

Adopting a Rabbit – Frequently Asked Questions

1. WHAT'S A RABBIT REALLY LIKE?

Many people are surprised to find that rabbits rarely conform to the cute-n-cuddly stereotype in children's stories. Baby bunnies (and many young adult rabbits) are too busy dashing madly about, squeezing behind furniture, and chewing baseboards and rugs to be held. Domestic rabbits have unique personalities that are not breed-specific making them wonderful indoor companions. In addition, rabbits are social animals meaning they need the companionship of humans or other animals, although the need may vary among individual rabbits. They play, some more than others. Many can get along with most cats and some dogs when properly introduced. Rabbits also can be trained to voice commands. They are generally not well suited for living outdoors. Rabbits require as much care as any other pet, including medical treatment. With proper care & diet, a typical house rabbit's life span is 8 – 12 years.

2. HOW IS A RABBIT DIFFERENT FROM A CAT OR DOG?

Cats & dogs are both predators, while rabbits are prey animals. Because of this fundamental difference, there are a few important points to keep in mind. First, rabbits mask illness, making it difficult to detect. Consequently, their caretakers must pay close attention to their normal behavior & act on even subtle changes. Cats & dogs tend to investigate unknown noises, while rabbits tend to prefer places that are generally quieter and will freeze or run away from unknown noises. As prey animals, rabbits generally do not enjoy being held, as their instincts tell them they have been captured. And finally, rabbits survive by knowing their environment very, very well. It is very stressful for them when their environment is changed, which can lead to illness.

Another unique trait of rabbits is that breed has no bearing on personality. You could easily find five rabbits of the same breed that have five distinctly different personalities, or five similar personalities in five different breeds. So, take the time to get to know the unique personality of your rabbit, regardless of its appearance.

3. WHAT RABBIT IS RIGHT FOR ME?

Many people want to start with a young rabbit, but adults (1 year or older) are often easier to start with. Rabbits under a year are still growing up – full of rambunctious energy, learning about their world through more frequent chewing/digging, and dealing with the hormones of rabbit adolescence. Adult rabbits are easier to litter train, learn appropriate behavior faster and are still very playful & enjoyable.

Another consideration is the size of a rabbit. While breed itself is not necessarily a factor, smaller rabbits tend to be more active and sometimes even skittish. Meanwhile, many larger rabbits tend to be more easy-going and are often easier to handle, despite their size. Larger rabbits are recommended for homes with children because of these tendencies and because it is less likely the child will attempt to pick up the rabbit, possibly hurting either the rabbit or themselves.

4. IS IT TRUE THAT RABBITS CAN BE LITTERBOX TRAINED?

By nature, rabbits choose one or a few places (usually corners) to deposit their urine and most of their pills. Urine training involves little more than putting a litterbox where the rabbit chooses to go. Pill training requires only that you give them a place they know will not be invaded by others. Here are some suggestions to help you to train your rabbit to use the litterbox.

5. WHAT FACTORS IMPACT SUCCESSFUL LITTERBOX TRAINING?

Most important factor for success is having your rabbit spayed/neutered. This will reduce or eliminate their hormonal urge to mark their territory. Also, older rabbits are easier to train than younger rabbits. Young rabbits do not have the control and ability to learn that develops from age. If you have a rabbit less than 6 months, be patient & persistent. Older rabbits will usually learn in a matter of a few weeks.

6. WHAT TYPES OF LITTER SHOULD I USE?

It depends on what's available in your area and what your rabbit's habits are. Some possibilities include:

- Litters made from recycled paper or other natural products.
- Since rabbits prefer at least some hay in their litterbox, some people use hay exclusively.
- Wood pellets designed for use in pellet stoves work very well & are very economical.

Avoid:

- Clumping litter because it can accumulate in your rabbit's digestive tract & cause physical problems.
- Litters made of softwoods, like pine or cedar, as they are believed to cause liver damage.
- Corn, oat, and alfalfa based litters as the rabbit too commonly ingests them.

7. HOW DO I LITTERBOX TRAIN MY NEW RABBIT?

The basic approach is pretty simple. Begin by restricting your rabbit to a small space, like their cage, for the first week or so. Be sure to place at least one litterbox in a back corner of this space. During the week, your rabbit will choose a corner for their bathroom area. If that isn't where you originally placed the litterbox, simply relocate the box to the rabbit's selected area. In a few days, the rabbit will associate the litterbox with their bathroom. At this point, gradually provide more run space for your rabbit. Be sure to supervise them carefully during this time, so any accidents can be corrected immediately by putting the rabbit back in their litterbox. Start with small amounts of space & time and gradually increase both as your rabbit proves their good habits. Reinforce consistently any accidents. If your rabbit will have access to more than one room of the house, it is a good idea to add more litterboxes as their space continues to grow. Eventually, your rabbit will demonstrate how many litterboxes are needed for the size of space they have.

8. WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON LITTER TRAINING MISTAKES?

- Ø Letting the bunny out of the cage and not watching her with undivided attention. If the bunny does not get herded into the litterbox every time she urinates inappropriately, it will take much longer for her to understand what is expected.
- Ø Getting in a hurry. Don't rush your rabbit. Each learns at their own pace. If you supervise carefully, and reinforce their behavior, they will learn to use their litterbox.

9. WHAT KINDS OF CAGES WORK BEST?

Rabbits were not designed to live on wire floors--they're hard on their feet (which have no pads on them, like cats or dogs). If you must use a cage with a wire floor, you need to provide your rabbit with a resting board or rug for her to sit on; otherwise she will spend all of her time in her litterbox.

You can find cages with slatted plastic floors, which are more comfortable, or you can use a solid floor. If your rabbit has a litterbox in their chosen bathroom corner, there shouldn't be much of a mess to clean up.

10. WHAT SIZE CAGE IS BEST?

Bigger is better! A cage should be at least 4 times the size of your bunny--more if he is confined for a large amount of the day. Be sure the cage is large enough to allow space for a litterbox, food & water bowls, etc, and still allow the rabbit enough room to stretch out completely. It should also be tall enough that your rabbit can stretch up without their ears hitting the top. If the cage has a wire floor, be sure to provide something solid, like a towel, newspaper, or board, for your rabbit to lie on.

11. WHAT CAN I DO TO MAKE THE RABBIT'S CAGE TIME MORE ENJOYABLE?

A cage should be seen as the rabbit's "nest." A special place where he can feel safe and secure. Make the nest enjoyable and she will enjoy being there, even when the cage door is open! Keep it stocked with toys, a synthetic sheepskin rug, a piece of wood attached to the inside (like a baseboard), and when you put him to bed at night, a nice veggie or fruit snack.

12. CAN MY NEW BUNNY RUN AROUND MY HOUSE 24 HOURS A DAY?

An untrained rabbit probably should be kept in a cage while you're not home to supervise and at night when you sleep. Rabbits are crepuscular, which means that generally they sleep during the day and during the night but are ready to play at dawn and at twilight. Be sure to let them out during the evening when you are home, and if possible, in the morning while you get ready for work.

When your rabbit is better trained, and when your house (or the part that your rabbit will have access to) has been sufficiently bunny-proofed, your rabbit can be allowed free run of the home (or part of it) even when you are not home. The more room your rabbit has to run around in, the more delightful you will find her as a companion.

13. WHAT DO I NEED TO DO TO BUNNY-PROOF AN AREA?

Because rabbits are very curious and often chew on things, their exercise area needs to be bunny-proofed by moving or concealing anything you don't want chewed, especially electrical cords. Common steps taken include moving house plants out of reach, covering electrical cords with tubing to prevent chewing, applying anti-chewing substances to woodwork & furniture, and blocking access to spaces under & around furniture, etc. After you think you are done, let your rabbit help you identify areas you have missed. Supervise closely until truly bunny-proofed.

Finally, never attempt to use training alone to keep a rabbit from something that can cause harm or death. Toxic houseplants and electrical wires should be impossible for a rabbit to reach. Counting on training or "the way she's always behaved" with respect to such things is asking for trouble.

14. WHAT CAN I DO TO MAKE THE RABBIT'S EXERCISE TIME MORE ENJOYABLE?

First, remember that your rabbit depends on you for companionship. It is important to spend time with them, ideally on the floor where they can hop up to you when they choose.

Even when a rabbit has a lot of room to run around, he may still get bored. A bored rabbit is often a naughty rabbit. If you don't make every attempt to provide your rabbit with lots of entertainment, then he will make his own entertainment in your carpet, behind your couch or under your recliner.

Toys not only aid in keeping your rabbit out of trouble, they also provide mental stimulation and exercise for your rabbit. Some good toys to start with are:

- Hiding toys: cardboard boxes, tunnels, paper bags
- Chew toys: untreated hardwoods, untreated wicker baskets, grass mats, cardboard paper tubes
- Toss toys: baby keys, many parrot toys
- Noisemakers: cat toys with bells inside, baby rattles

15. CAN I LET MY RABBIT RUN LOOSE OUTSIDE?

Because domestic rabbits have limited defenses for the many dangers found outdoors, it is best for the rabbit to be kept indoors. However, a limited amount of time outside is usually safe if you:

- Ø Always supervise your rabbit closely when she's outside
- Ø Make sure that the grass has not been sprayed with pesticides or fertilizers.
- Ø Check the yard for holes in the fence and poisonous plants.
- Ø Only allow your pet rabbit outside during daylight hours.

16. WHAT ARE THE BASICS OF A GOOD HOUSE RABBIT DIET?

A rabbit's diet should be made up of fresh grass hay (timothy, orchard, brome, or oat), fresh vegetables, water and good quality pellets. Anything beyond that is a "treat" and should be given in limited quantities (approx 1 tablespoon per day total).

17. IS FEEDING HAY IMPORTANT?

Grass hay should be the foundation of your rabbit's diet as it is essential to a rabbit's good health, providing roughage, which reduces the danger of hairballs and other blockages. Hay should be available at all times. Most rabbits can eat a pile the size of themselves almost every day.

18. WHAT KINDS OF VEGGIES SHOULD I FEED MY RABBIT?

Rabbits enjoy many fresh greens and vegetables and can have up to 2 cups per 5 lbs of body weight daily. Most produce is safe to feed your rabbit. They are likely to particularly enjoy: Romaine lettuce, most herbs, broccoli, carrots (& tops), spinach, kale, collard greens and many others. Try to serve at least three different veggies each day, introducing one new food at a time. This will help you determine if any particular food is not well tolerated by your rabbit. AVOID: Rhubarb leaves, peas, potatoes, beans, corn, onions and garlic.

19. WHAT MAKES A GOOD PELLET?

Pellets should make up a small portion of your rabbit's diet. Unless your rabbit is under 6 months old, they should get a set amount of pellets daily and not have constant access to pellets. Pellets should be high in fiber (>18%), and low in protein (<14%), calcium (<0.9%) and fat (<2%). Avoid pellet mixes that contain seeds, grains, dried corn, or other colorful additives, as these items can be difficult for your rabbit to digest and have little nutritional value. It is advisable not to purchase more than 6 weeks worth of feed at a time, as nutritional value degrades over time.

20. WHAT QUANTITIES OF FOOD SHOULD I FEED YOUNG ADULTS? (6 MONTHS TO 1 YEAR)

- Introduce timothy hay, grass hay, and oat hays, decrease alfalfa
- Decrease pellets to 1/2 cup per 6 lbs. body weight
- Introduce daily vegetables and gradually increase quantity
- Fruit daily ration no more than 1 tablespoon per 6 lbs. body weight (because of calories)

21. WHAT QUANTITIES OF FOOD SHOULD I FEED MATURE ADULTS? (OVER 1 YEAR)

- Unlimited timothy, grass hay, or oat hay
- 1/4 to 1/2 cup pellets per 6 lbs. body weight (depending on metabolism and/or proportionate to veggies)
- Minimum 2 cups chopped vegetables per 6 lbs. body weight
- Fruit daily ration no more than 1 tablespoon per 6 lbs. body weight.

22. WHAT TREATS ARE BEST FOR MY RABBIT?

Most rabbits consider anything hand-fed a treat, especially fresh veggies. It is not necessary to feed a lot of sweet treats or commercial treats. Rabbits should have no more than one tablespoon per day of any of the following:

- Fruits: banana, strawberry, blueberry, grapes, papaya, pineapple, apple
- Other: whole oats, whole peanuts, alfalfa cube

23. WHY SPAY AND NEUTER RABBITS?

- Altered rabbits are healthier and live longer than unaltered rabbits.
- Altered rabbits make better companion animals.
- Altered rabbits display fewer obnoxious behaviors that humans find annoying or distasteful.
- Altered rabbits won't contribute to the problem of overpopulation of rabbits.
- Altered rabbits can safely have a friend to play with.
- Spaying and neutering for rabbits has become a safe procedure *when performed by experienced rabbit veterinarians.*

24. IS SURGERY SAFE ON RABBITS?

Surgery can be as safe on rabbits as on any animal. Unfortunately, the vast majority of veterinarians aren't experienced with safe rabbit surgery techniques. Don't allow a veterinarian with little or no rabbit experience spay or neuter your rabbit. Using isofluorene as the anesthetic and appropriate surgical and after-surgery techniques, spaying and neutering of rabbits is as safe as for any other animal.

25. HOW CAN I FIND A VETERINARIAN EXPERIENCED WITH RABBITS?

If you don't have other bunny owners to get a referral from, you can evaluate any veterinarian by asking the following questions:

- Ask how many rabbits are seen at the clinic each week (or month).
- Ask if they know which antibiotics are dangerous for rabbits (amoxicillin, lincomycin & clindamycin.).
- Casually ask about preventing hairballs. Q: "What's the best way to prevent hairballs?" A: "Provide your rabbit with hay every day, preferably 24 hours a day. Provide daily exercise and brush frequently"
- Ask how many rabbits are spayed or neutered each week (or month).
- Ask if food has to be removed the night before surgery. The answer should be "no". Rabbits should never be fasted.
- What was the success rate? If any were lost, what was the cause? (90% success is way too low. Experienced veterinarians across the country who regularly spay and neuter rabbits have lost on average less than 1/2 of 1%.)
- What anesthetics are used? (Isofluorene is preferred. Some veterinarians are quite successful with anesthetics other than isofluorene, but the bunny is "hung over" after surgery, which increases the probability that s/he will be slow to start eating again, which can lead to serious problems if not dealt with.)
- You might also want to ask which conferences they've attended lately that had talks about rabbit medicine and what journals they read.

Be careful not to choose the nearest vet without inquiring about their experience with rabbits. Paying money for an inexperienced vet can be very costly both to you and to your pet.

26. AT WHAT AGE SHOULD RABBITS BE SPAYED OR NEUTERED?

Females can be spayed as soon as they sexually mature, usually around 4 months of age, but many veterinarians prefer to wait until they are 6 months old, as surgery is riskier on a younger female rabbit. Males can be neutered as soon as the testicles descend, usually around 3-1/2 months of age, but many veterinarians prefer to wait until they are 5 months old.

27. WHAT DOES THE SURGERY COST?

Most veterinarians charge somewhere between \$60 and \$180. Neutering a male is generally less expensive than spaying a female due to the amount of surgery required.

28. WHAT POST-OPERATIVE CARE SHOULD I EXPECT TO GIVE MY RABBIT?

After surgery, keep the environment quiet so the rabbit doesn't startle or panic, don't do anything to encourage acrobatics, but let the rabbit move around at her own pace-- she knows what hurts and what doesn't

Some veterinarians keep rabbits overnight. If your veterinarian lets you bring your bunny home the first night, note the following:

- Most males come home after being neutered looking for "supper"-- be sure they have pellets, water, and some good hay (good, fresh alfalfa is a good way to tempt them to nibble a bit)
- Most females want to be left alone, are not interested in eating at all, and will sit quietly in a back corner of the cage (or wherever in the house they feel they will be bothered the least)

The following morning, or at latest by the next evening, it is important for the rabbit to be nibbling something. It doesn't matter what or how much, as long as she is taking in something, so the digestive tract won't shut down. If she isn't, tempt her with everything possible and contact your veterinarian for further instructions.

29. WHAT OTHER HEALTH ISSUES SHOULD I BE CONCERNED ABOUT?

No vaccinations are required. However, rabbits' teeth grow continuously and need to be checked at least annually by a vet.

Rabbits have sensitive digestive systems. The best way to maintain it is through a proper diet. As grazing animals, rabbits need hay constantly to keep their system moving.

Finally, if you notice any marked change in behavior, including lethargy, lack of appetite, severe diarrhea, sneezing, or nasal discharge, take your rabbit to a veterinarian.

30. WHAT GROOMING DO RABBITS REQUIRE?

Rabbits shed four times per year. Because they ingest fur during their self-grooming process and build up of fur in the digestive system can cause serious problems, it is important to brush them regularly to help remove excess fur and prevent matts. In addition, rabbits' nails grow continuously and need to be trimmed about once a month.

31. HOW SHOULD I HANDLE MY RABBIT?

While rabbits need to learn to be picked up and handled for necessary exams & grooming, in general, they will be happier left to hop about on their own. However, it is still important that you are able to and feel comfortable handling your rabbit. Begin by approaching them slowly & calmly. Grab them firmly on their shoulders (no ears!) and lift. As soon as possible, place a supporting hand under their rump. Some people simply put one hand under the rabbit's tummy and the other on their rump. Bring the rabbit in close to your body & retain a firm grip. Rabbits will kick & struggle if they are not held securely (in their opinion). They also tend to kick more when they are nearing the ground or about to be put into their cage. If you start to lose your hold on the rabbit, drop as close to the ground as possible, so the rabbit does not fall far. To help calm a struggling rabbit, cover its eyes.

32. HOW SHOULD I INTRODUCE MY CURRENT RABBIT TO THE NEW RABBIT?

Rabbits are very territorial and do not easily welcome a newcomer. The most important element of creating a successful pair is to start with two neutered/spayed rabbits. You need to expect a transition period where each rabbit is maintained separately, while they get to know each other. The basic process of introducing two rabbits involves a neutral territory (someplace neither rabbit has been before), small amounts of time and close supervision. Normal behaviors for introductions include:

- Love at first sight. If this occurs, you can try them in the space they're going to live in. If it's still good, then they're fine, you have nothing else to do.
- Tentative friendship: If this occurs, just watch them when they're together, keep them separate when you're not around, and if no fighting occurs, they'll eventually become friends.
- Amorous behavior: If the (neutered) male mounts the female and the female permits it, this is usually a sign that the relationship will go well. If she does mind and runs, it is still not usually a problem. If she minds and becomes aggressive towards him, then you must prepare for a lengthier introduction period.
- One chasing, one running. If this occurs, just make sure the one running doesn't fight back and doesn't get hurt. If neither of these things occurs, then just watch and wait. If one gets hurt, then separate them and go slower and if one fights back, then you must prepare for a lengthier introduction period.
- Fighting. When two rabbits fight, then you must prepare for a lengthy introduction period.

Work with your rabbits every day, for at least twenty minutes or so a day, and when you're not working with them, keep them in eye contact of each other. Start with extreme scenarios and gradually move to less extreme. Do one extreme and one less extreme every day. The more often you work with them, the quicker the progress.

33. HOW DO I INTRODUCE MY THE NEW RABBIT TO OTHER RESIDENT PETS?

Rabbits usually get along with cats, guinea pigs and well-behaved dogs. In fact, many times, the rabbits will end up bossing the resident animals around. The ideal way to introduce the rabbit would be to confine or leash the dog/cat and let the rabbit investigate at its own pace. Interactions between rabbits and other pets should always be supervised.

Information condensed from www.rabbit.org online FAQs and supplied by the Minnesota Companion Rabbit Society, which can be reached at: 651-768-9755 or Info@MN.CompanionRabbit.org. For more information, see the MCRS website at MN.CompanionRabbit.org.