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Your New Rabbit

Congratulations on your new pet rabbit! The following guide is intended to help you provide the very best of care for your new pet.

Housing

We recommend an all wire cage for your rabbit. These are more sanitary and easier to clean than a cage with a plastic base. Many wire-bottom cages come with a tray that is easy to pull out for cleaning. You can find this type of cage at many pet stores but are very often less expensive at livestock supply stores like your local Tennessee Farmers Co-op or Tractor Supply. Standing on the wire bottom all the time can cause sore feet and other health problems so you will also need a resting board for your rabbit. Having this board will prevent injury to your pet, while still allowing you to use a more sanitary cage. A resting board is simply a board that is approximately 10 to 12 inches long and 8 to 10 inches wide. It can be any type of **untreated** wood, including most hardwoods and even pine. A ceramic tile works exceptionally well and offers easy cleaning. Cedar is not recommended however, because your rabbit will likely chew on the board and the natural oil in cedar can cause serious health problems.

Bedding

Recycled newspaper or wood shavings are the best bedding choices for absorption. You may also find that recycled wood pellets work well, although we have not tried those and therefore cannot recommend nor discourage their use. Shredded newspaper, corn cob bedding, and cat litter are *greatly* discouraged as these do not absorb urine quickly enough to prevent it from splashing back onto the rabbit's fur and skin. This splash-back will irritate and even burn your rabbit's skin. If you choose wood shavings, pine or aspen are the best choices. Cedar is not recommended for the same reason that a cedar resting board is not recommended, but if you use a wire cage that keeps the rabbit out of the shavings entirely, then cedar would be okay (because the rabbit will not be able to chew on the shavings).

Food

Your rabbit has been raised on basic rabbit feed purchased from our local Tennessee Farmer's Co-op. This feed is an inexpensive yet high quality food that provides all the nutrients your rabbit needs to maintain good health. If you choose to switch to another rabbit food, look for one with a maximum protein content of 18% or less. Anything higher will lead to an obese and unhealthy rabbit. Also, avoid at all costs any commercial rabbit food with colorful pieces. These lovely looking tidbits have a high sugar content, which like the high protein pellets, will lead to an overweight and unhealthy rabbit. When you begin changing your rabbit to the new food you have chosen, do so slowly because sudden changes in your rabbit's diet can lead to upset stomach and diarrhea (both of which are often fatal in rabbits).

In addition to basic pellets, your rabbit needs ample access to high quality grass hay. Timothy hay is a common type found in this area and therefore usually easy to find. Small bags can be found at pet stores and livestock supply stores, or you may also be able to find someone selling larger bales (which are usually less expensive than the small bags). If you decide to purchase a "square" bale of hay (as





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opposed to a small bag from the pet store), feel confident in choosing any available type that is **not** alfalfa. Alfalfa should only be offered in small amounts, as a treat, because its high calcium content can lead to kidney problems if fed in large amounts.

When feeding your *young* rabbit, provide it with an unlimited supply of pellets and grass hay. Once your rabbit is 6 months old, begin gradually cutting back on the amount of pellets until you are only feeding approximately 1 ounce of pellets per 1 pound of body weight. Small breed rabbits usually weigh between 4 and 5 pounds when full grown, so approximately 4 to 5 ounces of rabbit pellets per day should be enough. Continue offering an unlimited supply of grass hay. When offering fresh vegetables, offer one new food at a time. Some vegetables can cause diarrhea in your rabbit, but if you only offer one new thing at a time you will be able to identify problem foods quickly and avoid them in the future. The following is a list of recommended vegetables that are usually safe foods. Those with an asterisk (*) are high in vitamin A at least one should be offered daily.

- Alfalfa, radish, and clover sprouts
- Basil
- Beet greens (tops)
- Bok choy
- Broccoli (mostly leaves/stems)*
- Brussels sprouts
- Carrots and carrot tops*
- Celery
- Cilantro
- Clover
- Collard greens*
- Dandelion greens (NO pesticides)*
- Endive*
- Escarole
- Green peppers
- Kale*
- Mint
- Mustard greens*
- Parsley*
- Pea pods (the flat edible kind)*
- Peppermint leaves
- Radicchio
- Radishes and radish tops
- Raspberry leaves
- Romaine or other dark leaf lettuce*
- Spinach*
- Sunflower (flowers, leaves, stems, and unsalted seeds)
- Watercress*
- Wheat grass
- Most fruits are okay to offer in very small amounts, as treats only

Completely avoid potatoes and beans because these are known to cause bloating and diarrhea, both of which can kill your rabbit in only a few hours. Take care when offering cucumbers, iceberg lettuce, or other vegetables with a high water content, as these can also cause runny stools. If you are ever in doubt about the safety of a new treat, offer something you know to be safe instead.

Exercise

Aside from quality food and a clean cage, rabbits need very little to remain healthy. Your rabbit will enjoy and look forward to daily exercise and can be turned loose inside your home, provided you restrict their roaming to rooms that have been “bunny proofed.” To “bunny proof” a room, you should remove or block off anything you do not want your rabbit to chew on or dig at. Rabbits are very curious and will inspect every aspect of any room they are allowed access to. They will dig and bite at carpet and furniture if they are not supervised and provided with toys. These toys do not have to be expensive. Old phone books, wooden blocks, cardboard boxes, and old rugs are all inexpensive (usually free) items that your rabbit will enjoy moving around and shredding. In addition, if you get in the floor and interact with your rabbit often, it will see you as a friend and enjoy playing with and climbing all over you.

Litter Training

Believe it or not, your rabbit can be litter trained. The process is similar to house breaking a puppy. Begin by placing a small plastic box with low sides in the corner of the cage your rabbit uses the bathroom in most often. A plastic shoebox with a side cut out of it will work for this. Soon your rabbit will only use the bathroom in the box. After it is using only the box consistently, turn the rabbit loose in a small space with the box in the middle of the space. A bathroom or blocked off portion of your kitchen would be a good





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choice for this so that if your rabbit does have an accident, the mess will be easy to clean up. If your rabbit does not try to use the litter box in this open area, the space is too large and you should put him in a smaller space.

Once the rabbit is consistently using its litter box while in the open area, gradually increase the size of the open space. You may also want to provide him with a larger box, such as an inexpensive cat litter box, to encourage the rabbit to use it more often. With a bit of patience, you will soon be able to turn your rabbit loose in a large room and trust him to potty in his litter box consistently. You may, however, want to provide him with two boxes if the room is very large so that he will not be discouraged by having to travel a long distance when he feels the need to relieve himself.

General Health

When well cared for, most rabbits experience few health problems and usually live to between 8 and 10 years old. You should, however, watch out for any symptom that might indicate an ill rabbit. Some common indicators include sudden changes in mood or eating habits, diarrhea, or coughing. If you observe these or any other odd behaviors, consult a vet who has experience with rabbits **immediately**. Any delay could cost your rabbit its life. Some common minor ailments include fleas, ear mites, and fur mites. If your pet experiences any of these, feel free to consult us for recommended treatments.

Your rabbit's toenails and teeth will never stop growing at any age. To help maintain good health, you should periodically trim the rabbit's toenails. You can trim them using toenail clippers made for dogs, or you may bring the rabbit to us so that we may trim the nails for you. In addition, to help maintain your rabbit's healthy teeth you should provide it with blocks of wood to chew on. These blocks can be any type of hardwood, including oak, maple, or any fruit wood such as peach or apple. Pine is also okay but cedar can be lethal to your rabbit and should be avoided. Whatever type of wood you choose should be **untreated**. You can find suitable blocks at any pet supply store, or you may choose sticks directly from the tree or your yard. Most shrubs, bushes, and evergreens are just as dangerous as cedar, so these too should be avoided.

Spaying/Neutering

Many online references encourage rabbit owners to have females spayed to prevent uterine cancer. Because the surgery itself poses a high risk, we recommend that you consult the University of Tennessee Veterinary Teaching Hospital for advice as to whether this surgery would be beneficial or potentially harmful to your rabbit. We do, however, encourage you to have male rabbits neutered. This surgery is less risky and you will likely find that it will improve the personality of your male rabbit, as it will likely calm any aggressive tendencies he may have. Having your male rabbit(s) neutered will also allow you to house him with another rabbit if you choose to own more than one.

More Information

For more information on caring for your rabbit, feel free to contact us, or any of the sources listed below.

University of Tennessee Veterinary Teaching Hospital	(865) 974-5667
Ashville Highway Animal Clinic	(865) 523-8434
American Rabbit Breeders Association	arbapost@aol.com, (309) 664-7500

You may also want to purchase a copy of *Care of the Domestic Rabbit* by Chris Hayhow. This book is available from many bookstores or directly from the author at <http://www.chrishayhow.com/>

