

# Rabbit Behaviour: What we can learn from it



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## WHY DOES MY BUNNY MISBEHAVE?

Each year too many rabbits are abandoned due to behavioural problems. To help prevent this tragedy, it is essential to develop a basic understanding of rabbit behaviour. While you may never completely understand your rabbit, it is possible to have some basic understanding of why your rabbit behaves the way he does. Understanding is key in knowing how to control his undesirable behaviour. The two biggest factors that cause your rabbit to misbehave are hormones and boredom.

## HORMONES

When rabbits reach sexual maturity (at three to six months of age, depending on the breed), hormones start to influence their behaviour: owners often see an increase in negative behaviours such as digging and chewing. Unaltered, sexually mature pets also have an overwhelming desire to mark territory, and frequently lose their litterbox habits. Some will even spray or become aggressive.

Spaying or neutering your pet can help to control negative behaviour associated with hormones. It deters, if not eliminates, most negative hormonally-driven behaviour within three months after the procedure. It's unfair not to give your potentially wonderful bunny a chance to be an important member of your family just because he has become a hormonally-charged nuisance. As with any surgery, there is some risk. Therefore, it is very important to have only an experienced bunny veterinarian spay or neuter your pet.



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## BOREDOM

Rabbits are inquisitive by nature and require sufficient mental stimulation and physical exercise each day. A bored bunny may become depressed or destructive. To help prevent boredom, provide your rabbit with a selection of toys and daily exercise time in a bunny-proofed area.

## TOYS

### Some favourite and safe toys include:

- Cardboard boxes with doors and windows for 'remodeling'
- Tunnels made from cardboard concrete forming tubes (available at your local hardware or home improvement stores).
- Canning jar rings and hard plastic baby/bird toys, without small removable parts (such as a set of plastic keys) for tossing.
- Phone books for demolition projects
- Untreated willow rings, wicker baskets and grass mats. Important: Be sure that your rabbit's head cannot get stuck in the hole of the willow ring!
- Untreated fruit tree branches like apple, willow or aspen are tasty distractions, but cherry, apricot, peach, and plum (fruits with pits) are toxic unless they are removed from the tree and aged for a month.
- Cardboard boxes (or large litter pans) filled with hay or shredded newspaper for digging.

If your bunny doesn't seem interested in a certain toy at first, try it again later. Your bunny's interests may change. Also, remember that playtime can be a team effort and not just a spectator sport. Your bunny might enjoy a game of fetch...in reverse. He throws a jar lid and you retrieve it for him so that he can throw it again, and again, and again.

## DEALING WITH CHEWING & DIGGING

We have already discussed the importance of spaying and neutering in alleviating hormonal behaviour, which can include chewing and digging. It is important to realize, however, that chewing and digging are natural rabbit behaviours, and can't always be stopped. Sometimes rabbits will dig and

chew because they are bored, while others simply like to dig and chew. The key is to provide acceptable diversions from your antique dresser, colonial baseboards or favourite armchair.

When your rabbit digs or chews something that is inappropriate, it is helpful to remove him from the situation and replace the item with something that is appropriate for chewing and digging.

## PROVIDING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Don't assume that a rabbit must always be caged. Bunny-proofing can be relatively easy. Providing an area for exercise and out of cage time is extremely important to a bunny's well being. However, it is important to remember that rabbits are quick, quiet and curious: you may not even realize that your rabbit is in a dangerous situation until it is too late. Taking precautions to make your rabbit's exercise area bunny-safe is a must for any responsible rabbit owner.

**Dark Areas:** Be sure to block all openings that the rabbit can crawl into, including ductwork and the areas behind furniture and appliances with Plexiglas, wood panels and even cardboard or pillows (if your rabbit isn't an avid chewer).

**Electrical cords:** Electrical cords are very dangerous for bunnies. If chewed, they can cause severe burns or electrocution. Conceal cords in flexible plastic tubing, spiral cable wrap, PVC piping or plastic shower rod covers (great for cords that run along a wall).

**House plants:** Household plants should be kept out of your bunny's reach because many are toxic. Watch for fallen leaves as well.

**Unsafe surfaces:** It is important to make sure your rabbit cannot jump onto any unstable surface that he may fall off of and injure himself. If your rabbit likes to jump on to the top of his cage, secure a towel to the top with clothes pins so that he does not get his foot caught in the wire when jumping back onto the floor.

**Baseboards and Walls:** Some bunny owners have had success using commercial anti-chew products, such as Bitter Apple, on surfaces that they don't want their bunny to chew. Others have better luck applying a bit of cheap perfume or Ivory soap to areas that their bunny likes to chew. Whatever chewing deterrent you choose, it is important to apply a small amount to the object first to make sure that it truly deters your bunny. NEVER use anything toxic as a chewing deterrent. In addition, you can use clear corner guards, available at your local

home improvement store on the corners of your walls or tops of your baseboards (if your baseboards are wide enough).

**Off Limits:** You may not be able to adequately bunny-proof some areas of your home such as a home office. These areas should always remain off limits to your bunny. This can be done by closing the door or installing a baby gate (Note: Some rabbits can jump over a baby gate!).

**Carpet fibres:** Ingesting carpet fibres is very dangerous and can lead to a blockage or stasis. The best way to prevent a rabbit from digging and pulling out carpet fibres is to restrict access to carpeted areas or cover the areas that he finds attractive with cotton rugs or tiles.

Until your rabbit's exercise area is properly bunny-proofed, make sure your bunny is kept in a cage or play pen for his own protection, and only let him out under supervision. Rabbits can be quite creative and can sometimes foil even the best attempts at bunny-proofing. For this reason, it is recommended that new rabbit owners or owners with young rabbits confine their rabbits when they are not there to supervise. As young rabbits mature, they will become more calm and relaxed (spaying or neutering helps, too) and may eventually be allowed to roam free in a bunny-proofed area of the house. Remember, even a free-range bunny needs a homebase, or a special area to consider his own.

## WHEN BUNNY BITES

Since rabbits often nip as a way of communicating, it is important to distinguish between nipping as a way of communicating and biting out of fear or aggression. If your rabbit has started to bite or nip, you should determine what he is trying to tell you.

Light nipping could mean that your rabbit has become sexually mature, and he is trying to get you to notice him. It may also indicate that he has had enough attention, wants to be put down, wants food or that you are blocking his path.

Sometimes rabbits that are ill or sexually mature and unaltered will become aggressive and bite. Rabbits may also bite if frightened. This type of biting is different from nipping to communicate. Dealing with a bunny that bites out of fear or aggression requires patience as well as time to earn the rabbit's trust. This may mean modifying your own behaviour to make the rabbit feel comfortable and less fearful.

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