

Spaying and Neutering

Rabbits are very hormone-driven animals that mature sexually and reproduce at a young age (3-6 months). At sexual maturity, males may spray urine and become very "aroused". Females may become territorial and aggressive, and may run a higher risk of reproductive cancers. It is very difficult to sex young rabbits - even vets have trouble determining rabbit gender at times - making accidental litters common. A newly neutered male can impregnate an unsprayed female for about 30 days after the surgery, so keep your rabbits separated during this time. Females can even become pregnant again the same day as giving birth. Even housing two siblings of the same sex together can become a problem when they reach sexual maturity. Previous friendships turn into fights for dominance. Many rabbits end up in shelters or dumped on the streets shortly after they reach sexual maturity because their owners did not understand this new behaviour or how to fix it. Spaying and neutering greatly reduces this negative behaviour (including destructive digging and chewing) and can make a rabbit a much nicer pet. With all surgeries come some risks, therefore only an experienced rabbit vet should spay or neuter your pet. Some vets will not spay a female before 6 months of age. Males can be done as soon as their testicles descend. Surgical risks increase when spaying a female who is over 5 years old. It's important to have a rabbit-savvy vet perform surgery on your rabbit.

Handling

Rabbits are incredibly cute and everyone wants to hold them! However, being lifted and carried can be a frightening sensation for any prey animal such as a rabbit so you need to use patience, sensitivity and the right handling technique. In time, many rabbits do learn to enjoy being held and cuddled while others may only tolerate it briefly. There are several methods for lifting and handling your rabbit safely, depending on the size and temperament of your rabbit and what feels right. Each rabbit has its own preference. Bunnies should never be lifted by the ears. A normally affectionate bunny may wriggle, stamp his feet, launch into space or nip you when caught as he attempts to retain solid ground. The key is to position him within a few inches of you to shorten the suspended-in-air stage. Prevent injury by squatting down before you release your bunny, turning him around and setting him down facing you. You may also try to cover your rabbit's eyes with your hand - if he can't see freedom coming, he won't fly into space. Rabbit skeletons are light and very fragile and therefore easily susceptible to trauma from falling, twisting and kicking. If you are lifting or carrying a rabbit and he begins to struggle, try not to let it go: instead, hug the rabbit to you using your body as a splint. This will protect the rabbit as well as prevent him from hurting you. If you cannot keep the rabbit from getting away, then fall on your knees to keep the rabbit from falling too far to the ground. The more you practice, the more confident you will be, and the more readily your rabbit will accept being lifted. House rabbits can benefit from lifting drills followed by treats so you are both prepared when grooming, traveling or medicating are needed.

Bunny-proofing

Your rabbit needs exercise and should not be confined to a cage constantly. With a little forethought and preventative steps to make your home rabbit-friendly, your rabbit can easily come out and play. First get down on your rabbit's level and see what trouble lies in his path. Use cardboard or wood to block off areas that he can squeeze behind, especially fridges, stoves, entertainment units etc. The same precautions are needed for under couches and beds where the rabbit can chew the fabric and crawl inside. Watch that your rabbit is not ingesting dangerous materials, such as carpet fibres, styrofoam, insulation, drapes etc. Electrical cords can pose the greatest danger and need to be concealed behind objects or in plastic tubing. There are various forms of tubing like the accordion type used for engine wires, or for aquariums, or solid electrical tubing found at building supply stores. Cut the tubing lengthwise and push the cords inside. Some of this tubing is not thick and can be chewed through, but it will give you some extra time to stop the bunny from getting to the wires inside. Be careful to prevent falls from furniture or tables. Some plants can be toxic and should be kept out of reach (this includes fallen leaves). Bunnies are smart and fast, therefore you need to watch them closely to see what dangers they are interested in "playing" with.

Health

Shedding: Rabbits shed every 3 months, and need to be brushed gently or massaged with damp hands to eliminate some of this fur.

Intestinal blockages/GI stasis (decreased motility): Pain (from gas or an underlying condition) or insufficient fibre or water intake may cause GI Stasis. Decreased motility can lead to an impaction of hair/fibres and food that can become hard (dehydrated) and may not pass through the digestive system. If a rabbit has only eaten or defecated a small amount in the last 12 hours, seems listless or is uninterested in food or has other noticeable behavioural changes, he needs immediate veterinary attention. Sustaining water intake is necessary to prevent dehydration.

Heat stroke: Keep your rabbit in the coolest, least humid part of your house, out of the direct sunlight (but not a damp basement). The room should ideally be 68-72°F. Make sure your rabbit always has plenty of water available.

Molar spurs: Rabbit molars (deep inside the mouth) can develop sharp edges (spurs) that can cut into the cheeks or tongue and make eating difficult. If your rabbit has stopped eating certain foods and is showing changes in behaviour, have his molars checked immediately by your vet. Spurs can cause pain, which can quickly lead to GI stasis.

Penicillin: Antibiotics in the penicillin family, such as Amoxicillin, should not be given orally to a rabbit. They can destroy a rabbit's natural intestinal bacteria, possibly causing death.

Nail trims: Rabbits need nail trimmings. There is a "quick" running inside the nail (like cats and dogs) and it will bleed if cut. Have an animal technician cut the rabbit's nails or show you how it is done.

Runny eyes or nose, sneezing: Visit your vet if your rabbit has discharge from his eyes or nose.



The Ontario Rabbit Education Organization was established to promote the health and well-being of domestic rabbits in Ontario. This is accomplished by providing educational resources and support to rabbit caregivers. We are happy to assist with any general rabbit questions or concerns and, where possible or desired, connect you to a network of people in near-by areas or in similar situations. We also provide aid and encouragement to Humane Societies, individual rescuers or other rabbit shelters. We advocate that rabbits should be indoor house pets only and not kept outdoors in hutches or for breeding purposes.

Rabbits live 6 - 10 years, have distinct personalities and make excellent house pets. Proper food, exercise and socialization are all important factors in helping your pet achieve his full potential and live a long, happy life. Having your rabbit spayed or neutered will also help contribute to a happy and healthy life. The following information is provided to help you on your way to learning how to maintain or improve your pet rabbit's quality of life.

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Diet

Rabbits have complex digestive systems that are designed to efficiently process food, and produce nutrients necessary for life. Introducing new foods too quickly or offering inappropriate foods can disrupt the delicate balance of a rabbit's intestinal flora and possibly make the rabbit ill. Rabbits should typically have a nutritious daily diet of hay, fresh vegetables and pellets. *Please note that this is a generic dietary guideline for adult rabbits. Not all rabbits will tolerate, or even like, exactly the same foods. It is important to find a diet that is suitable for your rabbit.*

Young rabbits (under 7 months old) should have a slightly different diet than adults. Babies under 3 weeks need mother's milk; at 3-4 weeks, mother's milk with small nibbles of alfalfa hay and pellets; at 4-7 weeks continue with mother's milk and give access to alfalfa and pellets; at 7 weeks to 7 months provide unlimited pellets and alfalfa hay; at 12 weeks offer a small amount of greens, - again, watch carefully how your rabbit reacts.

Hay

Hay is the most important part of an adult rabbit's diet. It is high in fibre, which keeps the digestive tract moving, helping to prevent blockages and stasis. In addition, hay helps to sustain healthy teeth by helping to reduce the risk of molar spurs. Good hay should always smell grass-like. Do not feed a rabbit moldy hay. Alfalfa has more protein and calcium than adult rabbits (over approx. 7 months old) generally need. Therefore, adult rabbits should be fed an unlimited amount of grass hay (Timothy, Brome, Orchard) each day.

Suitable green vegetables

Try to offer your rabbit at least 3 different types of greens daily (a minimum of 2 cups per 6 lbs. body weight per day). Introduce a small quantity of new greens every 5-7 days, while observing the rabbit's droppings closely. Remove any vegetable that causes gas pain, soft stool or diarrhea from your rabbit's diet immediately. Remember to wash the greens thoroughly and do not feed spoiled vegetables because they can make the rabbit seriously ill. Avoid members of the cabbage/cauliflower family because they can cause gas, and do not feed iceberg lettuce, since it has little nutritional value. Try some of the following: Beet greens (tops only), Bok choy, Carrot tops, Cilantro, Dandelion greens (no pesticides), Endive, Kale**, Kohlrabi, Mustard greens, Parsley (curly & plain)**, Romaine/Dark Leaf lettuce, Spinach**, Swiss Chard (red & green), and Watercress. Carrot tops, dandelion greens, kale and parsley are higher in calcium than other vegetables. Excess dietary calcium, along with other factors, may lead to bladder stones in some rabbits. **These vegetables are high in oxalates, which may cause kidney problems if ingested in large quantities or on a daily basis.

Treats

Processed "people food" such as cookies and bread should not be fed to rabbits. Fruits and veggies with high sugar content such as bananas, apples, pineapples, raisins and carrots can be given as treats, but limit these to only 1-2 tablespoons per 5 lbs. body weight per day. This will prevent your rabbit from developing a sweet tooth and ignoring his healthy foods.

Pellets

Pellets should be high in fibre (ideally a minimum 18%), low in protein and low in calcium. Plain pellets are a healthier choice than pellets that include seeds, nuts, corn or dried fruit, which are unnecessarily high in sugar and fat. Some rabbits over-consume pellets, which can lead to obesity and other health problems. If your rabbit has had a diet that consisted solely of pellets, introduce grass hay (Timothy, Brome or Orchard), and slowly add a variety of greens, while gradually reducing pellet intake. Remember to make dietary changes slowly and to watch your rabbit closely. As you limit your rabbit's pellet intake, make sure he is eating an increased amount of hay and greens. Do not restrict pellets too much if there is no other food source. A daily guideline for an adult rabbit's pellet intake is approximately 1/8 cup for 2-4 lbs. of body weight. Older rabbits or rabbits that are thin or ill may require more pellets to help maintain their weight. Timothy based pellets are higher in fibre and lower in calcium and may be beneficial to rabbits who have stones or sludge, those who are overweight or those who suffer from intermittent soft stool.

Housing

There are many housing options available for house rabbits, such as traditional wire rabbit cages, metal dog crates and custom built "Neat Idea Cube" or "Creative Cube" cages. If you choose to use a cage with a wire bottom, be sure to provide a piece of cardboard, synthetic fleece cloth or newspaper so that the rabbit has a comfortable place to sit. This will help to prevent hock sores. If you use cloth as a cage liner, make sure that the rabbit isn't chewing it and ingesting fibres. A bunny who loves to chew may chew holes in the cloth, and possibly get his head stuck in a hole and strangulate himself. The cage needs to be big enough for the rabbit to be able to comfortably stretch out, and allow space for a litter box, food/water bowls and toys. Choose a cage with the door at the front so that you don't have to lift the rabbit out.

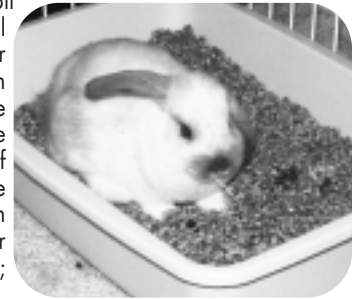
Some people prefer plastic bottomed cages because they are easier to clean. This is fine, as long as the size of the cage is adequate. In a bunny-proofed home some rabbits do not need to be caged. However, this is not recommended for new rabbit owners who are not yet entirely familiar with their rabbit's personality. Also remember that rabbits need both a home base and regular daily exercise time out of their cage.

Do not use aquariums or other solid walled/topped cages as they do not provide enough air circulation. **Do not use** a pen made from chickenwire: rabbits can chew it, causing mouth injuries. **Do not use** a dog crate/kennel for a baby or small breed of rabbit if the rabbit can get his head caught between the metal bars. This could cause serious injuries or paralysis. When making pens be sure the bars are a close distance (1 to 1-1/2") from each other; the pen should ideally have both vertical and horizontal bars.



Litterbox training

When beginning the training process include a small litterbox in the rabbit's cage and fill it with litter and hay: this makes it a more enjoyable place to visit. Place a couple of large litterboxes (plastic storage containers work well) outside of the cage in the rabbit's exercise area. Rabbits often eat and defecate at the same time, so add hay to these boxes as well. Keep the litterboxes clean. Babies and adolescents will have a more difficult time with the training process. Rabbits reach sexual maturity at 3-6 months and they will likely start to mark their territory. Having your rabbit spayed and neutered will greatly improve his/her litterbox habits. You can gradually increase the rabbit's freedom and space as he/she shows signs of good litterbox habits. Be patient. This may not be an overnight success. Never scold the rabbit for slip-ups; only show praise.



Types of recommended litters: Shredded newspaper, litters made of Aspen bark, or recycled newspapers like Yesterday's News, or dust-free unscented clay cat litter without deodorant crystals (not to be used if the rabbit digs in the litterbox, since they are never completely dust-free). **Things to consider:** Clumping cat litter or corn cob litter may cause blockages when ingested. Cedar and pine wood shavings have aromatic hydrocarbon (oils) and prolonged exposure may cause respiratory problems and liver damage.

Rabbits with children

The first point to consider: Does your family have time for a rabbit? This includes time for cleaning, feeding and socializing. Rabbits generally do not like, and even fear, being lifted off the ground or carried. They have a delicate skeletal structure, and may be easily injured trying to escape from a child's arms. A rabbit's sharp nails and powerful back legs may also cause injury to the child. If your child is calm a rabbit may be an appropriate addition to your family. On the other hand, if your child is loud, tends to interact physically/aggressively, or frequently needs to be reminded of rules, then a rabbit probably isn't a good choice. Always remember that a rabbit, or any other companion animal, is not a toy for a child. The parent must be the primary care taker of the animal. Most children are not responsible enough to assume such a job on a daily basis. Children learn by example, so it is important for adults to set a good one.

