

# 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, people keep their rabbits indoors as true companions, just like cats and dogs, where it is easier to meet their physical and social needs. With a little training and understanding, 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)



# What Should I Know When Considering a Pet Rabbit?

## **A Rabbit is a Commitment**

Caring for a rabbit is a big responsibility and extends to the whole of her life, which can be up to 12 years or even more when the rabbit is well cared for. You may be surprised to hear that rabbits are not inexpensive, low maintenance pets. They 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.



## Lifespan 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 are less destructive, especially when 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 the dwarf breeds, 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 easygoing 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 be easily injured from a fall.



## Space and Socialization

Gone are the days of keeping rabbits in hutches outside! A general rule of thumb is that rabbits should have a living space of 12 sq ft, and they also need to be let out of that space for exercise time each day. Many people choose to let their rabbit free roam in the house, just as a dog or cat would. Whichever method you choose, you will need to make sure that the places the rabbit has access to are completely bunny proofed because even the most well-behaved rabbit likes to do an exploratory nibble sometimes!



Rabbits are highly social animals, which means you will need to spend time with them daily. If they are ignored, they can get depressed or sick. Even if you have a bonded pair of rabbits, they still require attention from you.

## Rabbits and Children

Even though pet rabbits are domesticated, they still retain the prey instincts of a wild rabbit. This means they are often afraid of people standing over them, sudden movements, loud noises, and rough interactions. Because rabbits are timid and sensitive animals, they are not very suitable for small children. Children want a pet they can pick up, hold, and cuddle, while rabbits feel most secure with all paws 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.

# How Do I Care for My Rabbit?

## 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, though most rabbits prefer bowls as it enables a more natural drinking position. A good breakdown to follow is 80% hay, 10% fresh greens, 5% high quality pellets, and 5% healthy treats.



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. 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 many vegetables as she will eat. A large rabbit will certainly need more than 2 cups per day, but a dwarf breed will eat less. Fruits and sugary vegetables such as carrots should be regarded as treats and not given everyday - a baby carrot, a strawberry, or an inch of banana is plenty. You may also give your rabbit twigs from apple and pear trees (he will eat the bark) and edible straw baskets or mats (untreated). Finally, if you have a safe, predator-proof fenced yard, do not treat your lawn with fertilizers and herbicides, and have some time to sit outside with your rabbit to supervise them, 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 cup pellets per 4 lbs. of body weight (depending on metabolism and/or proportionate to veggies). A better choice for adult rabbits is a timothy hay-based pellet. Oxbow is a good brand with a lower fat and high fiber content. 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. Plain brown pellets are the way to go, and you will find that your rabbit will be very eager for them no matter what!

# Good Bunny Food!

## Leafy Greens and Vegetables

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.

|                            |                                       |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Alfalfa Sprouts            | Marigold                              |
| Arugula                    | Marjoram                              |
| Asparagus                  | Mint                                  |
| Basil                      | Mustard greens*                       |
| Beets and tops*            | Parsley*                              |
| Bok choy                   | Parsnips (not wild)                   |
| Brussel sprouts            | Pea Pods* (Chinese pea pods)          |
| Carrot tops*               | Peppermint leaves                     |
| Chard                      | Radicchio                             |
| Cilantro                   | Radish and tops                       |
| Clover                     | Romaine lettuce*                      |
| Collard greens*            | Red Leaf lettuce                      |
| Corn on Cob (sparingly)    | Sage                                  |
| Cucumber                   | Savory                                |
| Dandelion Greens           | Spinach !*                            |
| Dill                       | Spring Mix (Mesclun)                  |
| Endive*                    | Tomato (fruit only; greens are toxic) |
| Escarole                   | Turnip greens                         |
| Fennel                     | Watercress*                           |
| Frisee                     | Watermelon                            |
| Green pepper               | Wheat grass                           |
| Green Leaf lettuce         | Zucchini                              |
| Kale !*                    |                                       |
| Kohlrabi                   |                                       |
| Leaf Lettuce (not iceberg) |                                       |
| Lemon balm                 |                                       |
| Lilac                      |                                       |

\*Contains Vitamin A

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



## Healthy Bunny Treats

The following should only be given as a treat—NO seeds or pits.

Apple (fruit and twigs, NO seeds)

Banana

Blackberry (leaves, stems, fruit)

Blueberry

Cantaloupe

Carrot

Grapes

Honeydew Melon

Papaya (no seeds)

Peach

Pear

Pineapple

Plum

Raspberry (leaves, stems, fruit)

Strawberry (fruit and tops)



## Living Space

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 living area size is four times the rabbit's full length when stretched out on her tummy, tip of nose to the end of her feet—12 square feet is generally considered adequate space, but that can vary depending on the size of the rabbit. The rabbit should also be able to stand up and stretch without touching the top of enclosure, which is another reason cages are generally inadvisable. A popular alternative to a cage is portable fencing, such as the circular exercise pens sold for small dogs. A cut of by-the-foot vinyl or a chair mat from an office supply store can serve as the floor if you want to protect your flooring as they are easy to clean, but make sure to cover some areas with blankets or towels as cushioning for your rabbit's feet.

## Exercise Space

Rabbits need lots of space for exercise so they can stretch their legs and run! The size of the exercise area 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 (daytime only, with supervision), or one or more bunny-proofed rooms. The recommended size for an exercise area is a minimum of 4' x 10'.

Many house bunnies are completely free-roaming 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.

For more ideas on appropriate living space for rabbits, check out this Pinterest board for inspiration: <https://pin.it/3AevO4Q>

## Litter Training

Rabbits like to stay clean and tend to urinate in just one or perhaps a few specific places, and can be litter trained at any age. Adult rabbits are easier to train than babies, and spayed and neutered rabbits are much more successful than those that aren't.

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. You can also soak up/pick up any elimination outside the litter box and place it into the litter box so that your rabbit recognizes it as a good place to do her business.

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.

The safest litter for rabbits are those made from recycled newspapers or corn cobs (such as "Yesterday's News" and "Carefresh.") Another great option is hard wood pellets (for wood burning stoves), which are highly absorbent and cost effective. Newspapers covered with straw may also work - just make sure your rabbit isn't sitting directly in urine or feces as that can damage their feet.

Avoid cat litter, especially 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.

For more tips on litter training your rabbit, visit <https://myhouserabbit.com/rabbit-care/litter-training-your-pet-rabbit/>

# What Should I Know About Rabbit Behavior?

## 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 such as: newspapers (but leave out the shiny advertisements), 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. All electrical cords should be protected from bunny's teeth or he may be electrocuted. To protect them, look for CritterCord, split loom, or other cord protectors at your local hardware store. Even if you think you have cords out of harm's way, they are irresistible to bunnies and they WILL find a way to get at them! 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, provide mental stimulation, and prevent damage to your home. Here are a few ideas:

- 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, anything made of untreated straw, wicker, or seagrass (coasters, mats, baskets, etc.)
- Toss toys: cardboard roll from toilet paper, ball with a bell inside, plastic keys for babies, large Lego blocks, etc.
- 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, or anything else your bunny likes to dig in
- Safety note: If your rabbit enjoys plastic toys, make sure she is not chewing on them and ingesting the plastic

# How do I Interact with My Rabbit?

## 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 most the day, it is best to have two bonded rabbits so they can provide each other with company. If you currently have one rabbit and are considering a companion, many rabbit rescues provide a ‘speed dating’ or ‘meet and greet’ service in which they can help you select a likely companion for your rabbit. If you go this route, you will need to be prepared to bond them, which takes daily work for about a month and sometimes longer. In order to bond, both rabbits must be spayed/neutered. If you are interested in learning more about bonding, please see the “For More Information” section at the end of this booklet.

While most rabbits enjoy rabbit companionship, it is important to note that there are some who decidedly prefer to be single—in which case it is very important that you take time to interact with them each day.

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 picked up and held. Instead, they 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.

## **Positive Interactions**

While rabbits can be trained to accept being picked up and put down, there are other interactions they naturally prefer. Slow, quiet, calm movements are always best. Standing over them can make them nervous, so try getting down on their level by sitting or laying on the floor. The best method is to let them come to you, because if you try to follow them they will interpret it as being chased. Most rabbits cannot resist someone laying on the floor and will come to sniff you over and even hop on your back! You can play with them this way as well. Many rabbits enjoy grabbing and throwing things around, so try placing a toy or toilet paper roll in front of them, let them throw it, and repeat. If your rabbit is on the timid side, give them a little treat every time they approach you to let them know that interaction with you is a positive thing.

# What Can I Do to Keep My Rabbit Healthy?

## Neutering & Spaying

Neutering or spaying your rabbit is one of the best things you can do to help them 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, many 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. If you choose to adopt from a rescue, you should still check with them but it is very likely that your rabbit will already be spayed/neutered.

## Health Checks

You should do regular monthly health checks on your rabbit that include a nail trim, a thorough grooming, and checking their skin, eyes, ears, and genital area to see if there's anything out of the ordinary. Weighing them each month is a good idea as well so you can more easily track any concerning changes in weight. Checking their ears, eyes, and skin weekly is always a good idea too.

You should also take your rabbit(s) to the vet for a yearly wellness check as vets are able to notice things that we don't always catch. 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, or 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)

**One of the biggest culprits of rabbit illness is GI stasis.** This occurs when your rabbit either has a blockage in the digestive system, or when the digestive system shuts itself down. This is very dangerous and rabbits can die quickly if left untreated. It can be caused by a number of things including stress, poor diet, changed diet, dehydration, and pain from an unrelated issues. If you notice even one of the following symptoms, you should schedule a vet visit right away:

- shows little or no interest in food
- has small droppings or hasn't been producing any droppings at all
- sits somewhat unnaturally with an inward look in their eyes and has little to no reaction when you interact with them
- continuously lays down and gets back up again to try to find a comfortable position

If your vet can't see your rabbit within the next day or so, try other clinics. If that fails, take them to a rabbit-experienced emergency vet.



# For More Information

## Great Lakes Rabbit Sanctuary

A sanctuary for abandoned, neglected and abused rabbits and others. All rabbits adopted out are spayed or neutered.

PO Box 7 · Whittaker, MI 48160 | [www.rabbitsanctuary.org](http://www.rabbitsanctuary.org)

## House Rabbit Society

A rabbit rescue organization with chapters across the country. 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:

GLRS Rabbit 101 (Pinterest Board) <https://pin.it/4PNCsI8>

Hay and timothy pellets:

[www.oxbowhay.com](http://www.oxbowhay.com)

[www.americanpetdiner.com](http://www.americanpetdiner.com)

[www.kmshayloft.com](http://www.kmshayloft.com)

Things for bunnies:

[www.bunnyluv.com](http://www.bunnyluv.com)

[www.leithpetwerks.com](http://www.leithpetwerks.com)

[www.busybunny.com](http://www.busybunny.com)

[www.bunnybytes.com](http://www.bunnybytes.com)

[www.bunnybunchboutique.com](http://www.bunnybunchboutique.com)

[www.catsandrabbitsandmore.com](http://www.catsandrabbitsandmore.com)

Bonding:

<https://binkybunny.com/infocategory/bonding/>

<https://www.ohiohouserabbitrescue.org/bondingbunnies>

<https://smallpetselect.com/rabbit-bonding-hardest-part/>

# 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” 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 either GLRS uses and have had positive experiences with, or have received positive feedback from other rabbit owners.

## 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

**City Pets**  
1723 Plymouth Rd  
Ann Arbor, MI 48105  
(734) 929-4071

**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

**MiVet**  
Dr. Jennifer Azofeifa  
Dr. Anna Calderon  
7091 Dexter Ann Arbor Rd  
Dexter, MI 48130  
(734) 388-0102

## 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

**River Raisin Veterinary Clinic**  
124 N. Monroe St  
Monroe, MI 48162  
(734) 243-4222

## **In Metro Detroit:**

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### **Alsager Animal Care Center**

Dr. Fear  
44262 Warren Rd  
Canton, MI 48187  
(734) 459-5070

### **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

### **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

### **VetSelect Animal Hospitals**

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

### **East Detroit Animal Hospital**

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

### **Warren Woods Veterinary Hospital**

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

## **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

## **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



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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!