

# BUNNY BASICS

Many people are surprised to hear that rabbits actually make excellent household pets. They are clean animals by nature and, like cats, are easy to litter box train. They are generally very quiet and friendly, as well as incredibly curious. Your rabbit can also provide you with hours of entertainment with their silly antics! Just like any other pet, rabbits require a lot of care and attention. It is important to familiarize yourself with their daily and long-term needs before adding one to your family.

## Indoor vs. Outdoor

We strongly believe that rabbits should always be housed indoors. Outdoor enclosures expose rabbits to extremes of heat and cold. In addition, your rabbit will be unable to escape from potential predators (hawks, foxes, cats, dogs, and other wildlife). Even if the predators cannot reach your rabbit, regularly being exposed to perceived threats will cause a great deal of unhealthful stress to him or her. Housing your rabbit indoors will keep them safe and less at risk for diseases. Keeping your rabbit indoors with you also promotes a greater bond between you, your family, and your rabbit through constant interaction and enrichment. Developing that bond and trust with your rabbit is important and promotes a long and happy life. Some people set up outdoor springtime enclosures for their pet rabbits, to provide them with some extra enrichment. If you choose to do this, your rabbit must be supervised at all times while outdoors.

## Housing

Your rabbit's cage must be large enough to contain a litter box, food bowls, and a place for your rabbit to rest/hide, while still providing enough space for normal bunny behaviors. Rabbits should be able to lie down and stretch out, hop around a little, and stand up on their hind legs inside their cage. When choosing a cage, you'll want to consider how much out-of-cage time your rabbit will have during the day. We recommend a minimum of 3 hours of out-of-cage time. The more the better!

Rabbits that cannot get at least the minimum 3 hours out of the cage should be provided with additional cage space so that they can exercise. This space can include multiple levels, which will increase the rabbit's floor space without taking up more room in your home. You will also want to choose a cage that is comfortable for your rabbit and easy to clean for you. You will need to clean the cage regularly, so try to avoid ones that are made of wood, which can rot, or cages that have hard-to-reach places. Wire bottom cages can be painful for your rabbit's feet and really should not be used unless the wire is covered with a solid surface. Additionally, make sure not to place your rabbit's cage in an area with extreme changes in temperature. Temperatures above 80 degrees can lead to heatstroke.

## Diet/Feeding

Rabbits need to eat a variety of foods in order to stay healthy and active. The bulk of their diet should be a "salad" of high quality fresh greens, with timothy hay provided at all times. Pelleted rabbit food should be used only as a supplement to the greens. Avoid alfalfa hay and alfalfa pellets, as alfalfa is too high in protein. Fruit and carrots should only be offered in moderation as occasional treats, because the high sugar content can rot their teeth and cause them to gain weight.

## Grooming

**Brushing** – Frequency of brushing will depend on the length of your rabbit's hair and how well they groom themselves. Brushing will help to minimize shedding and maintain a healthy coat in your rabbit. Brushing also aids in reducing hair ingestion. Rabbits do not have a gag reflex and therefore need to pass their hairballs.



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**Nail trimming** – Just like cats and dogs, rabbits need their nails to be trimmed carefully so as to not hit the blood vessels that run through the base of the nail (commonly known as the “quick”). Use the guillotine style nail clippers designed for your pet’s nails. Do NOT use human clippers, as they can be very uncomfortable for your pet. Nails should be trimmed every 3-4 weeks. While trimming their nails, look for any urine staining on their paws, which is a sign that their cage needs to be cleaned more regularly. Regular exposure to damp surfaces can irritate your rabbit’s feet and lead to other health problems.

**Oral health** – Rabbits need to have their mouths checked every few weeks for abscesses, as well as any abnormalities in their teeth. Follow up with your regular veterinarian if you see either of these things. If your rabbit will not allow this type of handling, check for bad breath, drooling, eye or nasal issues, which are all signs of dental problems in rabbits. An appropriate diet will help to maintain good oral health.

## Litter box

Rabbits are fairly clean animals and can be easily trained to use a litter box. Litter boxes designed for rabbits are available, or you can use a litter box that is made for a cat, which might work better if you have a large rabbit. Place a layer of paper-based litter on the bottom (Care Fresh or Yesterday’s News brands are good choices). Place a layer of hay on top of the litter. This will entice the rabbit into the box to eat the hay and they often go to the bathroom and eat at the same time. If your rabbit will be roaming around your house freely, another litter box outside of their cage is highly recommended. See where your rabbit regularly leaves poops, and place the second box in that spot, putting some of the poops in the box to give your rabbit the right idea.

## Behavior

Over time, you will get to know your own rabbit’s favorite games and pastimes, as well as what he is trying to communicate to you with specific behaviors. Here are a few tips to get you started:

**Chewing** – rabbits teeth grow continuously; therefore they need things to chew in order to keep their teeth filed down. They can also chew if they are bored or stressed. Rabbits unfortunately tend to be attracted to chewing on electrical cords. This can be potentially dangerous for your rabbit. It is important to make sure either to use cord covers or simply keep your rabbit isolated from wires.

**Digging** – burrowing and digging is fun for rabbits. Give your rabbit a box of hay or even just a big blanket that they can “dig” in.

**Napping** – rabbits are most active during the morning and the evening. During the middle of the day, they tend to enjoy short naps with small amounts of activity in between.

**Grunting/Thumping** – grunting and thumping are ways that your rabbit is telling you they are frightened, angry or annoyed. Make sure to give your rabbit some space if you see these behaviors.

**Chinning** – sometimes your rabbit may rub their chin on your stuff. This is your rabbit’s way of getting his scent all over your stuff in order to claim it as his territory.

**Nudging** – at times, your rabbit may approach you and nudge you gently with their nose. This can either mean that they would like to be pet or that you are in their way.

**Binky** – when your rabbit is really happy and having fun they may run around your house and randomly jump up in the air, kicking their legs and wiggling their bodies. This is very cute and fun to watch!

## Helpful Links

Sweet Meadow Farms – <http://www.sweetmeadowfarm.com>

Oxbow – <http://www.oxbowhay.com>

House Rabbit Network – <http://www.rabbitnetwork.org/>

Leith Petwerks – <http://www.leithpetwerks.com/>

The Busy Bunny – <http://www.busybunny.com/>

Rabbit Myths and Misconceptions – <http://www.rabbitron.com/myths.html>

House Rabbit Behavior – [http://www.ddfl.org/behavior/rabbit\\_behav.pdf](http://www.ddfl.org/behavior/rabbit_behav.pdf)

BunSpace – <http://www.bunspace.com>

## Recommended Books

Rabbits for Dummies

Rabbits: Gentle Hearts Valiant Spirits: Inspirational Stories of Rescue, Triumph, and Joy