



Rabbit Care Quick Guide

Husbandry & Diet Information

Fast facts about rabbits

- ❖ Lifespan: average 7-12 years
- ❖ Their large ears give them an excellent sense of hearing. They also serve as a way for them to regulate their temperature!
- ❖ Rabbits have a digestive tract adapted for digesting large amounts of fiber that is required in their diets. Their digestion more closely resembles a horse than a dog or cat!
- ❖ Like rodents, rabbit teeth grow continuously throughout their lives. They may need periodic trimming by your veterinarian if their occlusion is abnormal.

Enclosure

BUNNY PROOFING:

Rabbits love to chew and can be very destructive to the house and furniture. Rabbits should never be allowed in areas that are not first safety-proofed due to chance of injury.

- ❖ Block all escape routes
- ❖ Cover or block access to electrical cords
- ❖ Cover furniture to protect it from teeth and claws
- ❖ Remove access to toxic plants, rodenticides, insecticides, and other toxic materials
- ❖ Carpets/rugs as some bunnies will chew these

It is important to remember that bunny proofing is always an ongoing process as they figure out how to get past the bunny barriers, causing you to have to get even more creative!

Cage/exercise area:

House rabbits should never be kept completely confined to a cage – exercise is vital for their health. The cage should allow your rabbit to stand up on their hind legs without hitting the top of the cage, provide a rest area, and have space for a litter box. The enclosure should be easy to clean and indestructible! This can be used for home base for part of the day, or it can be open all the time within a bunny proofed room or exercise area (a dog exercise pen, commonly referred to as an x-pen, works well for an open exercise area). Enclosures should be in a well-ventilated area to help prevent respiratory disease. The pen can be used outside as a movable enclosure to allow your pet access to grassy areas. Never leave a rabbit outside in a pen unsupervised due to predators!

***Here at Brook-Falls Veterinary Hospital and Exotic Care, we do not support housing rabbits outdoors for any reason. We believe rabbits should be housed indoors only for a variety of reasons including outdoor predators, insects which carry disease/parasites (fleas) and can cause disease (flystrike), weather extremes, and the recent emergence of Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease Virus in the United States.*

Litter box training:

Like cats, rabbits can quickly learn to use a litter box. Make sure the sides of the box are low enough that they can get in and out with ease. If you're just starting out litter training, it can be helpful to put some droppings in the litter box, so they know that it's where they belong. Some people find it helpful to put some hay in the box as well. This can encourage defecation as they often pass stool while eating. Wood or paper pellet litter makes the best litter box substrates and is preferred over wood shavings, corncob, and kitty litter. These can cause health issues, such as respiratory disease or obstruction, later in life. Pelleted litters are non-toxic and can be digested if eaten, draw away moisture from the surface, and control odor. Do not use clay or clumping kitty litter – we have seen rabbits get intestinal blockage when using this litter. Tip: Rabbits often choose their own corner to be a “potty spot”, place a litter box where they tend to go frequently.

Toys/enrichment:

Rabbits get a fair amount of mental exercise from their diet of grass hay and green foods, but additional toys are appreciated. They like things that can be both moved and chewed. A cheap, easy, and safe way to achieve this is to use toilet paper/paper towel rolls, small empty cardboard cartons and small piles of shredded paper. For additional enrichment you can add in healthy treats, stuff hay in hiding areas, toilet paper rolls, and old tissue boxes. Giving a rabbit a sense that they are foraging for their food is an excellent mental activity! If you are looking for additional toys, Oxbow is a brand that we recommend because it is made of safe materials for rabbits.

Diet

Fun fact: the only food item that rabbits need to thrive is unlimited hay! Since their teeth continuously grow, this helps keep them at a healthy length and keeps their fiber needing guts moving.

If your rabbit is *less than 6 months old*, a mixture of alfalfa/timothy hay should be available as free choice. Alfalfa is too high in calcium for older rabbits and can lead to bladder stones and obesity. Rabbits under 6 months old can be offered unlimited alfalfa pellets for the calcium content. This helps their growing bodies!

A high-quality timothy rabbit pellet (other rodent pellets can not be substituted, rabbits can not get guinea pig pellets!) can be offered. Tip: Most rabbits do better when these are just used as treats!

If you do choose to feed pellets here are some recommendations:

- ❖ Pellets should ideally be 10% of a healthy rabbit's diet (no more than ¼ cup per 5lbs of weight)
- ❖ 18% or higher in fiber
- ❖ 2.5% or lower in fat
- ❖ 16% or less in protein
- ❖ 1% or less in calcium
- ❖ DO NOT buy pellet mixes that also contain seeds, dried fruits, or nuts. Rabbits will usually selectively eat these items that are higher in fat which could lead to obesity. Think of trail mix, you like to eat all the M&Ms first before you eat the raisins!

Pellets can even be fed in a treat ball, which encourages added exercise as your rabbit pushes the ball around the floor to get the pellets out.

A handful of vegetables can be offered daily (see shopping guide below) and should be about 20% of your rabbit's diet.

Remember that rabbits are designed to live primarily on a diet of grasses and leaves; therefore, grass hay can provide a good portion of that diet!

While hay should be offered at all times, we recommended feeding veggies twice daily to ensure your rabbit is eating well.

Rabbits do not need any additional vitamins added to their diet.

Water should be offered at all times. It can be offered in a dish or a sipper bottle. Sipper bottles need to be checked frequently to make sure they are not clogged with food debris. Make sure they are cleaned at least once weekly.

Master Rabbit Grocery List

Good to Feed!	Feed Sparingly*	NEVER Feed**
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Alfalfa Sprouts o Arugula o Baby Greens o Basil o Celery Leaves o Cilantro o Dill o Endive o Escarole o Fennel o Frisee Lettuce o Mine o Radicchio o Raspberry Leaves o Red/Green Leaf Lettuce o Spring Greens o Watercress o Wheatgrass o Bok Choy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Beet Greens o Bell Pepper o Bok Choy o Borage o Carrot Tops o Chicory o Kale o Mustard Greens o Parsley o Radish Tops o Spinach o Sprouts (from 1-6 days of sprouting) o Swiss Chard o Turnip Greens o Dock 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Beans o Bread o Cereal o Chocolate o Corn o Grain o Nuts o Peas o Refined Sugars o Seeds o Wheat o Yogurt drops (and other commercial rabbit treats)

*High calcium foods can lead to bladder stones.

**High carbohydrate foods such as oatmeal, breads, crackers, and cereals can cause problems in the gut leading to GI stasis and diarrhea.

Rare Treat foods	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Apple (no stem or seeds) o Apricot (no pit) o Banana (no more than ¼ in slice per day, no peel) o Berries o Carrots o Currants o Kiwi 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Pea Pods (no peas) o Pear o Pineapple o Plum o Mango o Nectarine (no pit) o Squash

Vaccinations

Currently there is only one vaccination for rabbits in the United States. Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease Virus entered the United States in 2020 and is a highly contagious and deadly disease affecting wild and domestic rabbits. We strongly recommend this vaccination for all rabbits, even indoor only rabbits.

Common Diseases of Rabbits

“Snuffles” or Pasteurella bacterium: Clinical signs are usually related to the eyes and nose (discharge, redness, squinting, sneezing). Housing your rabbit in a well-ventilated area and keeping their cage clean will help prevent respiratory infections. Most cases are mild but need to be addressed by a veterinarian to get the appropriate treatment.

Hairballs: These are relatively common in rabbits, as they are very clean animals and love to groom themselves! Diagnosis can be made by taking x-rays of the stomach. Hairballs are best treated medically with certain medications, fluid therapy, and force feeding to help encourage the hairball to pass through the intestinal tract. Rarely, surgery is needed to remove the hairball.

Parasites: Like dogs and cats, rabbits can contract various intestinal parasites, especially if they roam outside (supervised) in the grass. Yearly microscopic fecal exams will allow easy diagnosis and treatment of intestinal parasites. They can also get external parasites such as fleas, ticks, mange, and ear mites. If you take your rabbit outside, we can prescribe a topical external parasite protectant that is specially compounded for rabbits in our hospital.

Uterine Cancer: Female rabbits should be spayed early in life (by 4-6 months of age). Intact female rabbits often develop a type of uterine cancer called uterine adenocarcinoma. This is treated surgically by spaying the rabbit, but there is always a chance the cancer may have spread by the time it is diagnosed. Some studies show that there is an 80% chance of uterine cancer by the age of 6 years old!

“Sore Hocks”: This is a condition that is fairly unique to rabbits. Treatment requires certain medications to clear possible infection and reduce inflammation. Providing soft bedding is essential to allow the sores to heal. When caught early, the hocks can usually be treated without much effort. However, this can easily become a chronic, difficult-to-treat condition if not addressed.

Diarrhea: This is a very dangerous condition in rabbits. There are many things that can cause diarrhea in rabbits such as parasites, improper diet, and medication sensitivity. If your rabbit is experiencing diarrhea, it needs to be seen by your veterinarian **as soon as possible**.

GI stasis: Gastrointestinal stasis is when the rabbit’s gut slows down or stops completely usually due to decreased appetite. Stasis is not a medical condition but a sign of an underlying medical problem such as excessive gas, dental disease, or pain somewhere in the body. Diagnostic testing such as x-rays or bloodwork is always indicated to look for the underlying abnormality.