

How to Care for Domestic Rabbits

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Rabbits may be easy to love, but they're not quite as easy to care for. Rabbits are social creatures and wonderful companions to people who take the time to learn about their needs, but unfortunately, many shelters take in more than their fair share of homeless bunnies. To learn about providing temporary care for these adorable creatures in your facility, check out books and web sites on rabbit care. This quick set of reminders will give you the basics.

1: Help Them Hop to It

Just because rabbits are little doesn't mean they don't need room to roam; if you have the space, use it. A cage or a run for a six-pound rabbit should be at least 18 inches high, 24 inches wide, and 24 inches deep. Cages with wire flooring are hard on rabbits' feet, which do not have protective pads like those of dogs and cats. If you must place rabbits in wire cages, be sure to layer the floors with cardboard or paper. To lower stress levels, keep rabbit cages away from noisy areas such as dog kennels, and, if possible, set them apart from cat areas as well. If you're squeezed for space and you must house rabbits and cats in the same room, make sure cats are out of rabbits' direct line of sight. Place a cardboard box in each cage so the bunnies have a comfortable place to hide, and respect the animals' need for quiet time. (Rabbits usually sleep during the day and night, becoming playful at dawn and dusk.) Always house rabbits indoors and maintain comfortable room temperatures, as rabbits do not tolerate extreme temperatures.



2: Please Put Litter in Its Place

Rabbits can easily learn to use a litter box. Placing a litter box in a cage will not only encourage this behavior, but will also show potential adopters that the animals can be trained. When creating a litter box or bedding, stay away from cedar or other wood shavings, which may cause liver damage or trigger allergic reactions in rabbits. Instead, stick with organic litters made of paper, oats, alfalfa, or citrus. Hay is another option for litter material, but it requires even more frequent changing because rabbits will nibble on it.

3: Give 'Em Hay If there were a food pyramid chart created for rabbits, timothy grass hay would form the entire base. Rabbits should have access to a constant supply of this hay, which aids their digestive systems and provides the necessary fiber to help prevent health problems such as hair balls, diarrhea, and obesity. Alfalfa hay, on the other hand, should be given to adult rabbits in limited quantities because it's too high in protein, calcium, and calories.



4. A Balanced Diet

In addition to hay, the basic diet of a mature rabbit should include leafy green vegetables such as parsley, dandelion greens, and carrot tops; one to two tablespoons per day of treats such as rolled oats, unsalted crackers, dry bread, or fruit; and a good pellet feed with 12 to 20 percent crude fiber and 14 to 17 percent crude protein (check the packaging). Begin feeding pellets at one-fourth cup per five pounds of body weight, divided into two meals per day, and then adjust the amount according to the rabbit's body condition. Avoid lettuce, tomatoes, cabbage, or table scraps, which can all cause bloat and diarrhea. Keep fresh water available, preferably in sipper bottles, which take up less space than water bowls and are less likely to spill. Watch new rabbits to make sure they know how to use the bottles, and clean bottles daily so the tubes don't get clogged.



5. Chew on This

Chewing is part of a rabbit's natural behavior, but it doesn't have to be destructive. To keep rabbits active and amused, you may want to put untreated wood blocks or cardboard in their cages. Your best bet is paper-towel rolls, toilet-paper rolls, and other chewable cardboard materials that can be tossed in the trash once they've served their purpose. Avoid plastic toys and objects with sharp edges, loose parts, or soft rubber that rabbits could chew into pieces and swallow.



6. Caution: Handle With Care

Rabbits are fragile animals who should be handled carefully. Their bones are so delicate that the muscles in their powerful hind legs can easily overcome the strength of their skeletons. As a result, if not properly restrained, struggling rabbits can break their own spines. One way to take a rabbit out of a cage is to gently gather a handful of loose skin at the scruff of his neck, turn the animal's face away while pulling his body toward you, and immediately place your other hand underneath his rump to support his body weight. Another method is to slide one hand underneath the front of the rabbit and the other hand underneath his back side, lifting him carefully with both hands. Whichever method you use, make sure you never let his body hang free, never lift him by the stomach, and never pick him up by his ears. And remember that since rabbits groom each other around the eyes, ears, top of the nose, top of the head, and down the back, they'll think of you as a kindred spirit if you pat them there, too.

