking with area house rabbit enthusiasts.
-  While we attempt to keep up-to-date information to assist with locating rabbit-savvy veterinarians, we are not qualified to diagnose medical conditions.
-  Because of our dedicated volunteers and generous donations, we are able to work with individuals and area shelters to help save many abandoned and surrendered rabbits who would otherwise face euthanasia.
-  We have had tremendous success in facilitating adoptions, helping to make the best possible human/rabbit matches, and working with these adopters to ensure a happy home environment for all.
-  By spending time with and socializing mistreated or misunderstood rabbits, we are able to rehabilitate them to the point where they could be adopted. In most cases, the rabbits who enter our care are able to become important family members in their new, forever homes.
-  Because of the unacceptably high numbers of rabbits who are surrendered, abandoned, and euthanized each and every year, we do not support rabbit breeding practices. Therefore, all of the rabbits in our care are spayed/neutered before being made available for adoption.
-  Because domestic rabbits housed outdoors are most often denied the love, attention, and care they need; and because of the many dangers outdoor housing poses to a rabbit's health and wellbeing, we adopt only to indoor homes and encourage all rabbit guardians to explore the possibility of bringing their rabbits indoors.



# A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO INDOOR COMPANION RABBITS

## LIVING WITH A HOUSE RABBIT: BUNNY BASICS

Many people are discovering the joys of sharing their homes with one or more rabbits. Rabbits are intelligent and playful, can be easily litter-trained, and make wonderful indoor companions. When you understand rabbit behavior, proper veterinary care, how to create the proper environment for your pet, and how to bunny-proof your home, your pet rabbit will provide years of love and companionship for you and your family.

A bunny owner needs patience, creativity to block or hide things a rabbit might want to chew (such as electrical cords), and a willingness to get down on the floor to interact with a bunny on her own level. For people willing to make this commitment to a house rabbit, the reward is years of companionship with a surprisingly clever, loving, and intelligent creature.

### Quick Facts About Rabbits.

**Rabbits are not good starter pets for children.**

Rabbits are delicate, ground-loving creatures. Most rabbits do not like to be held or handled, and may try to escape a well-meaning child's arms by biting and scratching. In addition, a rabbit's back may be easily broken as a result of improper handling.

**Rabbits are interesting and have lively personalities.**

Simply placing a rabbit in an outdoor hutch with minimal interaction from you and your family does result in a boring (and bored) pet. However, with regular interaction from you and plenty of running space for a bunny to kick up his heels and play, a rabbit suddenly becomes a social, fun-loving addition to a household. All the rabbit needs is the opportunity to show his true colors to you.

**Myth: Rabbits are low maintenance pets and don't live very long.**

Rabbits have needs similar to those of other household pets. A sick bunny needs medical care from a qualified veterinarian. Rabbits have specific dietary needs. A chronically ill rabbit will require long-term care. In addition, for medical and behavioral reasons rabbits need to be spayed and neutered. Cages and litter boxes need frequent cleaning. A properly cared for rabbit can live 8 to 10 years, sometimes even 12 or 13. This is quite a long-term commitment for a rabbit owner.

## **IMPORTANT FACTS ON SPAYING AND NEUTERING**

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Just like cats and dogs, rabbits must be spayed and neutered. Due to over-breeding and the common misconception that rabbits are easy or “disposable” pets, there are more rabbits than there are good homes willing to take them. Rabbits are the third most common animal to be abandoned to animal shelters. Animal shelters which accept rabbits and rabbit rescue organization foster homes are nearly always filled to capacity. Many other rabbits are “set free” in fields and parks where they die.

Aside from helping to relieve the massive overpopulation problem, spaying and neutering your rabbit has behavioral and medical benefits. When a rabbit hits puberty between 3 and 6 months of age, he most likely will become very territorial. Both male and female rabbits may aggressively defend their territory by grunting, lunging, and biting. Sexual activity in the form of mounting hands, feet, fuzzy bedroom slippers, and anything else available is also very common. While these behaviors are troublesome, one common behavior tops them all: spraying. Unneutered males and some unspayed females will spray large amounts of urine to mark territory and objects (such as an unsuspecting owner) as belonging to them. They frequently do this by leaping into the air and spinning in order to spray the urine over a large area. Unfortunately, this is when most rabbit owners give up their rabbits or move them to outdoor hutches. Neutering relieves most of these behavioral difficulties without changing your rabbit’s personality.

Most importantly, for medical reasons female rabbits must always be spayed. Studies have found that 50 to 80% of unspayed female rabbits develop uterine and/or mammary tumors by five years of age. Spaying your female rabbit adds years to her life.

Spaying and neutering, as with any other medical procedure, should be done only by a veterinarian with experience and training in treatment of rabbits. Male rabbits can be neutered as soon as their testicles descend (3 to 6 months). Most vets spay females at about 6 months.

### **Questions to Ask Your Vet Before Spay/Neuter Surgery**

**How many spays/neuters has the vet done?**

Your vet should be seeing rabbits on a regular basis and be experienced in surgery.

**What is the success rate?**

90% is too low. Some deaths are bound to occur, but they should be very rare.

**Should the rabbit be fasted prior to surgery?**

The answer to this question should always be “No.” Rabbits cannot vomit, so this is not a problem during surgery. In addition, it is not a good idea to upset the delicate balance in the rabbit’s intestinal tract.

**What anesthesia will be used?**

Isoflurane is the most common anesthesia used in rabbits, but halothane can be used also. It depends on the vet’s training and experience.

**In a spay, will both the ovaries and the uterus be removed?**

The answer should always be “Yes.”

**Will the rabbit need to stay overnight after the surgery?**

If so, provide the vet with pellets, hay and veggies to feed. Many people also give the bunny an old t-shirt or washcloth that smells like home for security.

Be sure to ask your vet about pain management. Some vets include that in the cost of the surgery, and some send pain medication home for an extra fee. We highly recommend it for a day or two, as bunnies in pain tend not to eat. Not eating for even a short while can cause serious gastro-intestinal problems which can become life-threatening very quickly. Bunny Buddies’ recovery protocol is Metacam (meloxicam) for three days following the day of spay surgery and for two days following the day of neuter surgery. Your vet may prefer a different drug, but you should insist upon some pain management protocol. Always ask for specific instructions on what to do once your bunny comes home. Call your vet immediately if the rabbit begins chewing on stitches, stops eating or drinking, or has any other difficulty.

## HOME SWEET HOME: CAGE AND ENVIRONMENT

Most rabbits have some sort of cage they can call their own. Even rabbits that have 24 hour free range of a house enjoy a place to go to nap, hide, or nibble hay. The rabbit's cage should be a pleasant place to spend time, and the bigger, the better (the space above a rabbit's habitat is almost always unused or "wasted" space, so consider building UP!). We recommend that you either build a condo (see below), use an "x pen" or other enclosure, or bunny-proof one room of your house (ideally a family or rec room where the bunny can act as part of the family). You can buy the panels to make a condo at Target in the home organization section. They are called "Organize It" cubes. Throw away the connectors and connect the grids at several intersections with zip/electrical ties. A box of Organize It cubes costs around \$20. You can make a large condo with two boxes of Organize It grids. Look for more condo setups on [www.bunnybuddies.org](http://www.bunnybuddies.org).



**From the Basic...**

**To the Not-So-Basic**

### The Cage/Condo

Most cages for rabbits sold in pet stores are much too small for a rabbit who must spend long periods of time in her cage. They are also much more expensive than a condo you can build yourself. Many people have designed multi-level rabbit "condos" with ramps, enclosed hiding places, and multitudes of other features designed to keep a bunny occupied. A general rule of thumb in selecting a cage is to choose one that is at least four times the stretched out size of the adult rabbit. Try to provide at least four square feet for a small breed and nine square feet for a large breed. Multiple rabbits living together need even more space. Cages often come with wire mesh bottoms and a removable tray to catch urine and feces. While this is convenient in terms of cleaning, it can be very hard on a rabbit's feet. Constant exposure to this type of surface can lead to sore hocks, a condition in which the hair on the feet is worn away and ulcers form on the ankle. If you do purchase a cage with a wire floor, be sure to provide a board, piece of cardboard, a few sheets of newspaper, or a small grass mat for the rabbit to comfortably sit on. The tray itself should be lined with newspaper or filled with hay or a paper-based litter. Do not use pine or cedar shavings as the aromatics in the wood can cause serious liver and respiratory damage to your bunny. This damage can interfere with your rabbit's ability to metabolize anesthesia and cause serious complications during surgery. The New York State House Rabbit Society recommends that rabbits that have lived on pine or cedar shavings wait at least three months before undergoing surgery.

Another factor to consider in a cage is the size of the door. You should be able to fit a litter box in the cage. If you cannot fit a box in the cage and you are the creative sort, you may be able to enlarge the door somewhat with wire cutters. If you are still unable to fit a litter box through the door, or are planning on using the cage itself as a litter box, urine guards attached to the sides of the cage are helpful. Rabbits often back up into a corner to urinate and may end up directing their urine through the cage bars onto your carpet. Urine guards are also useful during litter training to protect your floors while the bunny is still learning good bathroom habits.

Placement of the doors is also important. The best cage has both a top opening door, which makes it easy for you to clean the cage, and a side door which can be opened to allow the rabbit to come and go freely (also be sure you can get to your bunny if an emergency requires you to retrieve her quickly). You may not even need to build a top except for just over the top floor of the condo. This will allow you to stand up inside the condo.

## Cage Environment

A rabbit must have access to water and hay while in her cage. Water can be provided in a hanging bottle or in a heavy, tip-proof ceramic bowl. (A bottle may be easier for you to maintain, but not all rabbits will drink enough water from a bottle; a bowl is a more natural way of drinking. Watch to be sure your bunny is getting plenty of water.) Hay may be put loose on the cage floor, on one end of the litter box, in a separate box, or in a hay rack attached to the cage (a hay rack attached over the litter box will entice the bunny into the litter box and allow waste hay to fall into the box where it's easy to clean). If the bunny is to eat meals in her cage, heavy ceramic food dishes or cage crocks attached to the side of the cage should also be provided. A variety of toys should be in the cage to keep your rabbit occupied.

Cages should always be kept clean. White vinegar is an excellent cleaner for litter boxes and cage trays. Soiled litter should be changed at least once a week. Above all, the cage should be an inviting place for your bunny. The rabbit should view her cage as a safe home base which is all her own, and not as an unpleasant punishment. A rabbit can also be fairly territorial, and may defend her area if she feels threatened. Her space should be respected, and only entered for cleaning and feeding.

### Toys for Bunnies

Rabbits love to play, and they need mental stimulation to keep active and healthy. Bunnies like to chew, dig, push, jump and throw. Giving them toys of their own also keeps your furniture from taking a beating from bunny teeth and nails.

Store-bought toys are good, but many common household objects can provide just as much excitement:

- ◆ Toilet paper and paper towel tubes
- ◆ Old phone book for shredding (in a cardboard box)
- ◆ A ramp to climb and a shelf to sit on
- ◆ A non-chewable plastic ball to nudge
- ◆ Boxes of all sizes (with staples removed)
- ◆ Cardboard take-out trays from fast-food restaurants
- ◆ Untreated willow baskets and balls to chew (check Pier One Imports)
  - ◆ Cardboard tunnel-usually used as a form for pouring concrete posts (see photo)
  - ◆ Toys- Order online at Busy Bunny, Bunny Luv, The Bunny Store or Leith PetWerks
- ◆ Jingly wire cat ball to toss around
- ◆ Hard plastic baby toys
- ◆ Canning jar lids
- ◆ Empty rolled oats container
- ◆ An old towel to push around
- ◆ Grass mats for chewing
- ◆ Big tub of hay or straw to dig in

## **“HE’S CHEWING EVERYTHING!!”—RABBIT PROOFING YOUR HOME**

Rabbits have been referred to as “life-support systems for teeth that chew.” They have an amazing ability to chew, rip, shred, tear, and otherwise destroy anything they come across.

A rabbit’s teeth grow continuously, and chewing helps to wear down teeth to a healthy level. By providing acceptable chewing alternatives and making some adjustments to the area the bunny occupies, you can minimize the destruction to your home and property.

While some rabbits are allowed run of an entire house, others have their areas restricted to certain rooms. For example, a computer with all its cords and cables is difficult to rabbit-proof, and it is often easier to simply restrict access to that room. A strong baby gate that is too tall for a bunny to jump is a good investment.

The number one household hazard to rabbits is electrical and telephone cords. Cords seem to draw rabbits like a magnet, and sharp bunny teeth can sever a cord in seconds. Not only can the resulting electrical shock injure or kill your rabbit, the bare wire can be a risky fire hazard. Cords can be hidden behind bookcases and other furniture that the rabbit can not get behind. Another solution is to encase the wire in something that the bunny can not bite through. Plastic cable covers can be purchased at electronics or automotive stores. You can also purchase plastic tubing or a garden hose, slit it lengthwise, and insert the wire inside.

If you like the buttons on your remote control keep it out of reach of your house rabbit! Rabbits love anything rubbery and can chew up a remote in minutes. Carpet is also irresistible temptation to many rabbits. A bunny may dig or chew at carpet fibers, which can lead to an intestinal blockage if ingested. If there are only a few spots (usually corners) where she likes to dig, grass mats can be used to hide the area and provide a great chewing and digging diversion. Plastic carpet runners protect the carpet from digging and urine. A large tub of hay or straw also serves as a good digging outlet. A wide variety of untreated willow baskets, wood blocks, and chewable cardboard gives a bunny plenty of opportunity to chew.

Rabbits who chew the household despite these alternatives may need to be further deterred. A water pistol is a cheap, safe way to let your rabbit know what she is doing is wrong. Also, bitter tasting substances can be bought in pet supply stores and applied to carpet, table legs, curtains, or whatever she likes to chew. When she begins to make the association that chewing the furniture results in something unpleasant, she will be less likely to destroy your property and seek out acceptable chewing and digging pastimes.

Another hazard is household plants. Many of these are toxic to rabbits and can cause serious illness or death when eaten. Plants should be out of reach.

Other cover-ups, diversions, and measures can be taken as needed to make your home rabbit-friendly. Expensive hardcover books can be moved to a higher bookshelf, shoes and clothes should be put away, and important bills and documents should not be left on the floor, or you can be assured your bunny will find these things and work her destructive magic on them.

## **YES-THEY CAN BE LITTER TRAINED!**

Many people are surprised to find that rabbits can be litter-trained. It takes patience, time, and a lot of litter-boxes (at first), but the result is a companion that can be trusted in the main living areas of your home.

Spaying or neutering your rabbit is the first step. Unaltered rabbits are highly territorial and will frequently spray large amounts of urine to mark their territory, especially during adolescence. Spaying and neutering decreases this urge to spray and improves litter habits greatly.

Rabbits vary in how quickly they learn to use a litter box. Young rabbits are often hyper and too busy exploring to remember to return to a litter box, and can be more difficult to train. A rabbit with a well established spraying habit may continue to spray, especially in the presence of another rabbit.

## The Setup and Training

You will most likely have to start with several litter boxes. Fill them with newspaper, hay, or paper-based litter. Pine and cedar shavings can cause respiratory and liver damage and should not be used. Clay cat litter and corn cob litter can cause intestinal blockages if ingested and are not recommended either. Clumping cat litter is especially dangerous if ingested as it can cause a cement-like blockage and should never be used.

Litter-training begins in the cage. Rabbits tend to urinate in one spot, so place a litter box in the corner of the cage that the rabbit has chosen to use as a bathroom. If the cage has a wire floor, place newspaper or other resting material on it or he will probably choose to sit and rest in the comfy litter box instead of the wire. Rotate the litter box every day since bunnies tend to frequent one corner of the box. Place a few droppings and some urine soaked litter in the litter box to encourage him to continue to use that place. Place fresh timothy or orchard hay in or above the litter box every day.

When he is reliably urinating in the litter box, allow a little freedom in a small area such as a bathroom. As he becomes successful in a small area, you can increase his territory. If he makes a mistake and misses a litter box, use white vinegar to clean the area. If he consistently urinates in one spot, place a litter box there. He will eventually narrow his bathroom areas to one or two favorite litter boxes and the extra ones can be removed.

Control of droppings usually follows urine training. When entering a new territory, even neutered rabbits will mark it with droppings. As they become more familiar with their surroundings, this marking decreases and usually becomes controlled on its own. Litter boxes should be cleaned once or twice weekly or more frequently if more than one rabbit is using them. Soiled recycled newspaper litter can be composted or used to fertilize a garden, or simply thrown away. Clean the litter box with white vinegar. This will dissolve any calcium buildup on the plastic and gets rid of any odor. Never use Lysol or pine cleaners, as the phenols in these cleaners can cause liver and respiratory damage.

## Paper-Based and Other Safe Litters

Some common paper-based litters are: Yesterday's News, Nature Fresh, PaPurr, Cat Country, CareFresh, EcoFresh and Bio-Flush. Woody Pet and Feline Pine are wood based litters that have had the aromatic oils removed that otherwise would cause respiratory problems. If these are unavailable, you can use plain newspaper, crosscut shredded paper (no staples) and/or hay (this will need more frequent cleaning).

### Litter Box Basics

- ◆ Spaying/neutering your bunny is the first step toward litter box success
- ◆ Start with multiple boxes and reduce the number as your bunny's habits improve
- ◆ Try putting some hay in or over the litter box to encourage your bunny to spend time in it
- ◆ Put boxes where your bunny tends to go (this may not be the same place you would choose!)
- ◆ Many bunnies like to have two boxes—one to lounge in and one to potty in
- ◆ Try different sizes and shapes of boxes to see which your bunny prefers
- ◆ If your bunny goes near the box, try using one with higher sides or turn your high back litter box "backwards" to make him/her get all the way in
- ◆ If your bunny is a digger, try putting a piece of coated hardware cloth over the litter to prevent scattering (give your bunny other options for digging—perhaps at playtime)
- ◆ Do Not Use Pine or Cedar shavings, clay litter, or clumping litters
- ◆ Do use non-aromatic, dust-free litters of recycled paper or stove pellets

## **FOOD FOR THOUGHT: THEY NEED MORE THAN JUST CARROTS**

The number one most important thing to feed your rabbit is grass hay. Unlimited amounts of timothy, oat, or orchard hay should be supplied 24 hours a day. Legume hays such as alfalfa and clover hay contain large amounts of calcium and protein which can cause health problems when fed in excess to rabbits over 6 months of age, and should only be used as treats. Feeding hay provides large quantities of fiber without unneeded calories, and helps to prevent intestinal problems such as trichobezoars (hairballs) and stasis (slowdown or complete stoppage of the intestinal system).

Pellets should be offered in limited amounts to rabbits over 6 months. Pellets should be of high quality with high fiber (18%), low fat (1 - 2 %), low calcium, and low protein. Do not feed pellets with nuts, seeds, dried vegetables or other "treats" in them! These pellets are low in quality and very high in fat. Plain, high quality pellets are the best thing for your rabbit.

Vegetables should also make up a large amount of your rabbit's diet. Try to introduce at least eight different types of vegetables, and of these, at least three should be fed daily. Leafy greens such as romaine, dandelion greens, endive, parsley, cilantro, basil, peppermint leaves, carrot tops, beet tops, radish tops, collard greens, and escarole are good, as well as vegetables such as carrots, celery, and broccoli. Kale and spinach can be fed in limited amounts. Generally, one heaping cup of vegetables per five pounds of body weight can be fed per day. Introduce new vegetables gradually, one at a time. If any diarrhea or intestinal upset is noticed, discontinue that vegetable. If after a week your rabbit has no problems, introduce another vegetable. Be sure to wash all vegetables thoroughly.

Treats such as apple, pear, raisins, melon, papaya, or banana can also be fed (about a tablespoon a day). Grains such as rolled oats or barley can also be fed in small amounts.

Fresh water should always be available to your rabbit. This can be provided in a tip-proof ceramic dish (lead free only) or in a hanging water bottle. Change the water at least once daily and clean crocks and bottles often with a mild dish detergent.

Other items you may want to consider feeding your rabbit include papaya enzyme (papayin) and acidophilus/lactobacillus. Papaya enzymes help promote motility of the intestinal tract. Fresh papaya or dextrose free papaya tablets can be fed. Acidophilus/lactobacillus is thought to help maintain a good balance of microorganisms in the intestinal tract.



### **Bunny Dietary Guidelines**

#### **UNLIMITED HAY EVERY DAY!!**

**(Get it from Oxbow or American Pet Diner online or through our co-op.)**

Timothy is the best	entices all but the pickiest bunny
Orchard Grass is also good	this is a seasonal item though
Alfalfa	great for young bunnies, but too rich for regular use in adults (use as a treat)
Oat Hay	another great treat hay!
Coastal is the local variety	Not nutritious enough for bunnies – can be used as litter box filler



## HIGH QUALITY TIMOTHY PELLETS

There are many varieties available at feed stores and pet supply stores; look for high fiber and low protein. Do not buy the kind with the added seeds & colored bits—it is junk food for bunnies!

2-4 lbs.— $\frac{1}{8}$ cup daily	5-7 lbs.— $\frac{1}{4}$ cup daily	8-19 lbs.— $\frac{1}{2}$ cup daily	11-15 lbs.— $\frac{3}{4}$ cup daily
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## Young Rabbits

Rabbits up to six months of age can have free access to pellets. Feed alfalfa pellets then slowly transition to timothy pellets at six months. After this growing stage, pellets should be limited based on the weight of the rabbit.

## SAFE VEGGIES

Maintain a variety in the diet, at least 3 types a day to ensure adequate vitamins in the diet. 5 or more types a day is even better. Introduce new veggies slowly, watching for signs of diarrhea, gas, or upset stomach. Feed at least one heaping cup of raw veggies per 5 pounds of bunny—some bunnies eat a lot more.

The veggies on this list are all safe, but each bunny has different tastes! Limit the ones highest in calcium. Most herbs are considered quite tasty by many bunnies, too.

Raw Vegetable	Calcium Content mg/1 cup serving	Raw Vegetable	Calcium Content mg/1 cup serving
Alfalfa Sprouts	10	Lettuce, Romaine	20
Asparagus	28	Lettuce, Loose-Leaf	38
Beet Greens	46	Mustard Greens	58
Broccoli	42	Mustard Spinach	315
Chinese Cabbage	74	Okra	82
Carrots & Carrot Tops	30	Parsley	78
Cauliflower	28	Peas, Edible Pod	62
Celery	44	Peppers, Sweet	6
Chard, Swiss	18	Pumpkin	24
Chicory Greens	180	Pumpkin Leaves	15
Collard Greens	218	Purslane	28
Coriander (Cilantro)	16	Radishes & Leaves	28
Cress, Garden	40	Spinach	56
Dandelion Greens	103	Squash, Summer	26
Eggplant	30	Squash, Zucchini	20
Jerusalem Artichoke	21	Turnips	39
Kale	94	Turnip Greens	105
Kohlrabi	34	Watercress	40

United States Dept. of Agriculture, Human Nutrition Information Service, Agriculture Handbook Number 8-11, "Composition of Foods: Vegetables and Vegetable Products." Revised August 1984. Compiled by Susan Smith, Ph.D. 1996.

## FRUITS & TREATS

A small amount of fruit can be fed daily: banana, apple, pear, orange, mango, plum, peach, berries, grapes, etc. BEWARE: apple & pear seeds, fruit pits, banana peel, & orange rind can be deadly or dangerous! Don't risk it! Don't encourage your bunny to be a junk food junkie with human cereals, chocolate, or seed treats. Frozen fruits are especially yummy in the summer-time: try freezing fresh papaya chunks or grapes.

## PAPAYA ENZYME

There's some speculation that the papaya enzyme can aid in preventing bunny hair-balls. Unlimited hay is the best prevention, but papaya tablets (found in health-food stores or mail-order) can be given daily as a treat.

## SHARE PRODUCTS IN HOUSTON

Bunny Buddies members may e-mail [supplies@bunnybuddies.org](mailto:supplies@bunnybuddies.org) to purchase hay, pellets, and other supplies in bulk and at a reduced cost. Supplies are currently ordered quarterly, so be sure to plan ahead.

# GROOMING AND HANDLING: YOU LOOK MAH-VALOUS!

## Up From Ground Zero

Rabbits need to be handled very carefully. Most rabbits generally do not like to be lifted from the ground, and may struggle. They also have an exceptionally delicate skeletal structure and can be injured very easily if improperly handled or dropped.

A rabbit should never be picked up by her ears: she is not designed to support the weight of her body and picking her up like this hurts terribly and can cause damage. In addition, rabbits should not be lifted by the scruff of the neck. If the rear legs are not supported, she will struggle, kick out and most likely hurt her back. If you must pick up your rabbit by the scruff, be sure to quickly put a hand on her rump to keep her from struggling.

The best way to pick up a rabbit is to slide one hand underneath her chest, place the other hand firmly on the rump, and scoop toward your body. Hold the rabbit close to you in a firm grasp. Some rabbits may struggle even when they're secure against a body. If your bunny does this, it sometimes helps to cover her eyes with your hand. Be prepared to squat quickly should she struggle violently or start to escape from your arms.

To put your rabbit back down on the floor, do a deep knee bend to get yourself as low as possible without tipping or tilting the bunny. Gently release her to the floor.



Photo courtesy of the House Rabbit Society

## Good Bunny Hygiene

Like cats, most rabbits do a pretty good job of keeping themselves looking their best. However, there are still some things that you will need to look after to keep your bunny well-groomed and healthy.

Long-haired rabbits such as angoras, fuzzy lops, and Jersey woolies need vigilant, daily brushing to keep mats and tangles from forming. Once these mats form, the only way to remove them is to gently cut them out. It can literally take hours to get mats out once they form, and regular brushing prevents this. A wire slicker brush commonly sold for cats easily removes large amounts of loose hair and wool. A wide-toothed pet comb can get out the occasional minor snarl.

Short-haired rabbits will need to be brushed as well, but not as frequently. Rabbits shed four times a year, with two of these shedding periods being major molts. Since ingesting loose hair can easily lead to dangerous hairballs, it is a wise idea to brush your rabbit frequently while she is shedding heavily.

Rabbits' toenails need periodic clipping to keep from growing too long and causing foot problems such as sore hocks.

This can be done by your vet, or you can do it yourself with a little practice. Try wrapping the bunny in a towel "bunny burrito" and stick one paw out at a time. Many rabbits can be "tranced" by gently placing them on their backs in your lap and stroking the top of the head. Once the bunny is quiet and still, you may be able to clip her nails. Be ready for the bunny to suddenly snap out of the trance! Always have a firm grasp to be sure she doesn't hurt herself!

If your rabbit has light-colored toenails, you will be able to see a vein inside. This is the quick. (If your rabbit has dark nails, you will need to backlight the nails with a flashlight to see this.) Using cat nail clippers or regular human toenail clippers, clip the toenail just below the quick (see illustration). If by mistake you cut through the quick it will bleed, often quite heavily. This can be stopped with styptic powder, corn starch, or regular flour. Keep an eye on that toe for a few days to be sure it does not become infected.

## **“HEY, WHAT’S ONE MORE?”—MULTIPLE RABBIT HOUSEHOLDS**

Rabbits are extremely social animals. Wild European rabbits from which domestic rabbits descended live in large groups. While these rabbits breed quickly and can often overrun an area, spayed and neutered domestic rabbits can enjoy each other’s company without worrying about a population explosion.

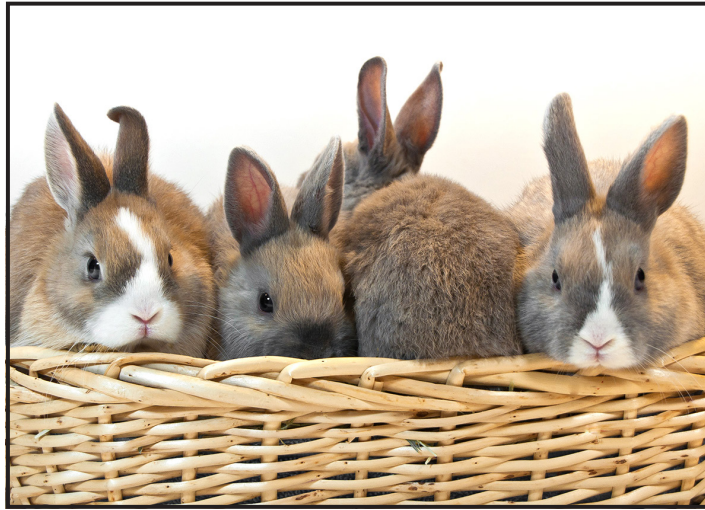


Photo courtesy of the House Rabbit Society

Bonded rabbits are lifelong friends. They often share a cage, groom each other, and sleep nestled up together. Often, when one rabbit is ill the pair is left together since the separation of the two can be stressful. When one of the pair dies, the other mourns the loss and may not eat or behave normally for some time.

Introducing rabbits can be tricky business, but the final reward of watching a bonded pair snuggle closely or bound about a room is well worth the trouble. The easiest couple to introduce is a neutered male and a spayed female, especially if you bring a new female to an established male. Female rabbits are more territorial and may resent any new rabbit, male or female. Two spayed female rabbits can also be bonded, though it may be more difficult. Most difficult, but certainly not impossible, is introducing two neutered males. All important are the bunnies’ personalities: a very mellow neutered male may accept just about any new friend.

When bringing a new rabbit into a house, be sure to quarantine her in a separate room and schedule health exam with a vet right away. Once you are sure the new rabbit is healthy (and spayed or neutered), introduce the rabbits in an area that is new to them both. The new situation in an unfamiliar area makes most rabbits slightly nervous, and they may band together to explore the new surroundings. You should also move their cages together so they get accustomed to each other’s smell and movements. If all goes well with the introductions for several days, you can try to expand their run time to the regular place where they will live. Keep a spray bottle handy to break up any fights that may occur. If there is any fighting, go back to the neutral space for a few more days. Eventually, they should become friends.

Some rabbits will fight, even in neutral territory. In these cases, always keep a spray bottle close at hand to break up any fights. A more stressful situation, such as a car ride is often needed to get these rabbits to accept each other. In all cases, be prepared to move slowly. It takes time to build a lasting relationship.

If it becomes apparent that the rabbits will not tolerate each other, you may have to keep them separate. This possibility should always be considered when bringing a new rabbit into your household, and accommodations will have to be made for separate territories in your home. Rabbits can also form friendships with other animals such as guinea pigs, cats, and some dogs. While in many situations it is the rabbit that harasses the cat, young adolescent cats may not always be trustworthy enough to be left unsupervised with a rabbit. Dogs should be very calm and well-trained.

Extensive guidelines for introducing pairs of rabbits or rabbits and other animals can be found in the House Rabbit Handbook (Drollery Press, 2017) or in the video *Introducing Rabbits* (Drollery Press, [www.drollery.net](http://www.drollery.net)).

## MEDICAL CONCERNS FOR PET RABBITS

Whenever you notice that your rabbit is not eating, urinating, defecating, or behaving normally, consult a veterinarian experienced in rabbit care. Rabbits seem to get ill suddenly and their health can deteriorate very rapidly without proper veterinary care.

There are many diseases common to rabbits, all of which need to be diagnosed and treated by a veterinarian. The purpose of this section is not to help diagnose illnesses on your own, but to illustrate signs and symptoms that indicate your bunny may be ill. This information should be used to supplement—not replace—the advice of a qualified rabbit veterinarian.

Some rabbits, especially Netherland Dwarfs or other rabbits bred for round-shaped heads, often have maloccluded teeth. This is a condition in which the rabbit's teeth do not line up properly and overgrow into "tusks." This can happen either with the front teeth or the rear molars. These teeth will need to be clipped or filed periodically, or may need to be extracted altogether in some cases.

Sore Hocks is a condition in which the fur on the bottom of the rabbit's feet is worn away. The exposed skin is subject to cracking, ulcerations, and infection. Rabbits with sore hocks need a soft, dry resting place at all times, and extra care should be taken to clean their litter boxes more frequently to help keep their feet dry.

Fleas, flies, mites and other pests may infest your bunny. If you note any small specks, dry flaky skin, or crusty material in your rabbit's ears, contact your veterinarian.

Respiratory diseases are very common in rabbits. If you notice runny nose or eyes, labored breathing, mucous on the insides of the front paws (from the rabbit wiping his nose), or excessive sneezing or coughing, take your rabbit to a veterinarian immediately.

Of course, keeping an eye open for symptoms and catching any problems in their early stages decreases the chance of a minor problem turning into a major catastrophe. Preventive measures such as feeding unlimited hay, regular grooming, proper diet, and exercise help your rabbit live a long and healthy life.

### Symptoms of Illnesses

Other physical symptoms and signs to watch for are:

- ◆ inactivity—bunny is hunched up and not sociable
- ◆ lack of interest in food or water
- ◆ tilted head, loss of balance or coordination
- ◆ bloated or distended abdomen
- ◆ loss of consciousness or convulsions
- ◆ any sores, abscesses, lumps, or tumors
- ◆ loss of movement in hind legs or any apparent broken bone, serious cut, or injury
- ◆ runny nose or eyes (can indicate serious respiratory problems)
- ◆ diarrhea (liquid stool or normal stool surrounded with mucous) If you see soft droppings shaped like bunches of grapes, do not panic. These are normal in small amounts.
- ◆ bulging eyes coupled with loud grinding of the teeth indicate severe pain
- ◆ drooling (may be caused by maloccluded molars)
- ◆ lack of urine or feces in the litter box
- ◆ excessive gurgling digestive sounds

### Finding a Veterinarian

The Bunny Buddies website at [www.bunnybuddies.org](http://www.bunnybuddies.org) maintains a list of recommended rabbit vets separated by regions.

The best way to deal with an emergency is to be prepared. Find an experienced rabbit vet before an emergency arises. This will save precious time in a crisis.

## ADOPTING A RABBIT

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If you are interested in adopting a rabbit, contact Bunny Buddies. Please do not purchase a rabbit from a pet store or breeder while there are so many rabbits waiting in crowded shelters and foster homes.

Bunny Buddies can assist you in locating a Texas rabbit that needs a second chance. As a private rescue organization, we have constant access to rabbits in need of homes.

Please contact us for house rabbit information, resources, and adoption assistance in the greater Houston area. Visit us on the internet at [www.bunnybuddies.org](http://www.bunnybuddies.org) or contact us at [adopt@bunnybuddies.org](mailto:adopt@bunnybuddies.org).

We can give rescued bunnies love, exercise, and fresh food,

But we need YOU to give them a forever home!!

## FINDING A HOME FOR A RABBIT

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If you have found a stray rabbit or have to give yours up, there are several things you can do:

- ◆ Contact Bunny Buddies about participating in our Foster-In-Place program.
- ◆ Place an ad in the paper and in vets' offices.
- ◆ Litter-train the rabbit.
- ◆ Interact with her so she is used to people.
- ◆ If possible, have the rabbit spayed or neutered. Bunny Buddies can give you advice on where to go.
- ◆ Provide her with toys to show prospective adopters that she is a fun, interesting companion animal.
- ◆ Never offer your rabbit for free. Insist on a modest \$ 20 charge. This will prevent your rabbit from becoming snake food.
- ◆ Insist that your rabbit go to an indoor home only.
- ◆ Recommend that prospective adopters purchase the House Rabbit Handbook—Fifth Edition (Drollery Press, 2017, [www.drollery.net](http://www.drollery.net)).

## RABBIT RESOURCES

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The original version of this guide was originally compiled by Jennifer Royce of the Southern Tier Rabbit Care Network in 1996. It has since been revised and updated by Bunny Buddies. We would like to thank and acknowledge Jennifer Royce for the earlier version of this work.

Great Books... In order of our preference.

House Rabbit Handbook (Fifth Edition) by Marinell Harriman. 2017

A House Rabbit Primer by Lucile Moore. 2005, Santa Monica Press.

Rabbit Health in the 21st Century by Kathryn R. Smith.

Why Does My Rabbit...? by Anne McBride.

Websites worth bookmarking...

[www.bunnybuddies.org](http://www.bunnybuddies.org)

The Language of Lagamorphs <http://language.rabbitspeak.com/> by Eric Mercer

The House Rabbit Society [www.rabbit.org](http://www.rabbit.org)—The HRS has chapters across the U. S. and internationally



**An Outdoor Hutch?**  
**Why Leave So Much Love Outside Your Home?**  
<http://therabbithutch.com/Care/outdoorhutch/outdoor.htm>  
**By Lucy Miranda Rabbit**  
**March 2003**

One of the most common questions that Oliver and I receive in the e-mail bag goes something like this:

“Hello, I just bought a rabbit as a pet and I would like to know where I can find free plans on how to build an outdoor rabbit hutch for my rabbit. “

The first thing that goes through my mind is” Why would you want to do that?”

Just put yourself in our fur for a moment.

Would you want to stay outside, in a small wooden structure with walls and floors made from wire? The only protection is maybe a small built- in enclosure filled with straw for warmth?

In the winter months as the temperature outside dips, you get colder. You have fur, and your coat offers a little protection from the elements but not enough to keep you comfortable. During the day, you try to hop outside the enclosure in the hutch, but even as the sun shines it’s still too cold! Your human caretaker comes out for a little while to pet you, and perhaps change your water out. Because the temperature is so cold, he or she can stay with you but a little while. After a few minutes of friendship, he or she has to go back inside their well heated home.

But you are still outside, shivering, with the long winter night fast approaching.

You watch as your human caretaker goes off, and the only emotion your sense is loneliness.

Later that night, you feel yourself getting thirsty so you cautiously hop outside the small enclosure to get a drink, only to find that your water bottle is frozen solid. Around you are the creatures of the night, skulking about. You know you are a prey animal and it makes you VERY nervous and scared. Some have one goal: breaking into your home, capturing you, and having you over for dinner, with YOU as the main course! If your hutch is overturned, there isn’t much you can do to protect yourself, except run and hope you are not caught.

Summertime is no better. The air is now very warm and humid. Your heavy winter fur has long since been shed and your lighter summer coat is now in. Still it’s fur, and its not doing much to help you keep cool.

You hop over to the water bottle that your caretaker has left for you which gives you at least a little respite from the heat. You hope that the water bottle in your cage is full but sometimes with all of the summer activities, your caretaker sometimes forgets you are in there, and the water may be stagnate.

Because of the weather, your caretaker is inside enjoying the breeze from a fan, or an air conditioner or somewhere at the local park enjoying the day. Visits to see you outside may be few and far between.

You still feel lonely.

Insects are now a problem. You try your best to keep them away but they still trouble you at every turn. If even a fly should bite you, it could mean a medical catastrophe, perhaps even lead to your demise.

And the creatures of the night are still there, with the same goal in mind: Having YOU for dinner!

Now if you are kept inside the home, you become a member of the family! You are protected from the cold of the winter winds, and the heat of summer. Your food and water are replenished daily and not disturbed by the elements or insects.

Inside a home, your natural predators cannot reach you! You feel far more at ease.

Most importantly, since you are indoors, you receive more attention from your human family! Everyone inside recognizes you not as some inanimate object outside that is just a chore to take care of, but as a member of the family, to be cared for and loved!

The most fun part of having us around is getting to know our personalities, and for us bunnies getting to know you! We can’t do that from and outside hutch without being around you. We bunnies are very social creatures and would love to get to know you better, and in return we have a lot of love and affection to give you!

This is why when my first human friend found out that her new dog and I just were not going to get along, she loved me enough to be very particular about the home that I would go to. She wanted to make sure that I would be kept indoors inside the house and be treated like I was a member of the family, not kept outdoors with limited human contact, limited protection from the elements, and little protection from potential predators!

So if you are thinking about keeping one of us outside away from the shelter of your home and your attention, please think twice about keeping us rabbits in an outdoor hutch. We will be much more safer within your home, and we bunnies can get to know you a LOT better!

# Reasons Not to Leave Your Rabbit Outdoors

The House Rabbit Society has a helpful article explaining how your bun can make the transition from an outdoor hutch rabbit to a House Rabbit!  
<http://rabbit.org/making-of-a-house-rabbit/>

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**A rabbit kept within the home and not in an outdoor hutch can live up to 7 to 12 years with the proper care**

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**Rabbits kept outside are exposed to the weather. Extreme heat or cold can be fatal to your rabbit.**

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**Keep in mind, rabbits are prey animals in the wild. Rabbits kept outside in a hutch are exposed to natural predators that can strike while you are unaware.**

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**Rabbits can scare easily. Even if the outdoor hutch offers some protection, an attack may place enough stress on the rabbit that he could go into shock and may die of fright.**

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**Rabbits are social animals. They appreciate the company of their own kind and the affection of people.**

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**The best way to look at the problem is put yourself in your rabbit's place:  
Would YOU enjoy it out there exposed to so much?  
Or would you prefer to be in a comfortable safe environment surrounded by those who care for you?**