

Basic Rabbit Care

Housing

Your rabbit's adult weight should be the biggest factor in choosing a cage size. Bigger is always better, as this is where your rabbit will spend most of its time. Cages should have a wire bottom, so that the animal is not sitting in its own mess. Contrary to popular belief, rabbits are more likely to get "sore hocks" from a solid bottomed cage, as they end up sitting in their own urine, which causes the sores. Outdoor rabbits must be housed in a manner that they can get out of the wind and rain, such as in a wooden hutch with an enclosed section. The hutch must also allow for adequate ventilation.

Rabbits must be housed separately. Rabbits are solitary animals, and, while they may get along when young, once they become mature, both males and females will fight. Females can and will become pregnant at a very early age and, if housed with the male, will become pregnant again as soon as she gives birth.

Feeding

Rabbits should be fed a good quality pelleted feed. **Pelleted feeds are complete nutrition for you rabbit.** A quality pelleted feed can be purchased from a feed store or Tractor Supply Co. store. The best feed is a feed that you can get as fresh as possible. Do not buy feed with anything other than plain pellets in it, as the other stuff is basically junk food for your rabbit. Corn should be avoided as an ingredient in any amount. Protein should be between 16% and 18%. Your rabbit should be given as much feed as it will consume in a day, which should be no more than one ounce per pound of body-weight as an adult.

Hay, in loose form or as cubes (which reduces mess by a huge amount), can be given, but is not necessary. It is very enjoyable to a rabbit to eat hay and it also helps to prevent some digestive problems. Your rabbit can be fed as much hay as it wants either placed on the cage floor (where it may be wasted) or in a hay rack. Cubes can be given on the floor and double as toys.

Rabbits are herbivores, not vegetarians. They should not be fed fruit except very small amounts on special occasions, such as a small slice of banana once a month. They can be given dark leafy vegetables on occasions. The best treats for your rabbits are hay, black oil sunflower seeds (not striped sunflower seeds), old fashion rolled oats, dandelion leaves, and plantain leaves (this is plantain the weed, not the thing that looks like a banana). Only feed these weeds if your lawn has not been treated with chemicals or fertilizers. Treats should be fed in small amounts, such as 5-10 sunflower seeds or a small handful of dandelion leaves.

Rabbits are very prone to digestive upsets. **All changes in a rabbit's diet should be made very slowly and new foods introduced a small amount at a time, especially treats.** Wait to introduce treats until your rabbit is six months old. If your rabbit were to get diarrhea from stress or eating something it shouldn't, take away all pellets and treats. For two or three day feed only hay and old fashioned oatmeal. Make sure that your rabbit is drinking enough to replace lost fluids. If need be, give them some Gatorade to entice them to drink.

Equipment

Besides an appropriately sized cage, your rabbit will need a food bowl, a water bottle, and toys. The

bowl should attach to the side of the cage or your rabbit will turn it into a toy. I recommend water bottles over bowls as bowls can become soiled quickly. Get the 32 oz. bottle. It seems like a lot, but it is extremely important that your rabbit always have water. These can be bought at Walmart for \$3-\$4 and are also available at other retailers, such as pet stores, and from rabbit suppliers at shows. If your rabbit is housed outside, during the winter it is recommended that you switch to a bowl. At minimum, your rabbit should have the ice knocked out of their bowl and the bowl refilled with warm water three times a day. **Water is the most important nutrient for a rabbit or any animal and your rabbit will die very quickly without water.** A small heated bowl can also be used if the cord is kept out of reach of the rabbit.

I have never come across a rabbit that likes a toy from a pet shop. They are expensive and usually go untouched. The best toys are plastic baby keys, shower curtain rings linked together, paper towel rolls, and cardboard boxes. It is not fair to leave you rabbit alone in a cage all day with nothing to do. Hay also provides something for your rabbit to do.

General Care

Your rabbit's cage should be cleaned at least weekly. **Ammonia can quickly kill a rabbit. Clean cages and proper ventilation are imperative to your rabbit's health.** Do not allow urine or feces to build up in the cage or the pan below the cage. Make it a point to clean it as often as possible. In the summer, the cage should be cleaned more often. Pine pellets or pine shavings can be placed in the tray to absorb urine and spilled water. Besides removing urine and feces, all owl bottles, and toys must be cleaned weekly.

Rabbits can tolerate cold well, but heat can be deadly. In the summer, when temperatures get above 85 degrees, you can place a frozen 2-liter bottle full of water in the cage for your rabbit to lie up against to stay cool. In winter, outside rabbits should have an enclosed box stuffed with straw for insulation.

Rabbits do not require much grooming. Your rabbit will shed twice yearly like a dog or cat. At this time you should brush your rabbit or wet your hand and pet the rabbit to get the loose hairs off. Nails should be trimmed monthly. **Nails that are allowed to get too long will painfully break off.**

Handling

While rabbits are not dogs or cats, they can still be very friendly pets. Rabbits are naturally prey animals and become scared extremely easily. For the first few days, your rabbit should be left alone to become accustomed to its surroundings. Gentle petting and handling can then begin in short sessions. As you approach the area where your rabbit is kept, begin talking softly so that your appearance does not startle it. **Rabbits should be held so that their whole body is supported, especially their back feet.** Rabbits have brittle bones and can easily break their back while struggling or if their back end is allowed to dangle. Small children should not be allowed to carry rabbits, as if the rabbit is dropped, it will likely be hurt.