



Rabbit Care: Enrichment and Housing

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Cages and Your Rabbit's Environment

Often, well-meaning people describe rabbits as easy to keep because “they can be caged and don’t take up much space”. This idea has led to many rabbits being caged most of their lives with the distinct possibility of developing both physical and behavioral disorders. Bunnies have evolved to run, jump, and move about in large areas.

House rabbits should never be confined exclusively to their cage. Exercise, in addition to [a healthy diet](#), is vital for your pet rabbit's health.

To confine a rabbit exclusively to a cage can cause several problems:

- Obesity – caused most often by a diet too high in calories coupled with a lack of exercise;
- Pododermatitis - inflammation of the feet caused by sitting in a damp or dirty environment;
- Poor bone density - rabbits that are continually confined to a small cage can exhibit marked thinning of the bones, which may lead to more easily broken bones when handling;
- Poor muscle tone - if your rabbit can't exercise, the muscles, including the heart, will be underdeveloped and weak;
- Gastrointestinal and urinary function - a rabbit that sits all day in a cage with little exercise can develop abnormal elimination habits;
- Behavioral problems - continuously caged rabbits can show a wide range of abnormal behaviors, including lethargy, aggression, continual chewing of the cage bars, chewing fur (obsessive grooming), and destruction of the entire contents of the cage.

A cage can be a home base for part of the day or can be opened all the time within an exercise area. The cage should allow your rabbit to stand up on its hind legs without hitting the top, provide a resting area, and have space for a litter box. It should be easy to clean and indestructible, so metal is the best choice. The floor should be solid but covered with soft padding, such as a foam mat covered with fleece blankets.



Keep the cage in a well-ventilated, cool area. Basements are often too damp, which can promote respiratory disease. If you must house your pet in a basement, use a dehumidifier and a fan to improve the air quality. The ideal temperature range for a rabbit is 60°F to 70°F.

If temperatures reach the mid-80°Fs and beyond, especially with high humidity, your rabbit could potentially suffer a fatal heat stroke. On hot days when air conditioning is unavailable, leave a plastic milk jug filled with frozen water in the cage to use as a portable air conditioner and consider using a fan.



Rabbits can be caged outdoors if provided with a shelter to protect them from rain, heat, and cold. Rabbits tolerate the cold far better than the heat, and can rapidly suffer from fatal heatstroke if the temperature is greater than 85°F degrees.

Ensure your rabbit's cage is secure from predators such as dogs, coyotes, and raccoons and kept clean so it won't attract parasitic insects. In the winter, use straw or, ideally, hay bedding in the sheltered area for insulation and change the water bowl daily. Your pet can dehydrate rapidly if the water is frozen for even a day.

Exercise Areas

It is vital to your pet rabbit's health to provide an exercise area where they can roam for a few hours daily. The easiest way to accomplish this is to use exercise fencing panels sold for dogs. Sometimes referred to as "x-pens", these can be found at most pet stores. Buy fencing at least three feet high for small and medium rabbits and four feet high for giant breeds. These panels are easily assembled with metal pins and can be configured to any size or shape needed. The pen protects your bunny from furniture, electrical cords, and toxic materials.

The pen can also be used outside as a moveable enclosure to allow your pet access to grassy areas. Never leave a rabbit outside in a pen unsupervised or vulnerable to other animals. Large predatory birds are a concern when rabbits are not properly protected outside. Some rabbits may jump over or dig under the fence.

If you need to protect the floor under your rabbit's cage indoors, you can use a sheet of no-wax flooring, available at most hardware stores. It can be easily cleaned and rolled up when not in use. The soft foam squares used on playroom floors work well if your bunny uses the areas around its cage as a play yard. Cover the area with fleece blankets for extra softness and to keep your bunny from nibbling on the foam.

Safe Spaces Are Bunny-Proof

Many rabbits live uncaged in the homes with their human families, roaming the house and playing at will, returning to their open cages for food and water. If you want to allow your rabbit liberty in your home, it must be bunny-proofed to keep them safe. Block all escape routes; cover or block access to electrical and computer cords and charging cables; cover furniture to protect it from your rabbit's teeth and claws; remove access to toxic plants, rodenticides, insecticides, and other harmful materials.

Litter Boxes

Rabbits can be litter box trained relatively easily. When beginning training, confine your pet in a small area, either in a cage or a blocked-off section of the room, and place a litter box in the corner; try to pick the corner your pet has previously used for their toilet. Ensure the box's sides are low enough so your pet can get in and out easily.

To encourage defecation, droppings in the litter box on top of hay can sometimes be helpful. Rabbits will not eat soiled hay, so change the hay frequently and consider having a hay box on the side of the enclosure to allow access to unsoiled hay.

In exercise areas, provide one more litter box than the number of rabbits you have and put newspaper or plastic under the litter box to protect your floors from accidents.

Pelleted litter is the best for rabbits and is preferred over corncob, kitty litter, and wood shavings, which are considered toxic. Pelleted litter is non-toxic and digestible if eaten. It draws moisture away from the surface, keeping it drier, controls odor well, and can be composted. Do not use clay or clumping kitty litter, which, if eaten, can cause intestinal impacts. Many rabbit owners prefer the use of pine pellets.

Resting and Hiding Areas

The ancestors of pet rabbits would have spent a good part of their day in protected underground burrows. Pet rabbits retain the same need for a protected area where they feel safe and secure. Some rabbits are content to sit in a box full of hay, others like an enclosed box in which to hide. If your bunny seems to enjoy semi-enclosed safe spaces, try providing hiding places, such as untreated wicker or straw baskets, litter pans or other shallow boxes filled with hay, cardboard boxes with an entrance hole and the bottom removed, or large cardboard tubes.

Wire flooring in cages is not recommended, but most cages come with it. If your bunny's cage has one, you can make a solid and comfortable resting area by using washable or disposable materials that are also absorbent. Some examples might be fake fleece (not long fur) found in fabric stores or absorbent baby blankets (not terry cloth towels). Do not use carpet squares as they are not absorbent, are abrasive to your bunny's feet, and cannot be thoroughly cleaned. Carpet, if eaten, can cause abdominal obstruction.



Enrichment

Rabbits get a fair amount of mental exercise from their diet of grass hay and green foods, but additional toys are appreciated. Rabbits like to chew, so give them branches from untreated trees (dry the wood for at least a month to prevent any adverse reactions to the sap), wooden chew toys designed for birds, or unfinished, unpainted wicker or straw baskets.

Rabbits also enjoy things that move and can be chewed, such as empty paper towel rolls, small empty cardboard boxes, and small piles of shredded paper. Small, air-filled balls are also fun to nose around. Stacking-type toys made for young children are a safe choice and seem to be enjoyed by bunnies.

Toys can be made more interesting by hiding healthy treats inside empty toilet paper rolls and old tissue boxes. Stuff hay in your bunny's favorite hiding area. Giving your rabbit a sense that they are foraging for food is an excellent mental activity.

Handling

Depending on how calm your pet is, there are several ways to pick up your rabbit. The main thing to remember is to always support the hindquarters to prevent serious spinal injuries. A rabbit's backbones are fragile and can fracture if the hind legs are allowed to dangle, and if the rabbit then gives one strong kick. Unfortunately, these injuries are usually permanent and often result in euthanasia, so prevention is the best policy.

Never pick a rabbit up by their sensitive ears. It's painful and unnecessary. The proper way to pick up your bunny is to grasp the loose skin over the shoulders or scoop them up under the chest for support before lifting your bunny from the floor.

When first learning to handle your pet, work near the floor so that if they jump out of your arms, there isn't a chance of a fall.

Ask your veterinarian or an experienced rabbit handler about methods of handling rabbits. Some restraint methods are useful when your rabbit needs to be medicated. Wrapping your pet securely in a towel, often referred to as a "burrito", is one easy method, and your veterinarian can instruct you on the proper procedure.

Your veterinarian is always a good source of information to help you keep your pet rabbit healthy, happy, and enriched.



This handling technique is called a "burrito" and can be used when rabbits, as well as cats, need to be safely restrained.



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