

# BUNNY BASICS

## An Introduction to Rabbit Care



Rabbits make wonderful companions – they are bright, affectionate, inquisitive, gentle, and playful. Because they are highly social, rabbits enjoy the company of people, rabbits, and other animals. Historically rabbits were often kept in a hutch in the yard, where they tended to be neglected when the novelty wore off. Today, more and more people keep their rabbits indoors as true companions, where it is easier to meet their physical and social needs. With a little training, a rabbit can become a delightful addition to your household.



Providing a safe haven for abandoned, abused,  
and neglected domestic rabbits and others.

[www.rabbitsanctuary.org](http://www.rabbitsanctuary.org)



## **LIVING WITH A COMPANION BUNNY**

Caring for a rabbit is a big responsibility and extends to the whole of her life (up to 12 years or more for well caredfor rabbits). You may be surprised to hear that rabbits are not inexpensive, low maintenance pets and require quite a bit of time devoted to them, as well as regular veterinary check-ups. So before you adopt a rabbit, it is important to educate yourself about her needs and the work and expense involved.



## **AGE AND SIZE**

A well cared for rabbit can live an average of 8-12 years. There have even been cases of rabbits living beyond 12 years! Adult bunnies over a year old are easier to litter-train and less destructive, especially if they are spayed or neutered. They are also more likely to enjoy being petted because they are less active and energetic than baby rabbits. Rabbits range in size from dwarf, weighing as little as 2 1/2 pounds, all the way up to extra-large breeds like the Flemish Giant with an average weight of 13-16 lbs. Like people, each rabbit is an individual with a unique personality. Generally speaking, however, large rabbits tend to be more placid and easy-going than smaller breeds. They are also a better choice for a household with children as they will be less likely to be picked up and dropped (rabbits can easily break their back from a fall).



## **RABBITS AND CHILDREN**

Because rabbits are timid and sensitive animals, they are not very suitable for small children. Children want a pet they can hold and cuddle, while rabbits are ground-loving animals who prefer to be on the floor. Rabbits make excellent family pets provided that adults are the primary caregivers and are willing to supervise their children when they are with the rabbit.

## LITTER-TRAINING

Rabbits tend to urinate in just one or perhaps a few specific places and can be litter-trained at any age. However, adult rabbits are more easily trained than babies, who haven't yet figured out the desirability of keeping their waste matter away from their eating and sleeping areas. Also, many litter-trained young bunnies will start having "accidents" during their adolescence (up to about 1 1/2 years old).



Start with a small litter box in the rabbit's cage or living area and at least one litter box in every room the rabbit has access to. If your rabbit urinates on the floor, simply add another litter box in that location. Later, you will be able to remove boxes she uses less often.

The rabbit will often choose where the litter box should be placed, by eliminating in the place of his choice. If he chooses too public of a place for his litter box, use a covered cat box, or decorate a large cardboard box with wrapping paper and place it over the litter box. That way the bunny will have a place to play as well as a covered litter box. You can also slowly, over time, move the litter box to a more suitable location.

Some rabbit parents report good results with the new "sifting" pans made for cats. The litter goes in the bottom, then the sifting tray sits on top of it. Fecal matter and urine drain through to the bottom and the rabbit stays relatively clean. This is an important point, as many bunnies love to lounge and sleep in their litter boxes, so you must keep the box clean.

The safest litter for rabbits are those made from recycled newspapers or corn cobs (such as "Yesterday's News" and "Carefresh.") Newspapers covered with straw may also work. Plain clay cat litters are acceptable if your rabbit does not eat any of it, which can cause intestinal blockage and death. Never use clumping cat litters or litters with chemical deodorizers as these are extremely dangerous if ingested. Never use soft wood shavings such as pine or cedar, as studies have shown these to cause liver damage in rabbits and other small animals.

## CHEWING AND DIGGING

These are normal, natural and very pleasant activities for a bunny. Rabbits' teeth and toenails grow continuously so your bunny needs to chew and dig to keep them trimmed. To prevent excessive damage to your home, offer your rabbit acceptable chewing and shredding materials; e.g. newspapers or yellow pages, plain cardboard boxes, untreated wicker, and apple tree branches. A box filled with hay is often an exciting plaything for a rabbit, as well as nutritious. Telephone and electrical cords should be protected from bunny's teeth or he may be electrocuted. Clear plastic tubing may be purchased in the plumbing aisle of your hardware store. Split it lengthwise and then wrap it around the cord. Neutering your rabbit and providing interesting activities will help reduce destructive behavior. Again, adult rabbits are less destructive than juveniles.

## PLAYTIME

Toys are important to keep your bunny occupied and prevent damage to your home:

- Toys are important to keep your bunny occupied and prevent damage to your home:
- Closed cardboard box with at least two doors for hopping in and out
- Large clay or cardboard tube to hide in
- Chew toys: apple tree branch, pine cones, anything made of untreated straw, wicker, or seagrass (coasters, mats, baskets, etc.)
- Toss toys: cardboard roll from toilet paper, wire ball with a bell inside, plastic keys for babies, large Lego blocks, etc.
- Empty margarine tubs and lids
- A towel to dig in or drape over a chair for your bunny to run through
- Old telephone books and cardboard boxes to shred
- Box full of hay, straw, shredded paper, spare piece of carpeting or anything else your bunny likes to dig in



## FEEDING

An adult rabbit's diet should be comprised of fresh, leafy green vegetables, unlimited timothy hay (not alfalfa), and pellets in moderation. Fresh water should be available at all times. You can provide this in either a bottle or a bowl.

Rabbits enjoy leafy green vegetables; please see the following page for a partial list of greens that may be incorporated into a healthy rabbit diet. Because of a high sugar content, feed carrots and corn in moderation. The average rabbit should receive about 2 packed cups of greens per day, and at least 4-5 different types each day to ensure receiving all the necessary nutrients. Rabbits who have the opportunity to exercise do not generally overeat, so feed your rabbit as much vegetables as she will eat. A large rabbit will certainly need more than 2 cups per day; a dwarf breed will eat less. Fruits should be regarded as treats and not given everyday. You may also give your rabbit twigs from apple and pear trees – he will eat the bark – and edible straw baskets (untreated). Finally, if you have a safe, predator-proof, fenced yard and do not treat your lawn with fertilizers and herbicides, your rabbit will enjoy grazing on grass, clover, dandelions, and other wild plants. These are highly nutritious! Rabbits are most active in the early morning and then again in late afternoon up until dark, so these would be the best times to take your bunny outside for supervised play. Of course, if your rabbit cannot go outside, you may bring these wild plants inside to him.

Timothy hay should be available at all times. Rabbits have a sensitive digestive system, and the timothy hay helps keep that system healthy!

An average-sized adult rabbit generally should receive a 1/4 to 1/2 cup pellets per 6 lbs. of body weight (depending on metabolism and/or proportionate to veggies). A better choice for adult rabbits is a timothy hay-based pellet. Rabbits under a year old will be fine with unlimited alfalfa-based pellets, in addition to hay and leafy greens. Do not buy pellets with seeds, grains, or colored "treats" mixed in. These added ingredients are not healthy for rabbits, but are added because they look interesting to consumers. For young bunnies, and pregnant and lactating rabbits, choose an alfalfa-based pellet that is 16% protein.



# GOOD BUNNY FOOD!

Alfalfa Sprouts

Arugula

Asparagus

Basil

Beets and tops\*

Bok choy

Broccoli (mostly leaves/stems)\*

Brussel sprouts

Cabbage (very small amounts)

Carrot & carrot tops\*

Celery

Chard

Chives (in moderation)

Cilantro

Clover

Collard greens\*

Corn on Cob (sparingly)

Cucumber

Dandelion Greens

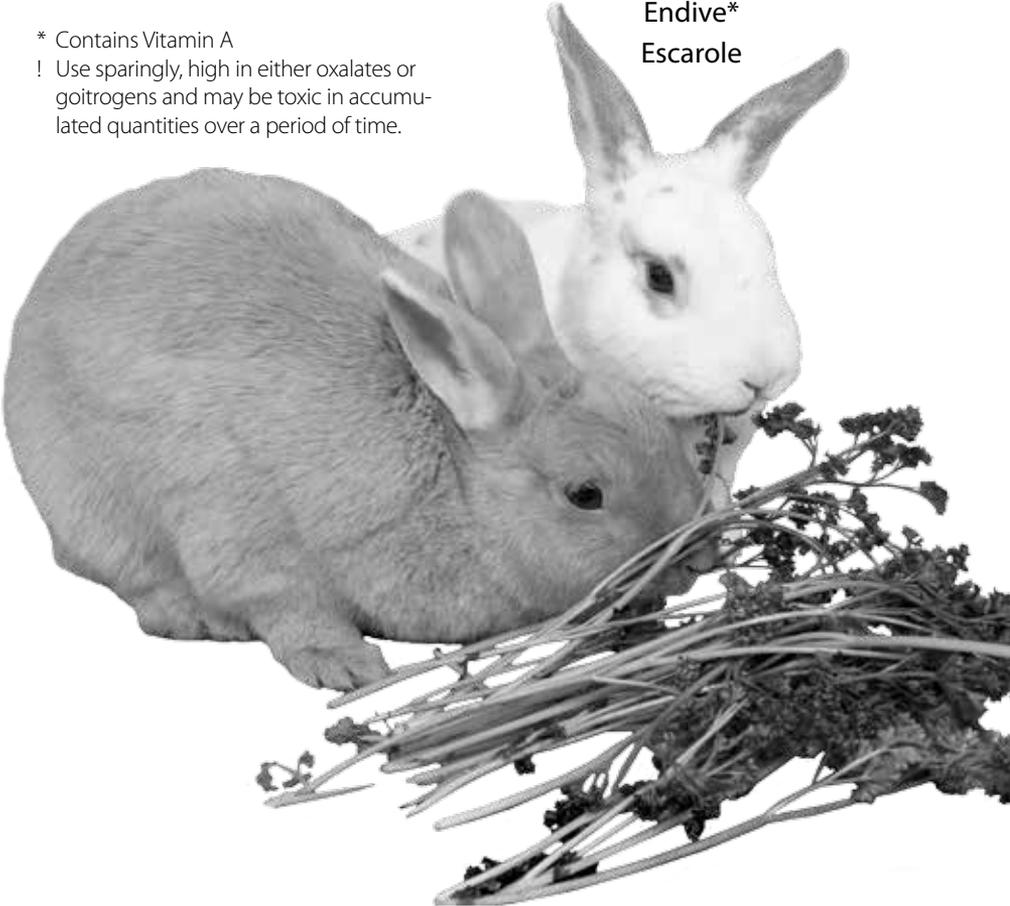
Dill

Endive\*

Escarole

\* Contains Vitamin A

! Use sparingly, high in either oxalates or goitrogens and may be toxic in accumulated quantities over a period of time.



Following is a partial list of plants, fruits, and vegetables that can be incorporated into a healthy rabbit diet. Make sure they are pesticide free! Select at least 4-5 kinds of vegetables daily; a variety is necessary in order to obtain the necessary nutrients, with one each day that contains Vitamin A.

Fennel	Pea Pods* (Chinese pea pods)
Frisee	Peppermint leaves
Green pepper	Radicchio
Green Leaf lettuce	Radish and tops
Kale !*	Romaine lettuce*
Kohlrabi	Red Leaf lettuce
Leaf Lettuce (not iceberg)	Sage
Lemon balm	Savory
Lilac	Spinach !*
Marigold	Spring Mix (Mesclun)
Marjoram	Tomato (fruit only; greens are toxic)
Mint	Turnip greens
Mustard greens*	Watercress*
Parsley*	Watermelon
Parsnips (not wild)	Wheat grass
	Zucchini

## GOOD BUNNY SNACK FOOD!

The following should only be GIVEN AS A TREAT,  
NO seeds or pits.

Apple (fruit and twigs, NO seeds)	Papaya (no seeds)
Banana	Peach
Blackberry (leaves, stems, fruit)	Pear
Blueberry	Pineapple
Cantaloupe	Plum
Grapes	Raspberry (leaves, stems, fruit)
Honeydew melon	Strawberry

The above list was compiled from the following sources:

Vegetables & Fruits ~ [www.adoptarabbit.com/articles/packet/abcvegi.html](http://www.adoptarabbit.com/articles/packet/abcvegi.html)  
Acceptable Fruits and Vegetables for Rabbits ~ [www.mybunny.org/info/fruitveg.htm](http://www.mybunny.org/info/fruitveg.htm)  
Suggested Vegetables ~ [www.rabbit.org/cgi-bin/print-article.cgi](http://www.rabbit.org/cgi-bin/print-article.cgi)

# RABBIT HABITATS



When it comes to cages and living areas, bigger is better. Rabbits need a lot of exercise, and small “rabbit” cages sold in pet stores are generally inadequate. The minimum recommended cage size is four times the rabbit’s full length when stretched out on her tummy, tip of nose to the end of her feet. A run should be at least 4’ x 10’ x 2’ high. The size of the run will depend on that of the rabbit and whether the bunny has access to a larger exercise area, e.g. a predator-proof, escape-proof yard (day-time only, with supervision), or one or more bunny-proofed rooms. Many house bunnies are completely free-running and do not have a cage at all. If you need to confine your rabbit you can simply put him in one bunny-proofed room and close the door as you would with a cat or dog, or use a baby gate so he can see out of the room. An alternative to a cage is portable fencing, such as the circular exercise pens sold for small dogs. A chair mat from an office supply store can serve as the floor – the heavy plastic is easy to clean. Also, plastic grating sold in storage departments of stores such as Target and office supply stores can be connected to each other with cable ties. These solutions allow a larger and usually less expensive habitat for a rabbit than does a pre-made cage.

## RABBITS NEED FRIENDS

Rabbits are social animals and need the company of human and/or animal friends. If you are away from your home during the day, it is essential that you provide her with a companion or she will get very lonely. Ideally, every rabbit should be paired with a second rabbit friend. The best combination is a neutered male and a spayed female. Let them meet each other on neutral territory, and expect some chasing and even fighting. Be prepared to separate them if necessary. A male-female pair will usually fall in love with each other within a week or two. They will become companions for life, snuggling, grooming each other, and playing together. Two females can sometimes be successfully introduced, but it is unlikely, though not unheard of, that two males will bond. Rabbits can also become good friends with guinea pigs, well-behaved cats, and some dogs. Neutering will minimize fighting. Supervise introductions carefully and do not leave your animals alone together until you are certain it is safe to do so.



## HOLDING A RABBIT

Most bunnies do not like to be held and prefer to sit next to you to be petted. However, there are times when you must pick up your rabbit, so it is a good idea for an adult to practice lifting and setting down their bunny. To pick up a small bunny, put one hand behind her forelegs and one under her bottom and scoop toward you. To pick up a large rabbit, do the same but lift facing away from you. Hold the back feet securely in your hand to prevent kicking. NEVER lift a rabbit by the ears. Picking a rabbit up by the scruff of the neck can also be dangerous as the rabbit can easily injure himself if he kicks. Take care when putting your bunny down as he may leap in anticipation. The best way is to bend your knees, squat down, and gently release him. Follow this exercise with praise and a food reward so your rabbit will see this as a positive experience.

## NEUTERING & SPAYING

Neutering or spaying your rabbit is one of the best things you can do to help him or her live a long, happy, and healthy life. It prevents unwanted litters and enables two rabbits to live together as a pair. Neutering also improves litter-training, prevents spraying, reduces destructive and aggressive behavior, and generally makes your rabbit calmer and easier to manage. Furthermore, some studies suggest that a majority of female rabbits will eventually develop cancer of the reproductive system if they are not spayed. It is a lower-risk operation, provided it is done by an experienced rabbit veterinarian.

## HEALTH CHECKS

In the United States there are no vaccines that are approved or recommended for rabbits. However, it is still a good idea to take your rabbit(s) to the vet for a yearly check-up. It is also important that you examine your bunny every week for possible health problems. Rabbits are fragile and tend to hide signs of illness. Do not delay in getting your rabbit to a veterinarian experienced with pet rabbits immediately if anything seems in the least bit wrong. Look out for:

- red or scaly brown patches inside the ears (ear mites)
- flaking skin anywhere; looks like dandruff (fur mites)
- acting lethargic
- loud stomach noises
- loss of appetite or failure to have normal bowel movements (in regard to size, consistency, or quantity)
- a discharge from the eyes or nose, or persistent sneezing (rabbits do not get colds, so these symptoms can indicate serious illness)
- wet chin
- overgrown teeth
- wet fur on the inside of the front paws
- loss of fur and sores on the bottom of the rabbit's feet
- overgrown nails (these can be trimmed with a cat nail clipper)
- wounds, swellings, bumps and signs of parasites
- a dirty bottom
- head tilt, paralysis of a limb, unsteadiness, white spots or cloudy area(s) in eye
- anything unusual in your bunny's appearance or behavior (e.g. unwilling to move, glazed look, loud grinding of teeth)

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

### **Great Lakes Rabbit Sanctuary**

A sanctuary for abandoned, neglected and abused rabbits and others. Rabbits in the Adopt a Rabbit program are in need of good homes. All rabbits adopted out are spayed or neutered.

PO Box 7 · Whittaker, MI 48160

info@rabbitsanctuary.org · [www.rabbitsanctuary.org](http://www.rabbitsanctuary.org)

### **House Rabbit Society**

A rabbit rescue organization that fosters rescued rabbits until a permanent home can be found. Chapters across the country. \$18 membership includes the quarterly "House Rabbit Journal." The website offers a wealth of information about all aspects of caring for a house rabbit.

PO Box 1201 · Alameda, CA 94501

[www.rabbit.org](http://www.rabbit.org)

### **Online Rabbit Information:**

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|--------------------------|--|
| Hay and timothy pellets: | <a href="http://www.oxbowhay.com">www.oxbowhay.com</a><br><a href="http://www.americanpetdiner.com">www.americanpetdiner.com</a><br><a href="http://www.kmshayloft.com">www.kmshayloft.com</a>   |
| Things for bunnies:      | <a href="http://www.bunnyluv.com">www.bunnyluv.com</a><br><a href="http://www.leithpetwerks.com">www.leithpetwerks.com</a><br><a href="http://www.busybunny.com">www.busybunny.com</a><br><a href="http://www.bunnybytes.com">www.bunnybytes.com</a><br><a href="http://www.bunnybunchboutique.com">www.bunnybunchboutique.com</a><br><a href="http://www.catsandrabbitsandmore.com">www.catsandrabbitsandmore.com</a> |
| For rabbit care:         | <a href="http://www.rabbit.org">www.rabbit.org</a>   |

## RECOMMENDED VETERINARIANS:

Most veterinarians do not see many rabbit patients and learned little about them in vet school. It is important that all rabbit owners locate an experienced rabbit veterinarian before the need for a visit arises. If you have no idea as to which vets in your area are rabbit experts, look for veterinarians specializing in “exotics” in the yellow pages, and call and ask if they specialize in rabbits. Ask them what kind of diet they recommend – if they say rabbit pellets only, go elsewhere! Keep in mind that common drugs used in dogs and cats, such as amoxicillin, can kill rabbits, so you want to be positive your veterinarian has received specialized training in rabbit care. Following is a list of veterinarians that GLRS uses and have had positive experiences with, or have received positive feedback on from other “rabbit people.”

### In the Ann Arbor area:

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#### **All Creatures Animal Clinic**

Dr. Lyssa Alexander  
Dr. Holly Zechar  
3382 Washtenaw Ave.  
Ann Arbor, MI 48104  
(734) 973-1884

#### **Ann Arbor Animal Hospital**

(open 24/7)  
2150 W. Liberty  
Ann Arbor, MI 48103  
(734) 662-4474

#### **Easthaven Animal Hospital**

2140 Huron Parkway  
Ann Arbor, MI 48104  
(734) 971-3444

#### **Animal Kingdom**

Dr. Vickie Marsh  
4920 Ann Arbor Saline Rd  
Ann Arbor, MI 48103  
(734) 913-0003

### In the Monroe area:

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#### **River Raisin Veterinary Clinic**

124 N. Monroe St  
Monroe, MI 48162  
(734) 243-4222

### In the Toledo area:

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#### **Bird & Exotic Pet Wellness**

Dr. Susan Orosz  
5166 Monroe Suite 305  
Toledo, OH 43623  
(419) 843-3137

### In Lansing:

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#### **Eastside Animal Hospital**

Dr. Mary Seager  
2643 Grand River  
East Lansing, MI 48823  
(517) 332-2511

#### **Cedar Creek Veterinary Clinic**

Dr. Wayne Beasley  
2295 N. Williamston Rd  
Williamston, MI 48895  
(517) 655-3968

## In Metro Detroit:

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### **Canton Center Animal Hospital**

Dr. Harr  
5900 Canton Center Rd  
Canton, MI  
(734) 459-1400

### **Parkway Small Animal & Exotic Clinic**

Drs. Golombek and Bankstahl  
39321 Garfield  
Clinton Twp, MI 48038  
(586) 416 8800

### **Vet Select Animal Hospitals**

Dr. Rearick  
2150 Novi Rd  
Novi, MI 48377  
(248) 624-1100

### **VetSelect Animal Hospital**

Dr. Andrea Maceri  
1010 W Oakley Park  
Commerce Twp, MI 48390  
(248) 926-9696

### **Snider Veterinary Service**

Dr. Andrew Snider  
39930 Garfield Rd  
Clinton Twp, MI 48038  
(586) 286-5684

### **East Detroit Animal Hospital**

Dr. Bryone Hagewood  
24506 Gratiot  
Eastpointe, MI 48021  
(586) 776-5011

### **Warren Woods Veterinary Hospital**

Dr. Julie Cappel  
29157 Schoenherr  
Warren, MI 48088  
(586) 751-3350

## Emergency Clinics:

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### **Ann Arbor Animal Hospital**

(open 24/7)  
2150 W. Liberty  
Ann Arbor, MI 48103  
(734) 662-4474

### **Veterinary Emergency Services**

Madison Hts., MI 48071  
(248) 547-4677

### **Vet Care Specialists**

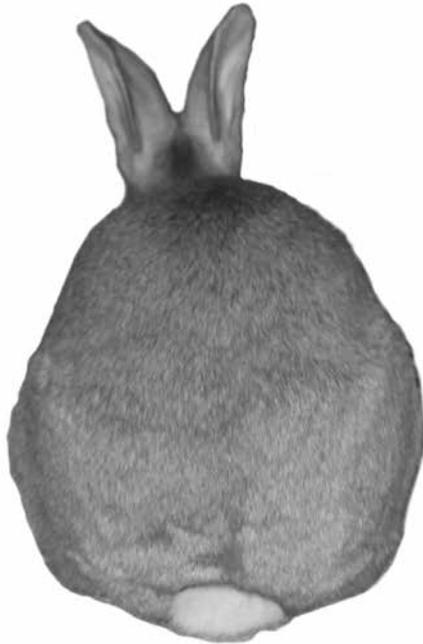
205 Rowe Road  
Milford, MI 48380  
(248) 684-0468

### **Animal Emergency Center**

(open 24/7)  
24255 Novi Rd  
Novi, MI 48375  
(248) 348-1788

### **Animal Emergency Center**

265 E 2nd Street  
Rochester, MI 48307  
(248) 651-1788



Was this pamphlet helpful to you? If so, please make a tax-deductible donation to Great Lakes Rabbit Sanctuary so that we may continue to produce free hand-outs like this.

Through education, there will be fewer rabbits in need of rescue in the future.

Send your check or money order to:

Great Lakes Rabbit Sanctuary

PO Box 7

Whittaker, MI 48190

or make a donation online at [www.rabbitsanctuary.org](http://www.rabbitsanctuary.org)

We are supported through donations from individuals like you.

Thumps of Thanks from the rabbits!