

Rabbits as Pets

History and Biology: Rabbits can make wonderful pets. They are curious, independent and can be socialized to enjoy interaction with their owners and other pets in the household. Today, many breeds of rabbits are recognized, with variable coats, ear length and size and body conformation.

Historically, rabbits have been bred for fur, meat and pets. Rabbits are classified in their own Order, *Lagomorpha*, as there are distinct differences between rabbits and rodents. Rabbits have a second set of upper teeth, known as peg teeth, situated behind the upper incisors (front teeth). They also lack foot pads, unlike rodents and many other mammals.

Rabbits are generally not well suited to be a child's first pet. They are easily frightened by quick movements, loud noises and changes in their environment. When handled, they should gently be scooped up, with their chest and front half of the body supported by the forearm, while the opposite hand and forearm is covering the shoulders and neck area. The whole body is then held close to you. Allowing the rabbit to hide his/her head under the forearm can be helpful.

Rabbits have very strong hindquarters and musculature, as compared to their delicate bones. Consequently, when rabbits kick with their hind legs when scared or anxious, they can break their backs if not handled correctly.

Anatomy and Physiology:

- Rabbits are hind-gut fermenters, similar to a horse. The stomach is connected to the small intestine. The cecum is a large, thin-walled organ which is attached to the small intestine and colon. It is the largest organ in the abdominal cavity and acts as a fermentation vat for ingested fluids and particles.
- Rabbits cannot vomit due to the anatomical arrangement of the stomach, hence hairballs and other foreign bodies in the digestive tract pose a serious emergency.
- Because of their unique gastrointestinal anatomy, rabbits are very sensitive to foods high in sugar. Fruit is not appropriate. High sugar vegetables, such as baby carrots, bell pepper, tomatoes and corn should also be avoided. Yogurt drops and seed treats are not appropriate. **If a rabbit stops eating, even if it is only for 24 hours, this is a medical emergency, and he/she should be seen by a veterinarian as soon as possible.**
- All of a rabbit's teeth grow continuously. The main way the teeth are kept at their proper length, is through feeding high fiber hay such as timothy, which forces the cheek teeth to grind/occlude against each other. Wood chews are not safe and should not be used.

Housing:

- Cage size will vary depending on the size of the rabbit. If the cage bottom is wire, use 14 gauge wire mesh with mesh openings no greater than 1 x 2.5 cm, otherwise a rabbit may accidentally get a foot suck. At least half of the bottom should be solid to allow the bottoms of the feet to rest and to prevent sore hocks, which are pressure sores to the bottom of the feet.
- If using a solid bottom cage, appropriate bedding should be used to help soak up urine and feces. Avoid pine, cedar or any clay-based bedding or litter. Hard wood shavings or paper are appropriate. Whatever is selected, be sure the bedding is as dust free as possible.
- Rabbits can often be litter box trained. Use paper pelleted litter, and avoid clay-based litter, cedar or pine. The litter provided in the litter box should be different from what is used as bedding.

Diet:

- Clean, fresh water should always be available. Using a water bottle with a ball-valve is recommended. The bottles should be cleaned regularly. Brushes are available at most pet stores to clean water bottles. Compared with other animals, rabbits have a high water intake. A 4.5 pound rabbit will drink as much as a 22 pound dog.
- A high-quality rabbit pellet should be fed. Seed mixes are not appropriate, and may cause gastrointestinal upset, obesity and other disease.
- Rabbits should be free fed timothy hay. Alfalfa is not appropriate for pet rabbits, unless growing or nursing young. A small amount of leafy greens 10 – 15 percent of the diet, can be fed daily.
- If on a well-balanced diet, rabbits do not need supplements or salt licks. These may cause an imbalance of certain minerals and nutrients which may lead to health problems.

Spaying and Castration:

- Both sexes of rabbits should be neutered as both are susceptible to reproductive tumors. If healthy, both sexes can be neutered at 5-6 months of age.

Veterinary Care:

- Finding a good veterinarian is recommended. Rabbits should have routine physical exams every 6 months. Manifestation of a health condition is often rapid due to their fast metabolic rates, so early detection is important. Ideally, your rabbit should have an exam after purchase or adoption, and every 6 months after his or her first exam.