

# Basic Rabbit Care

**Diet:** A sound rabbit diet consists of fresh hay, good-quality pellets, and fresh vegetables. Anything beyond this considered a "treat" and should be offered in limited quantities only.

- Hay is essential for rabbit health as the roughage provided by hay reduces the risk of gastrointestinal problems. Untreated wood twigs also provide roughage (see bunny proofing below).
- Pellets should be fresh and relatively high in fiber (20-25% minimum crude fiber).
- Offer a variety of pesticide-free vegetables, including leafy greens and root vegetables. Add one vegetable to the diet at a time. Eliminate any item that causes soft stool or diarrhea.

Alfalfa, radish & clover sprouts  
Basil  
Beet greens (tops)  
Bok choy  
Brussels sprouts  
Carrot tops

Celery  
Cilantro  
Clover  
Dandelion greens & flowers  
Escarole  
Green peppers

Mint  
Parsley  
Pea pods (flat edible kind)  
Peppermint leaves  
Radicchio  
Radish tops

Raspberry leaves  
Spinach  
Watercress  
Wheat grass

Alfalfa Hay

Grass Hay

Pellets

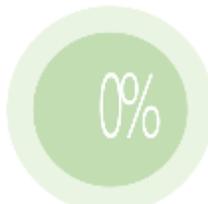
Veggies

Fruit



12 weeks

Credit: Gina Matarazzo



Postpubescent:  
~7 mos. to 1y



Adult ~1-5y



Offer young rabbits unlimited amounts of calcium and protein-rich alfalfa hay and alfalfa-based pellets. Very young rabbits, between 7 to 12 weeks, should not be offered vegetables and NEVER fruit as devastating gastrointestinal problems can arise. As the rabbit matures, gradually reduce the quantity of pellets offered and

transition to grass hay-based pellets. Approximately ¼ cup of pellets is recommended daily for the average medium-sized rabbit.

Age	Hay	Pellets	Vegetables	Fruit
7 months to 1 year	GRADUALLY introduce grass hay, reduce alfalfa	GRADUALLY decrease amount fed to ½ cup per 6 lbs. (2.7 kg) BW	GRADUALLY increase vegetables fed daily	No more than 1-2 oz. (30-60g) per 6 lbs. (2.7 kg) BW
Adult (1-5 years)	Unlimited grass hay, oat hay, straw	¼ to ½ cup per 6 lbs. (2.7 kg) BW	1-2 cups per 6 lbs. (2.7 kg) BW	No more than 2 TBSP per 6 lbs. (2.7 kg) BW

For frail, senior rabbits your veterinarian may want to increase the amount fed of protein-rich alfalfa hay although blood calcium levels may need to be monitored. If the senior rabbit's body condition is poor, your veterinarian may also recommend an increase in the quantity of pellets fed.

**Housing:** Essential supplies for all indoor rabbit habitats include a water bottle or bowl, feed bowl, hay, and toys. Bowls need to be heavy enough not to be tipped over. Provide a litter box with organic litter. Do not use softwood shavings such as pine or cedar. It is also helpful to attach the litter pan to the cage with clips, wire, or 2.5-cm (1-in) C-clamps.

Substrate: House pet rabbits on solid flooring.

- Wire floors on commercial cages may be removed with J-clip removers or a small awl and needle nosed jewelry pliers.
- Alternatively, a variety of materials can be used to cover the wire floor including carpet remnants, grass mats, synthetic sheepskin, and toweling. Grass mats are perfect for nibbling but if your bunny starts to chew on other floor coverings, replace them with a different item.
- Absorbent bedding, such as recycled paper product or aspen shavings, can also be used.

Cage Furniture:

- If there is sufficient height between the cage floor and ceiling, shelves may be added to serve as resting places, lookouts, or a source of exercise. A flat-roofed box of wood or cardboard within the cage can provide the same functions while also serving as a hide box for the bunny. By the same token, a hooded litter box or a pet carrier can be placed in the “bunny room” (see bunny proofing below) when your rabbit needs privacy. (Make sure that your bunny does not eat the plastic carrier or litter box).
- Clipping a small piece of Plexiglas to the cage wire behind the hay container will keep hay inside the cage. A 10-cm (4-in) piece of Plexiglas may also be placed along the cage bottom to deflect urine or debris.

Bunny Proofing your Home

Bunny proofing your home is part of living with a house rabbit. It is natural for rabbits to chew on furniture, rugs, drapes, and, most deadly of all, electrical cords. Young rabbits (< 1 year of age) are more inclined to mischief and require more confinement and/or bunny proofing than mature rabbits. Since bunny proofing can be extensive, some owners confine house rabbits to one or two rooms instead of allowing access to the entire home.

Protect your rabbit and your home:

- It is imperative that electrical cords be hidden or covered with tubing or hard plastic casing since one bite by your bunny could be fatal. Arrange furniture to hide cords and electrical outlets. Conceal cords within vinyl tubing, found at hardware stores, so that the rabbit cannot reach them. Split the tubing lengthwise with a utility knife so the cord can be pushed inside.
- Use Plexiglas to cover wallpaper or part of a carpet. Tack a thin strip of untreated wood over a baseboard to protect it from bunny teeth. Place grass mats on the floor to protect carpet or rugs.
- Gates, such as those used to keep children and dogs out of certain areas, are another way to create a safe area for your bunny. If your rabbit seems overly interested in chewing the gate, try decorating it with permitted chew toys (see below) as a diversion.
- Remove poisonous plants and other toxic substances as well as any small objects that could be ingested from the rabbit area.

Provide plenty of attention and offer safe, chewable items so that your rabbit is distracted from furniture and rugs

- Untreated wicker baskets and wood
- Willow bark balls
- Grass mats, jute and hemp doormats
- Cat balls or other cat toys that roll or can be tossed
- Hard plastic baby toys. Make sure that the rabbit is not eating and ingesting these toys!
- Large tubs of hay, newspapers, or a towel can be offered as an outlet for digging.
- Nudge and roll toys like large rubber balls, empty Quaker Oat boxes and small tins
- Create a climbing area with baskets, boxes, and pillows
- Paper bags and cardboard boxes for crawling inside, scratching, and chewing
- Tunnels can be made from open-ended cardboard boxes, cat tunnels, and cardboard propped up against the side of a wall.
- Untreated wood twigs and logs that have been aged for at least 3 months. Apple tree branches can be eaten fresh off the tree. Stay away from: cherry, peach, apricot, plum and redwood, which are all poisonous.
- A cardboard box stuffed with hay, straw, or shredded paper makes an inexpensive play box.
- Yellow Pages for shredding
- Straw whisk broom

## Temperature & Humidity

Place the cage in the coolest, least humid area of the house away from heat and drafts. A temperature range of 16-21°C (60-70°F) is ideal for pet rabbits. Temperatures in the upper 80s and higher can potentially cause fatal heat stroke. During hot weather, leave a frozen bottle of water in the cage and wet down the ears to help cool the bunny. Cool tiles can also be offered as a refreshing spot on which rabbits can lie in warm weather.

**Handling:** Offering your hand for a rabbit to sniff, much as you would to a cat or dog, is not the best way to introduce yourself to most rabbits. Most rabbits do not like to have the tip of the nose or chin touched either. Instead begin by gently stroking the top of the head.

Rabbits possess a relatively lightweight, delicate skeleton paired with extremely strong, well-developed back and leg muscles. With improper handling, rabbits that struggle or kick run the risk of a broken back or leg. Veterinary staff can demonstrate the proper way to pick up a pet rabbit. NEVER lift a rabbit by the ears or scruff.

### **References & Further Reading**

Bays TB. Rabbit behavior. In: Bays TB, Lightfoot T, Mayer J (eds). Exotic Pet Behavior. St. Louis, MO: Saunders; 2006. Pp. 1-49.

Harriman M. House Rabbit Handbook: How to Live with an Urban Rabbit, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Alameda: Drollery Press; 2005.

House Rabbit Society. Available at <http://www.rabbit.org/index.html>. Accessed on September 12, 2015.

McBride A. Why Does My Rabbit...?, revised ed. London: Souvenir Press; 2003.

Quesenberry KE, Carpenter JW (eds). Ferrets, Rabbits and Rodents: Clinical Medicine and Surgery, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. St. Louis, MO: Saunders; 2005.

Written April 1, 2011; updated May 6, 2016