

## **Basic Rabbit Care**

This web page contains basic information for the care of rabbits. For more detailed information, please consult other professional resources such as your veterinarian or one of the many books available about rabbit care.

Rabbits are intelligent social animals who require caring, attentive and affectionate keepers. Their average life span, depending on size and breed, is generally between 7 to 12 years. They are exceptionally clean animals that can easily be house trained and nurtured to become affectionate companions.

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## **Spaying & neutering**

Each year, Oshawa Animal Services receives many stray, unwanted rabbits. Spaying and neutering are surgeries that will prevent rabbits from being able to reproduce. If you adopt a rabbit, please have your rabbit spayed or neutered. The procedure can be done as young as 4½ months of age. Consult your veterinarian if your rabbit is 5 years or older. Having the surgery done will not only prevent unwanted litters but spaying or neutering will also:

- Prevent your rabbit from spraying urine to mark territory;
- Decrease aggressive behaviours such as biting, lunging, circling and growling;
- Make litter box training easier;
- Prevent cancers from developing – almost 80% of unspayed females will develop uterine cancer.

## Housing

Oshawa Animal Services recommends that like all pets, rabbits should be kept indoors where they can be cared for, played with, and become part of the family. The exact amount of space your rabbit will need depends on the size and breed of your rabbit — the more space the better. For the average Netherland Dwarf rabbit, your cage should be not less than 3.5 feet long by 2 feet wide by 2 feet high. In general, your rabbit's cage should be big enough to fit a hide-away (covered area for resting and hiding), food and water bowls, a litter box and still allow your rabbit to take three hops from end to end. Consider a cage that is made of a non-chewable material (e.g., metal or hard plastic) with a door that opens from the side rather than the top, that way, when getting her exercise, your rabbit can run (or be herded) into her own cage and not always be forced into her "prison cell." The floor of the cage or hutch should be solid as wire mesh can hurt rabbit feet. Enrich the cage with toys (e.g., paper bags, cat toys or hard plastic baby toys) and things to chew (e.g., mats, baskets or balls made of untreated maize, seagrass or willow). Provide fresh hay or wood shavings (such as aspen) for bedding. You can also use a blanket as bedding.

Be sure to clean out bedding as it becomes soiled or damp. Clean out your rabbits cage and litter box weekly. White vinegar is an excellent agent in getting the smell and stains from urine out of the cage and litter box.

## Food & water

Rabbits are herbivores, meaning they eat only grasses, vegetables and fruit. Avoid making any sudden dietary changes. Always introduce new foods in small amounts. Food should be changed daily and containers cleaned and disinfected once a week.

Daily diet	Recommended vegetables*	Do not feed to rabbits	Recommended fruits (dried or fresh)
Unlimited amounts of fresh Timothy Hay	Celery (strings removed)	Green beans	Pears
¼ cup of pelleted rabbit food	Alfalfa sprouts	Potatoes	Blueberries
Vegetables & legumes (2 cups a day)	Carrots and carrot tops	Beets	Grapes (no seeds)
Treats (e.g., fresh or dried fruits – give sparingly, 1 tablespoon daily)	Herbs (basil, parsley, cilantro, mint)	Avocado	Raisins
Fresh alfalfa can also be added to your rabbit's basic diet if she is younger than 7 months.	Bok choy	Cabbage	Banana
	Dandelion flowers and leaves (untreated)	Sweet potato	Apple (no core and seeds)
	Kale	Corn	Plums
	Radish tops and sprouts	Onion	Raspberries
	Broccoli (mostly stems and leaves)	Rhubarb	Strawberries
		Cereals	Pears
			Blueberries

\*Add one new vegetable at a time to your rabbit's diet.

## Water

Rabbits need water available to them all the time. Fill your rabbit's sipper bottle or heavy ceramic dish with clean, fresh water every day. Use soap and water to clean them out - once a week for bottles and daily for dishes. If you use a sipper bottle, be sure the tip is

low enough for your rabbit to reach. Not all rabbits know how to use a sipper bottle, so you may want to use a dish instead. Either way, monitor your rabbit to make sure she is drinking.

## Handling

Remember to never pick up a rabbit by her ears or the scruff of her neck. Pick up a rabbit with one hand under her rib cage and the other under her rump. Make sure she feels secure and that her feet are well supported — a rabbit can break her back if she kicks too hard. If your rabbit seems scared, gently cover her eyes with your hand. This creates a dark environment in which rabbits can feel safe. Hold your rabbit against you or on your lap. It is best to handle your rabbit while you're sitting down to avoid falls. Never hold a rabbit upside down, too tight around her stomach or any other way that causes her to experience pain or distress. Some rabbits are shier than others and will take some time to get used to regular human handling. It is very important to handle and socialize with your rabbit every day especially if they are younger so they feel comfortable around people. To calm your rabbit, mimic how they groom each other by petting your rabbit over the tip of her nose, eyes, ears, top of the head and down her back.

For the safety of your child and rabbit, supervise child-pet interactions at all times.

## Grooming and nail trimming

An average shorthair rabbit does not require a lot of grooming, just some brushing with a soft brush during heavy shedding periods. Longhaired breeds should be brushed regularly with a soft brush. Rabbits do not require bathes as they are meticulous groomers. Dirty patches that they cannot reach or clean themselves can be spot cleaned with mild soapy water and a soft towel.

Your rabbit's nails need to be trimmed about every six weeks or as necessary. Consult a vet or rabbit expert for instructions if hesitant. Care must be taken to avoid cutting the

blood vessel in the centre of the nail called the quick. In good light this vessel is clearly visible — if the nail is not black. Have styptic powder or a product such as "Quick Stop" nearby to stop the bleeding just in case the quick is cut.

## **Exercise**

Your rabbit requires daily exercise (minimum of 2 to 4 hours) outside of her cage. Exercise periods can be inside your home or outside in optimal weather conditions. Remember to supervise your rabbit at all times. Rabbits love to chew and dig so rabbit proof your home and yard. Cover electrical and phone cords with spiral cable wrap — available at home centres, hardware or computer stores. Move household plants out of reach. Arrange furniture to avoid your rabbit hiding in small, dark spaces. When outside, your rabbit will enjoy munching on fresh grass — make sure your lawn has not been treated. Temporary enclosures can be made or purchased at a pet supply store that will confine your rabbit to a small area of your home or lawn.

## **Medical concerns**

Rabbits are generally healthy creatures as long as their habitat is kept clean and their food and water fresh. Find a veterinarian in your community that specializes in rabbit care. Rabbits are prey animals and it is their nature to hide sickness and injury to avoid being left behind by their group. Therefore, they may not show signs of illness or disease until the very late stages. If you notice any abnormal symptoms or have medical concerns, it is important that you consult your vet right away. Some symptoms include: diarrhea; breathing difficulties; excessive hair loss; lack of appetite; abdominal gurgling; head tilt; incontinence (urine-soaked rear legs); and lumps. For more information about rabbit health, speak with your veterinarian.

## **Other information**

This information is meant to provide minimum care guidelines for rabbits. For more detailed information contact your vet and consult a rabbit care book available at book

stores, pet shops or from your public library. Look for guides that discuss nutrition, health issues, nail clipping, and rabbit behaviour.