

Rabbit Care: A Guide

Setting expectations: Rabbit lifespan

The average lifespan of a rabbit is about 10 years. This estimate will vary a little bit, depending on the breed of the rabbit and the conditions they live in. But when you get a pet rabbit, you need to understand that this is a long term commitment.

A rabbit's long life expectancy means that they can grow to be amazing companion pets, just like a cat or dog. But it also means we have to consider the possibility of moving with a rabbit, or caring for them in their old age. Before you make the decision to adopt or purchase a rabbit, take the time to really consider the amount of work it will take to care for them for their whole lives.

Part 1: What to feed your rabbit

Hay

A full 80% of your rabbit's diet should be grass hay. Timothy hay is best because it is high in fiber and it is rough, making it good for rabbit teeth and digestion. You'll want to get a big bag of hay and make sure you never let your rabbit run out. Hay keeps their digestive system moving properly and helps them absorb the nutrients their body needs.

Most pet stores, even those that don't have much in stock for rabbit supplies, will have bags of timothy hay. This is a good and healthy hay to make up the base of your rabbits diet, but it's also a good idea to add in other grass hays, such as orchard, meadow, or oat hay, to add some variety and encourage your rabbit to eat more hay.

Some brands will sell bags of hay that are already mixed, but you can also get the different types of hay separately and mix them together. You could even purchase large bales from local farmers if you want to get the freshest possible hay for your rabbit.

Note: Alfalfa is not a grass hay, and generally shouldn't be a part of your adult rabbit's diet unless you are instructed otherwise by a qualified veterinarian. The exception to this is baby bunnies who are less than six months old. In this case alfalfa has nutrients that are good for a growing bunny.

Leafy Greens

Fresh leafy green vegetables introduce variety and flavor into your rabbits diet, while also giving them the nutrients they need to stay healthy. You'll want to give your rabbit one to five cups of fresh greens daily, depending on how big your rabbit is. You can give this to your rabbit all at once or choose to portion it out over the course of the day.

Most leafy greens you can find in a grocery store, or grow in your garden, are safe for your rabbit, but there are some varieties that you should give in smaller quantities, and a few that you should avoid giving your rabbit entirely.

Safe leafy greens for your rabbit:

- Arugula
- Carrot tops
- Leafy lettuces (red, green, romaine)
- Turnip greens

- Dandelion greens
- Mint
- Basil
- Cilantro
- Watercress
- Dill
- Bok choy

Safe for your rabbit, but give in smaller quantities:

1. Parsley
2. Chard
3. Spinach
4. Beet greens
5. Mustard greens
6. Greens to avoid giving your rabbit:
7. Iceberg lettuce
8. Onion greens

Pellets

Pellets are not actually necessary for your rabbit's diet, but they do have some nutritional value and can be a healthy snack for your rabbit. You want to be very strict about the amount of pellets they get in a day. Too many pellets can quickly make your rabbit obese, causing a string of health problems.

It's okay if they run out of pellets during the day (or if they gobble them up right away). You still don't want to refill their food bowl until tomorrow. You want to encourage your rabbit to eat more hay, and too many pellets will make them full before they even get to their main food.

Part 2: How to set up an indoor enclosure

Most pet stores will try to sell you a small cage for your rabbit, similar to what they would offer for a guinea pig. In the vast majority of cases, the cages sold as 'rabbit' cages are much too small. Unfortunately this is because there is still a lot of misinformation out there about rabbit care.

Rabbit's won't be happy or healthy if they just sit in a tiny cage all day. So before you go out and purchase a new enclosure for your rabbit, you need to take the rabbit's size and the cage dimensions into consideration.

Enclosure size

When getting an enclosure or hutch for your rabbit you want to make sure the cage is long enough for your rabbit to make three hops from one end to the other. Your rabbit should also be able to lay along the width with a little space to spare and stand all the way up on their hind legs without bumping their head on the top.

The enclosure size will vary a lot depending on your rabbit breed, but for an average sized rabbit (about 5 lbs), you should aim to have an area of at least 4ft by 2ft.

There are some hutches available that will be big enough, but I have found it easier to use a rabbit ex-pen instead. This makes cleaning your rabbits area a lot easier too, because all you have to do is move the gates and vacuum.

You could also consider getting a large dog crate as a rabbit cage. These can be very easy to set up and clean and can offer plenty of space for your rabbit's home base.

There are a few points you want to look out for, to make sure you avoid getting an enclosure not suitable for rabbits:

A cage that is too small. The number one thing you want to avoid is getting a cage that is too small for your rabbit. This can lead to some serious health problems in the long run, not to mention a bored and unhappy rabbit.

A cage with a wire bottom. Wire at the bottom of a cage can cut into a rabbit's feet and cause sore hocks. If you have a wire cage that is appropriately sized, you can put a mat down along the bottom to keep them from standing on wire all day.

A hutch made of painted or toxic wood. Rabbits have an instinct to chew on everything, so they will definitely be trying to chew on a wooden hutch. This is why you want to avoid any painted wood, and you want to make sure the hutch is not made of a wood that is toxic to rabbits (such as cedar, birch and yew).

Exercise space

Rabbits, especially when they are young, have a ton of energy. So you'll need to make sure your rabbit gets a few hours of daily exercise time. You'll want to give your bunny an area that's at least 24sq feet for your rabbit to run around in for a few hours every day.

Usually people will just use the room they have their rabbits enclosure in as the exercise space, but you could also allow your rabbit access to the whole house. Or you could set up an extra exercise pen for your rabbit to use.

The best time of day to allow your rabbit out to exercise is in the morning or evening. Rabbits are crepuscular (not nocturnal), so they are most active during the hours around dawn and dusk. They'll get the most out of exercise time if you let them out during the times when they are most active.

Free range rabbits

Instead of having a rabbit closed up in an enclosure all day, many people choose to have what we call 'free range' rabbits. They let their bunnies stay out in the house all day long. This is great for rabbits if it's something you can do, but it's not always possible. Rabbits have a tendency to be a little mischievous and chew on things they shouldn't, so you want to make sure you bunny-proof any areas of the house your rabbit is allowed to roam around in.

Temperature

Rabbits have thick fur coats and tend to do better in temperatures that are slightly cooler than what humans usually prefer. Because of this, it's usually best to house rabbits on lower floors of the house, or even in the basement if possible. This will keep your rabbit's living space in the coolest part of the house.

Even in the summer, you want to try to keep the indoor temperature below 75°F, especially if the humidity is high in the region where you live. Rabbits can easily get heat stroke in temperatures above 80°F and long haired rabbits, such as lionheads, are at a higher risk.

In the winter, you may want to consider keeping your thermostat a little lower and wearing a sweater inside. Rabbits tend to thrive in temperatures that stay in the 50-70°F range, so there is no need to keep their room extra toasty.

Part 3: How to litter train your rabbit

Rabbits are actually very clean animals. They will naturally want to keep themselves and their environment clean. Rabbits can even be trained to use a litter box, just like cats! It just takes a little bit of extra work to help your rabbit understand that the litter box is where they should use the bathroom.

When you bring your rabbit home, you want to have the supplies ready to get started on litter training right away. What you will need:

- A few litter boxes
- A pooper scooper
- Paper based litter
- Pet-safe cleaning spray
- A pile of old newspaper

The tools you need to litter train your rabbit: litter, a litter box, newspaper, a pooper scooper, pet-safe disinfectant, a garbage can with a lid. To litter train your rabbit:

- 1) Start small. Keep your rabbit in their enclosure for a couple of days with a litter box set up in the corner.
- 2) Increase the space. Place a couple of litter boxes throughout the room and give your rabbit some time out of the enclosure to exercise.
- 3) Pay close attention to your rabbit. As your rabbit explores, watch them and try to catch them so you can herd them to a nearby litter box.
- 4) Clean up any accidents. You'll want to clean up any accidents right away so that your rabbit won't come back to use the same spot again. If they do continue to use the same spot as their bathroom, move one of the litter boxes to the rabbit's chosen place.
- 5) Remove the extra litter boxes. As your rabbit gets better at using the litter box, start to remove them one by one until your rabbit always goes back to their enclosure to use the bathroom.

Part 4: How to bunny proof your home

Rabbit's instincts to chew and dig are easily the most frustrating part of bunny ownership. We want to give our rabbits a chance to live the good life and zoom around the living room. But the little troublemakers just keep getting into things they shouldn't. They chew on wires and dig into the carpet.

If we want to keep our rabbit safe from the dangerous things they can get into, and keep our homes safe from our rabbit's destructive behaviors, we need to do some work to rabbit proof our homes.

Wires

Rabbits love to chew through wires. This is unfortunate for our various electronic devices, but it's also very dangerous for our rabbits. If a rabbit bites into a wire while it's plugged in, the poor bun could end up getting shocked or electrocuted.

As much as possible, you will need to move your wires out of your rabbit's reach. This could mean keeping wires behind a fenced in area, or lifting wires off the ground so your rabbit doesn't find them. When it's impossible to physically move the wires away, you can cover wires with thick plastic tubing.

Cover rugs and baseboards

Rabbits will often have an instinct to dig into the corners of rugs and chew on baseboards. This is because in nature rabbits are burrowers. They dig and use their teeth to make tunnels to live in. At home, however, this can be a very destructive behavior.

Carpets

Protecting your rugs is definitely the easier problem to solve. If it's possible for your living situation, you can try to circumvent this issue altogether by keeping your rabbit in a room that has wooden flooring, and using area rugs that you won't mind being dug into or chewed on.

Keep dangerous objects out of reach

Rabbits are a lot like children. They are curious about everything, especially the things they really shouldn't be getting into. So you'll need to take some precautions to make sure you keep your rabbit away from anything you don't want them to have access to.

Part 5: Enrichment toys for your rabbit

Rabbits need toys to keep their mind and teeth healthy. They are actually very intelligent animals and they need toys to keep their mind active. Rabbits need toys they can throw around, pull on, and dig into. And they like to use puzzle toys, so they can use their natural foraging instincts to figure out how to get at the treats.

Having appropriate toys is also good for your rabbits dental health. Rabbit teeth are open rooted and continue to grow forever. They need lots of hay and chew toys to help keep their teeth from growing out of control and causing health problems. If they're not given anything to chew on, a rabbit's teeth could end up growing so much that they can no longer eat.

Part 6: Grooming your rabbit

Rabbits shed a lot and you'll have to brush them to get rid of excess fur. While rabbits shed a little bit all the time, they'll have two big molting seasons where they shed their winter and summer coats. During this time, there will be clouds of fur, and you'll need to brush your rabbit often to keep their fur from getting matted. It also keeps them from ingesting too much fur, preventing blockages in your rabbits gut.

Part 7: Socializing your rabbit

Rabbits are very social animals and they get lonely if they are left alone all day. Like with humans, loneliness in rabbits leads to a shorter lifespan. If you want your rabbit to live the best life possible, you need to spend time with them. Sit with your rabbit every day to form a bond with them and let them know how much you love them.

Part 8: How to tell if your rabbit is sick

Rabbits are prey animals so they have a tendency to hide their weaknesses. It's often difficult to tell if a rabbit is sick unless they are very sick, so you don't want to wait for those more obvious signs.

The symptoms you should be aware of so you can get your rabbit to the vet as soon as possible:

- Lack of appetite, especially if they're not interested in their favorite treats
- Lack of energy
- Sitting in a hunched position
- A change in previously good litter box habits
- A bloated looking belly

Part 9: Finding a rabbit veterinarian

Rabbit biology is very different from a cat or dog, so you need to find a veterinarian that specializes in rabbits. Usually the terms you want to look for are 'small animal veterinarian' or 'exotic animal veterinarian.' But you should always double check to make sure this vet has experience with rabbits. The House Rabbit Society has a useful list of rabbit vets across the US and even some international rabbit veterinarians.

As with any pet, it's a good idea to bring your rabbit in for a basic check-up when your bunny first comes home with you. After that, you only have to bring your rabbit in once a year for their annual exam, unless your rabbit gets sick. If you notice your rabbit not eating or pooping for more than 12 hours, that's a sign that you need to get to a vet right away.

Spay or neuter your rabbit

If your rabbit has not been spayed or neutered, you'll want to make sure you get that taken care of as soon as you can. If your rabbit is young, you'll have to wait for sexual maturity, which is about six months for female rabbits and 4 months for male rabbits. An unaltered rabbit will develop a number of health and behavioral problems. It's much better for your rabbit's happiness and health in the long run if you get them fixed as soon as possible.

Your rabbit might need a little time to trust you

Rabbits are incredibly friendly and playful creatures, but they also get scared very easily. Rabbits are prey animals, and their best defense in any situation is running away. So don't be surprised if your new rabbit runs away and hides from you at first. If you give your rabbit the time and space they need to warm up to you, you'll have a spunky little fluffer whizzing around you in no time.

Here are a few quick tips to help your rabbit trust you sooner:

Sit on the floor quietly near your rabbit and let him approach you. You'll have to be patient with this. Sooner or later, your rabbit will get curious and come up to you.

Don't pick up your rabbit unless you have to (e.g. put him into a carrier, cut his nails, etc.). Most rabbits don't like to be held, so they'll be more likely to run away if they think you will pick them up every time you come near.

Give your rabbit some treats (in moderation). You don't want to give him too many treats, since that's bad for his digestion, but it's okay to bribe your rabbit a little bit. Raisins tend to be a big hit.

These tips are courtesy of Amy Pratt, 'The Bunny Lady', who specializes with rabbits at the Humane Rescue Alliance.

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