

Basic Bunny Care

Introduction

Your rabbit is an important member of your family who deserves love, attention, and proper care. When well taken care of, rabbits can easily live 7-12 years. While they can be challenging pets, the rewards of having a happy, healthy house rabbit are well worth the effort!

Diet

The most important element in your rabbit's diet is hay. Hay provides the fiber needed to keep the digestive tract working properly. Timothy hay (or another grass hay) is recommended over alfalfa since it is lower in calcium, protein and fat. Unlimited amounts of fresh hay should be provided on a daily basis. Because rabbits' digestive systems are designed to derive nourishment from foraging on low-nutrient food, they can actually be damaged by foods too high in protein, fat and calories.

We recommend feeding your bunny rabbit pellets for the first two months and then introducing small amounts of veggies one at a time once a week.

Fresh water should always be available. Make sure that you not only replace the water daily, but that you clean the bottle or crock.

Rabbits should not be fed any human treats including cheerios, bread, chocolate, crackers, etc. Good treats include about a half inch of banana, a thin slice of apple or a couple of raisins. Other fruits may be offered in tiny quantities.

Spaying/Neutering

It is very important to spay or neuter your rabbit. Most importantly, it prevents unwanted litters and helps with the overpopulation problem. It also provides health benefits including prevention of reproductive system cancers which can strike both male and female rabbits. Also, both male and female rabbits can spray and exhibit sexually aggressive behavior unless they are altered. These behaviors include excessive digging, marking territory with urine or droppings, nipping, fighting with other rabbits, and "humping" everything within sight. Once your rabbit has been "fixed", the hormones and instincts which cause these behaviors are reduced and your rabbit will be happier, more relaxed, and more enjoyable to have around the house!

Rabbits should not be fed any human treats including cheerios, bread, chocolate, crackers, etc. Good treats include about a half inch of banana, a thin slice of apple or a couple of raisins. Other fruits may be offered in tiny quantities. All processed treats available in pet stores should be avoided, even if they appear "natural". The extra fat and calories can compromise your rabbit's digestive system and internal organs.

Ongoing Care

Rabbits do need care on a regular basis. They groom their coats carefully but need your help to brush them regularly so they do not ingest fur, which can lead to digestive blockages. Daily brushing is needed when they are shedding. Their nails need to be trimmed when they get too long. Every rabbit and environment are different. Some need to be trimmed every few weeks, others can go 2-3 months between trimmings.

Your rabbit should also go to your veterinarian at least once a year for a check up. Your vet will do a thorough job making sure your rabbit is healthy. Since rabbits are considered exotic pets, it is important that you find a rabbit knowledgeable vet. Most important, you must closely observe your rabbit's behavior, eyes, coat, teeth, feet and eating habits. As prey animals, their instincts tell them to hide symptoms of illness or injury so they do not appear vulnerable to predators. This means that their human friends must be vigilant and take even small changes seriously. If your rabbit goes a day without eating, consult your veterinarian--delay in seeking care could be fatal.

Behavior

As noted above, house rabbits are domesticated prey animals. They are keenly aware of their environment and can be easily stressed by sudden motion or loud noises. Care should be taken to set up your rabbit's play and resting spaces to provide a balance between too much noise and too little opportunity for play and interaction with the family. An alternative space may be needed for the bun when lots of folks come by to visit or the kids have a birthday party, for example. Many house rabbits get along well with children, dogs and cats, but careful supervision by adults is essential.

Rabbits communicate through a variety of ways. They seldom vocalize but may occasionally snort or grunt if annoyed. A very frightened rabbit screams like a tea kettle. Unaltered rabbits hum little love songs, and happy rabbits "purr" by lightly grinding their teeth together. Body language is more important: happy rabbits dance, race around or leap in the air, flop over on their side or back, stretch flat out, etc. A rabbit who places his or her chin on the ground is usually asking to be groomed, by you or another rabbit-- this is called "presenting". If approached too abruptly, a rabbit may box, rear up and even bite. They have a blind spot in front of them because their eyes are placed to detect predators from above and behind, so a cautious approach from above where the rabbit can see your hand is recommended. Gentle, respectful handling and an understanding of rabbit behavior will help you and your bun enjoy your relationship.