

# FACTS EVERY BUNNY PARENT (or parent-to-be) SHOULD KNOW

Thank you for opening up your life and your heart to the unique love of a rabbit. This handout includes information gathered by rabbit lovers and rabbit doctors to help your rabbit have a happy, healthy, long life.

## **IMPORTANT RABBIT FACTS:**

- Life span: 8-12 years (possibly longer)
- Normal body temperature: 101.5-103 F
- Rabbits are herbivores, so their physiology is closer to a horse or cow than to dogs or cats. If you keep the rabbit's digestive tract healthy, you keep the rabbit healthy.
- Rabbits are very social animals and in nature they live in groups. Like dogs and cats, they are affectionate and bond with people, therefore they should be kept indoors as part of the family
- The rabbit's natural instinct is to be close to the ground and have access to a safe hiding place; this is because they are a prey species, which basically means that many other animals eat them. Thus it is not safe for rabbits to be left unsupervised with a dog or cat, or allowed outdoors in an unsecured enclosure.

## **WHERE CAN I GET A BUNNY?**

Thousands of adorable sweet bunnies are euthanized by animal shelters every year because there aren't enough good homes. Rabbits from rescue organizations are healthier, are already spayed/neutered, are accustomed to being handled, and are often litter box trained. As cute as those little fluffy baby bunnies are in the pet store, they are at a high risk for getting sick. Baby bunnies in pet stores are exposed to a lot of germs at an age when they are most susceptible to illness. If you obtain a baby bunny from a breeder, there may be less exposure to germs, but the young bunny will still be at an age wherein it has a higher risk of getting sick due to stress. Most rabbits at rescue organizations are 5 months to 2 years old; these older bunnies are healthier because at this age they have a better immune system. Baby bunnies are very cute, but young adult bunnies are still extremely adorable, they will easily bond with you, and will run and play for many more years to come.

## **WHEN YOU FIRST BRING BUNNY HOME:**

Many rabbits are shy at first. Have the rabbit's cage ready in advance (containing hay, water, and a couple handfuls of pellets), so that you can bring the bunny home, place it in the cage, and let it get used to its new home for two or three days. The bunny will be under a great deal of stress with changing homes, so allow the bunny to get used to its new surroundings with as little stress as possible in order to avoid illness. With the cage on the floor, open the door and let the bunny walk out to explore. Sit down, relax, watch your bunny check out the room and you. This allows the rabbit to feel secure in its new home, because it knows where to run to be safe and it can approach you and meet you as it would a friend in the wild. Allow the bunny increasing amounts of time out of its cage, under supervision. This method also encourages using the cage as a place to pee and poop. It may take a few weeks for your new bunny to settle down and open up to bond with you; a calm environment and consistent behavior on your part will help your bunny adjust quickly.

## **BUNNY HOMES & BUNNYPROOFING:**

Making your bunny a house rabbit will help to create that special attachment between human and bunny. It is ideal to start out with a cage that the bunny learns is its safe place, and the place to pee and poop. Many cages have wire bottoms. This is uncomfortable for bunny feet, so if you have that kind of cage, give the bunny something to stand on like a piece of wood or carpet, or a towel or synthetic fleece. If your rabbit chews excessively on the towel or carpet, remove it to avoid an obstruction in the digestive tract. Large wire dog cages and dog exercise pens work well as bunny homes. The cage should be as big as possible, allowing the bunny to stretch out and stand up on its hind legs, with room for food, water and litter box. The cage should be kept on the floor; your bunny will get nervous if it has to be lifted in and out, and will prefer to walk out of its cage to explore and run back in for safety.

Bunny proof your house. All important papers and books should be kept out of reach. Make wires inaccessible (place wires behind furniture, attach wires to the wall out of bunny reach, or cover wires with plastic tubing from the hardware store). Some bunnies will chew on wood furniture or wall edges. Cover the nibbled area and place old magazines/phonebooks/a cardboard box/a litter box with hay nearby for a more interesting chewing option. And make sure that there is no rodent poison or other toxic chemicals accessible.

Since bunnies are so social, keep them in an area in which you spend most of your time. Be aware that an extremely busy and noisy area may be too stressful for many rabbits. If your bunny will spend a lot of time out of its cage, then cage size doesn't matter as much. But if your bunny will be cooped up for half the day or longer, it should have a

large area to live in. You can create a larger area using dog exercise pens.

It is recommended that rabbits NOT be kept outdoors in hutches. These rabbits never receive enough attention. One rabbit, living alone in an outdoor hutch, will feel like he is in jail, in solitary confinement. We don't lock our dog and cat pets in a cage outside 24 hours a day, feeding them once a day only, and rabbits shouldn't be treated that way either. In addition to the mental and emotional hardships, outdoor rabbits are exposed to extremes of heat and cold, which may kill them. Dogs and cats commonly get into yards and harass rabbits to death. Also, it is difficult to monitor the rabbit's health, and you may one day walk out to find a weak rabbit with diarrhea, maggots, hock sores, etc; expensive problems that could easily have been avoided. If your rabbit must live outdoors, give it a bunny friend (see Bonding section) and provide them with shade, a wooden hide box filled with hay for protection from the elements, ice-free water in the winter, a frozen 2-liter bottle of water to help them stay cool in the summer, and fresh food. Escape from heat and sun are important; in the wild, rabbits are active at dawn and dusk, spending the hot midday hours relaxing in cool burrows.

### **LITTER BOX TRAINING:**

Most bunnies pick this up very quickly, though there are occasional bunnies that never get it, or are not quite 100%. Place a litter box in the corner of the bunny's cage that he/she pees in. Place litter boxes in corners of the room(s) the bunny is allowed out in. You can put urine-soaked litter and poops in the litter boxes, but the best thing to entice bunnies to hang out in their litter boxes is to place hay in the litter box. Try lining the litter box with a piece of newspaper, and place about an inch of litter in the box. Dump the contents when soiled, daily or every other day. Changing litter often and providing a clean living area encourages bunnies to use their litter boxes.

**DO NOT USE CLUMPING LITTER OR LITTER WITH ADDITIVES!** These are dangerous to bunny health . Some bunnies will eat corn cob litter, which may cause a blockage.

Recommended Litters:

- \*Yesterday's News -recycled newspaper pellets soak up and hold urine well
- \*Carefresh - recycled newspaper pulp
- \*Aspen bedding (Pine and cedar have been proven to cause liver and lung problems in small mammals)

### **WHAT PET RABBITS SHOULD EAT:**

**\*FREE CHOICE GRASS HAY! ALWAYS AVAILABLE!** Timothy, oat, brome, orchard grass hays

- Alfalfa is too rich in calcium, protein and carbohydrates, often causing health problems like bladder stones
- Loose strands of hay are much healthier than pressed cubes or chopped hay
- In the wild, bunnies, like horses, graze and browse continuously

**\*VARIETY OF GREEN LEAFY VEGETABLES** (see suggestions below).

1 cup/5lbs body weight/day

**\*LIMITED AMOUNT OF FRUIT** (see suggestions below).

1 tablespoon/6lbs body weight/day

**\*LIMITED AMOUNT GOOD QUALITY PELLETS**

¼ cup/5lbs body weight/day

-Get pellets with a high crude fiber content of 18-26%

-If pellets have a pungent odor that does not smell like hay, they may be rancid and should be discarded. Keeping pellets in the refrigerator helps them stay fresher and last longer.

**\*FRESH GRASS - PESTICIDE/FERTILIZER FREE!!**

**\*FRESH WATER**

**\*\*All diet changes should be done slowly, over 7 days (at least), mixing the old food with the new.**

-Vitamins and salt blocks are not necessary if you are feeding the above diet

-Long-haired and old or sick rabbits often need more calories, therefore may be fed more pellets.

-Very young rabbits and pregnant and lactating females have different requirements. Contact your vet for more info.

**GOOD VEGETABLES:** (Rinse with water before giving to bunny. Feed fresh vegetables, of the quality that you yourself would eat.)

Mustard Greens

Carrot Tops

Romaine

Dandelion Greens

Swiss Chard

Watercress

Escarole

Cilantro

Green Peppers

Endive

Dill

Carrots

Collard Greens

Parsley

Green/Red Leaf Lettuce

GOOD FRUITS: (Rinse with water before giving to bunny)

Apple	Pear	Watermelon	Papaya	Raspberries	Peach
Strawberries	Cantaloupe	Honeydew Melon	Mango	Blueberries	Plum

Iceberg lettuce has NO nutritional value.

**DO NOT FEED:** Rhubarb, Bread and bread products, Avocado, Chocolate, Chips, Pretzels, Nuts, Corn, seeds

### **WHY SHOULD RABBITS EAT A LOT OF HAY?**

The two easy things you can do to keep your rabbit healthy: give your bunny a loving and low- stress environment, and feed it lots of grass hay. Rabbits rely on the good bacteria in their digestive tract for nutrients (see Digestion section). If the environment changes in the digestive tract, (for example, more acidic) the good bacteria die and bad bacteria proliferate and cause illness and death. It is very easy to kill off the good bacteria: sudden change in diet or improper diet (like eating a large amount of carbohydrates), stress from being at the shelter/pet store, stress from changing homes, stress from surgery, stress from rough handling or harassing dogs, and giving certain antibiotics. Stress is additive, so if your bunny has a low-stress home life and a good diet, it will be better able to deal with stressful situations, like a visit to the vet for a check-up.

Hay is important because the good bacteria like to ferment grass hay, the long stems keep the digestive tract moving so things don't get stagnant, and the rabbit's teeth get worn down. Pellets are a low-fiber, concentrated form of nutrition, containing much more protein and calcium than a rabbit requires. If a rabbit eats only pellets, it will be prone to overgrowth of bad bacteria, slow digestion, obesity, and overgrown teeth. Low fiber diets, slow digestion, and decreased fluid intake predisposes rabbits to hairball obstruction in their stomachs. Basically, if you keep the digestive tract healthy, you keep the bunny healthy.

### **SPAY & NEUTER:**

If you have a rabbit that is not yet spayed or neutered, their health and emotional well-being will benefit greatly. Neutered male rabbits stop spraying, stop humping everything that moves, stop being aggressive, and become more cuddly and mellow. Spayed females will be less frustrated and less aggressive, and more calm and loving. Spaying females is extremely important because they have **an 80% chance of getting uterine cancer**, which can lead to death. If you've just adopted a rabbit from a shelter, he or she has most likely been spayed or neutered a few days before the adoption. It may take a few weeks to a few months after the surgery for your bunny to mellow out and the hormones to clear out of the system.

Rabbits can start breeding as early as 3-5 months of age, therefore males and females need to be kept separate until they are spayed or neutered. Male rabbits can be neutered as soon as their testicles descend, around 3-4 months old. Female rabbits can also be spayed at 3-4 months of age.

### **BONDING:**

Now that your bunny is spayed/neutered, he or she is now able to enjoy a loving relationship with another bunny. Bunnies form tight loving bonds with other bunnies and with people. Whereas your bunny will bond with you and be very loving, unless you can stay home and spend all day paying attention to your bunny, you should get your rabbit a bunny friend to talk "bunny talk" with, cuddle up to, and groom. Your bunny will still love you and beg to be petted, but will have a richer, fuller life. In addition, you get to watch them play cuddle, share food, and lots of other cute things. Plus, pair-bonded rabbits are healthier and better able to deal with stress, so they'll live longer. If you are planning to adopt your first bunny, consider getting two at the same time - same amount of work, twice the love. Often shelters have pair-bonded bunnies available, or a rabbit expert that can pair two bunnies of your choice. If you have a bunny already, and you're looking for a second bunny, introductions can be tricky at first, so be careful, and call a rabbit rescue organization for advice. Due to raging hormones, bonding rabbits can be difficult unless both rabbits are spayed and neutered.

### **BEHAVIOR:**

Rabbits are quiet and peaceful animals that respond beautifully to attention and affection when treated with gentleness and love. They are intelligent animals that form adoring lifelong relationships. They love to be petted, like snuggling, enjoy jumping and leaping playfully for fun, live to chew, and will bring joy to your life. If you've never experienced bunny love, open your heart and mind, and lay down on the floor with your bunny roaming free. Watch your bunny and you'll learn to recognize his body language: nervous, frisky, curious, loving, etc. See the world through your bunny's eyes - how would it feel to be a bunny?

Bunnies like to be comfortable and happy, and as mentioned previously, don't deal well with stress. Gently and patiently work with your bunny to get it used to a carrying case, traveling, nail trimming, brushing, and being lifted. This training will decrease your bunny's stress during these procedures.

Many bunnies go through an adolescent phase somewhere around 3 months to 1 year old. They have a lot of energy and curiosity, and are constantly exploring, often getting into trouble. Like a two year old child, this phase is best dealt with by redirecting their energies. Instead of reprimanding, just remove the valuable/important item the bunny has discovered, and give him a box of tissues to rip up, or a box filled with magazines to tear apart. Spaying and neutering helps to calm adolescents to some degree, but be assured, they will grow out of their naughtiness. Bunnies adopted from shelters are often at the age where they are mellowing out of their adolescent stage.

### **HANDLING:**

Being picked up is very scary and unnatural for rabbits; they feel like a predator has grabbed them for dinner. That's why many rabbits struggle when lifted, and when they kick out with their hind legs, they can **fracture their spine**. So it is very important to handle them properly - see House Rabbit Society handout "An Uplifting Experience" [[www.rabbit.org/journal/3-11/lift.html](http://www.rabbit.org/journal/3-11/lift.html)]. Remember to always support their rear end, and hold them securely without squeezing. Never pick rabbits up by their ears, legs or scruff.

Since rabbit handling requires a certain amount of manual dexterity, children under 8 years old are often unable to safely lift rabbits by themselves. Young children should always be monitored when handling and spending time with rabbits.

If you are very nervous picking up your bunny, he/she will get nervous as well, so try to be calm and confident. Here is a method of lifting for beginners that is very safe and easy. Get a large towel, sit on the floor, and pet your bunny on the head until it is relaxed. Do not hold your breath or tense up because the bunny will think that something bad is about to happen. Breathing calmly, place the towel over the bunny so that the bunny is in the middle with its head towards a long edge. Place your hands on either side of the bunny's midsection, and scoop the bunny up with the towel wrapped around it, to your chest region. Use both arms to support the rabbit, holding the rabbit with its head to one side, and its tail to the other. Once you've stood up and are holding the bunny securely, make sure the bunny's face is exposed so that it is not smothered. You have just made a "bunny burrito"! Don't keep the bunny wrapped in a towel for very long, as it can get overheated. When you're done, carefully place all four bunny feet on the ground and lift the towel off, letting him/her walk away. Many shelter bunnies are already experienced at being handled, and you may be pleasantly surprised to find a bunny that likes to cuddle in your lap, but most rabbits prefer to lie next to you to be petted.

### **HEALTH NOTES:**

- Monitor your bunny for signs of illness: decreased appetite, weight loss, runny nose, sneezing, coughing, soft poop.
- If your bunny eats less than normal for a few feedings, and it's not due to poor quality food, poor diet, or stress, take your bunny to the vet as soon as possible to see what's wrong.
- If your bunny stops eating completely, not a single nibble in 24 hours, **take it to the vet immediately!** Do not wait a few days, or the bunny will get very sick from overgrowth of the bad bacteria, in addition to whatever the primary illness is.
- Red colored urine is often due to plant pigments, but can be due to blood in the urine. Have a rabbit vet check your bunny's urine, and look for bladder stones. If the urine is white and thick, you should decrease the amount of calcium in the rabbit's diet; discontinue alfalfa hay and alfalfa based pellets. Ask your vet or a rabbit rescue organization for information on timothy based pellets.
- If a bunny is not feeling well, or if it is obese and has soft poop, then it will not groom itself well in its genital and tail region. Urine and feces get matted in the fur, burn the rabbit's skin, and attract flies to lay eggs, even indoors, which turn into maggots in the wound.
- Bunnies can get fleas as well - contact your rabbit vet for flea control.
- Monitor your bunny's front teeth. If they do not line up well, and are growing long in strange directions, they need to be trimmed by your vet. If the bunny has a lot of drool and foodstuff stuck under its chin, and the bunny is reluctant to eat, it may have overgrown molars. Frequently feel the sides of your rabbit's face, and under its jaw. Check for unusual lumps that could signal an abscess caused by abnormal teeth. See your vet asap if you find any of these abnormalities.
- Trim your rabbit's nails regularly. Long nails can get caught and the bunny can break a toe or nail.
- Rabbits cannot sweat, and have a limited ability to cool themselves; in the wild they spend the hot midday time in their burrows snoozing, and come out at dusk and dawn. They cannot handle temperatures above 85-90 degrees, and will go into heat stroke, so keep them out of the sun and in a comfortable environment. Also, rabbits kept in a warm and humid area with poor air circulation are more likely to get respiratory disease.
- If you have a bonded pair, and one gets sick - **do not separate them**. The other bunny has already been exposed, and parting them will cause a great deal of stress and anguish. The sick one will benefit from the love and support of its buddy,

and has a better chance at recovering. Along the same lines, if you need to take one bunny to the vet, bring the other bunny in the same carrier for emotional support. And if one bunny needs to be hospitalized, it will do much better if its buddy stays with it in the hospital.

-To keep your bunny healthy, try to maintain a comfortable, secure, low-stress environment with lots of love and plenty of grass hay.

### **WHICH VET SHOULD MY RABBIT SEE?**

Many perfectly wonderful vets are willing to see rabbits but are not experienced with the rabbit's unique requirements. Something as simple as giving the wrong antibiotics can kill a rabbit (Amoxicillin, Ampicillin, Clindamycin and Lincomycin are the most dangerous, but others can cause problems as well) therefore rabbits should always be treated by experienced rabbit veterinarians. Contact your local rabbit rescue organizations for recommendations on good rabbit veterinarians in your area.

### **OUTDOOR PLAYTIME:**

Bunnies should have constant supervision when outdoors; a dog or cat or other predator can get into any yard and kill a rabbit within seconds. A determined predator can rip open any enclosure, no matter how well built. Since it would be difficult to bunny proof an entire yard, closing up all the tiny fence openings, it is better to create a smaller, more secure play area. Build a strong wood and wire enclosure with a roof to discourage predators from just jumping in. Provide shade, water, food, and a hide box. An alternative is to train your rabbit to wear a harness, and then you can hang out in the yard with your bunny on a leash. Some bunnies will even go for walks!

Don't let your bunny eat grass that has pesticides or has been fertilized. And don't leave your bunny out for long during hot weather.

### **TOYS:**

Rabbits seem to prefer cheap toys, like cardboard boxes, magazines, newspapers, phone books, junk mail, important paper documents, paper bags, towels, wicker baskets, and toilet paper rolls (with and without toilet paper). Note the recurring theme - items that can be ripped up. Some rabbits like bird toys with bells and wood chunks. Slinkies also make a fun toy. Rabbits respond best when their toys are rotated, instead of staying with the same toy for weeks.

### **DIGESTION:**

Rabbits have a large cecum in their digestive tract that houses good bacteria. These bacteria ferment fiber to nutrients; some of the nutrients are absorbed in the cecum, and some of the nutrients are passed out of the anus as cecotrophs. Rabbits eat these cecotrophs directly from their anus, thus regaining the protein and vitamins contained within. You may occasionally see cecotrophs - they are soft and moist and look like a cluster of grapes. Cecotrophs are erroneously called "night feces," but rabbits may produce them anytime during the day or night, 4-8 hours after eating.

### **RESOURCES:**

**RABBIT RESCUE ORGANIZATIONS** - Happy to answer questions and supply your bunnies with the best food, toys, etc:

-Zooch Corner Rabbit Rescue (909) 868-BUNI [www.mybunny.org](http://www.mybunny.org)

-Bunny Bunch (909) 626-3946 [www.bunnybunch.org](http://www.bunnybunch.org)

-House Rabbit Society [www.rabbit.org](http://www.rabbit.org)

-BunnyLuv Rabbit Resource Center (818) 988-4488 [www.bunnyluv.com](http://www.bunnyluv.com) (Van Nuys)

Recommended reading:

[The House Rabbit Handbook](#)

(This handout was written by Dr. Sari Kanfer, veterinarian, rabbit owner and lover, and active member of Zoon Corner Rabbit Rescue and Bunny Bunch. The information contained herein is based upon the rabbit literature available, advice from top rabbit vets, information from long-term rabbit rescuers, and research data. Feel free to photocopy and distribute this handout. 8/9/2001)