

Frequently Asked Rabbit Questions

Congratulations on selecting a rabbit to be a member of your family. The doctors and staff of Glenway Animal Hospital are committed to making sure that your newest (or existing) family member lives a long, happy and healthy life. To help you get started on the right track, we have put together a list of most-asked questions about rabbits and their corresponding answers. This list is not all-inclusive, so feel free to consult with us if you have additional questions.

Where should I house my rabbit?

In the house! Rabbits are quite intelligent, social creatures and can be warm, friendly companions. Rabbits housed outdoors are more prone to parasitic infestations (warbles, fleas, ticks, etc.), heat stroke, attack from wild animals, dogs or cats, and behavior / self-mutilation problems due to boredom. Indoor rabbits can enjoy some supervised time outdoors with prevention of the above-mentioned dangers. Rabbits can be housed in a variety of settings such as cages, pens, or a separate room, but each living space needs to be thoroughly rabbit-proofed. This involves covering electrical cords and outlets, treated wood furniture, removal of reachable toxic plants and decorations. Like all pets, rabbits need mental stimulation and exercise, so if (s)he is housed in a cage, they need to have daily play and exercise time out of the cage. Many rabbits enjoy quiet, snuggle-time with their owners. Cages should be at least big enough for the rabbit to move around comfortably with space for a litter box and sleeping area; we always recommend purchasing the largest cage that the owner can afford so the rabbit(s) don't feel cramped. Wire cage bottoms are hard on rabbits feet and hocks (the joints in the back leg directly above the foot; analogous to our ankles). A raised platform cage with a softer media (rubber and plastic mats are commercially available) is preferable so that the rabbit's wastes can drop below without causing injury. Caution must be taken with plastics and softer substrates that the rabbit doesn't ingest them.

What type of bedding should I use for my rabbit?

It depends on your bunny's preferences and you may have to try a few things before you find the right one for your bunny. Options include straw, soft blankets or towels, shredded paper, pelleted sawdust shavings or commercially available paper products such as shredded egg-cartons. Materials to avoid are anything with aromatic oils in them (pine or cedar chips), or anything your rabbit may decide is worth eating (and may cause an impaction).

Can my rabbit be litter-box trained?

Absolutely! Rabbits are quite fastidious creatures and groom themselves similar to cats. Litterbox use should be encouraged from the day you get your rabbit. Observe where your rabbit prefers to eliminate and place the box in that location. Sometimes it is helpful to encourage the rabbit to enter the box by placing fresh hay in the box. You may have to play around with different types of litter; rabbits develop preferences just like other animals. Good options include pelleted newspaper and wood chips, and regular, unscented clay Kitty litter. Highly scented and scoopable litters have been known to cause asthma and other respiratory ailments in rabbits. You should not use the same substrate for bedding as you do litter. Like the bedding, you must carefully observe your rabbit and be sure s(he) is not eating it!

What should I feed my rabbit?

Rabbit food! However, there seems to be lots of misconceptions about what rabbit food really is. Rabbit food isn't processed or shaped, seeds or kibble; it's the green stuff that you see growing outdoors in the summertime. Commercially available "Spring Mix" salads are an easy method of providing variety. Rabbits' digestive tract is designed to extract every ounce of nutrients from grasses and hays. The best way to keep your bun healthy is to

feed it what it's designed to eat. Other foods can cause choke, bloat, impactions and decreased gastrointestinal (GI) tract motility. One of the most common causes of illness we see in domestic rabbits is feeding a diet too low in fiber; usually from overfeeding pellets. Many commercially available pelleted diets were originally designed for meat rabbits (rapid growth), and are typically too low in fiber and high in calcium. Fresh grass hay (eg. Timothy) should be available at all times and compose the majority of the rabbit's diet. Hay consumption helps with the formation of healthy cecotropes, promotes wearing of teeth (all teeth including molars you can't see grow continuously), and provides a natural satiety. Be careful about old hay that may be moldy or damp. Straw is bedding and not food so don't expect your rabbit to eat it. Alfalfa hay can be fed in small quantities, but contains a lot of calcium. Diets too high in calcium can lead to bladder and kidney stones. If your rabbit stops eating you should seek medical attention quickly as ileus (lack of bowel movement) can become fatal rapidly. Attached is a list of greens and allowed foods - as well as foods to be avoided. Following these guidelines will keep your rabbit's GI tract moving.

Vegetable Choices: (List from HRS Handout)

(!) = Use sparingly. High in either oxalates or goitrogens and may be toxic in accumulated quantities over time.

* = Contains Vitamin A. A variety is necessary in order to obtain the necessary nutrients. Choose 1 each day that contains Vitamin A.

Alfalfa , radish & clover sprouts
 Basil
 Beet / Carrot tops
 Bok choy
 Broccoli (leaves & stems) *
 Brussel sprouts
 Carrot and carrot tops *
 Celery
 Cilantro
 Clover
 Collard Greens *
 Dandelion greens & flowers (pesticide free)
 Endive *
 Escarole
 Green peppers
 Kale (!) *
 Mustard greens
 Parsley *
 Peppermint leaves
 Raddichio
 Radish tops
 Raspberry leaves
 Romaine lettuce (the dark, leafy lettuces)
 Spinach (!) *
 Watercress *
 Wheat grass

*** Glenway Animal Hospital highly recommends Oxbow Hay Products for their herbivore patients. We are currently keeping a small (to maintain freshness) stock of Oxbow Timothy Hay and Bunny Basics-T pelleted food for resale. It is possible to place a Special order for Oxbow products through Glenway Animal Hospital to help reduce Shipping charges. For a full display of Oxbow products available, visit their website at www.oxbowhay.com.

Fruit Choices

Serving should be 1 heaping Tablespoon per 4 lbs. Body wt.

Apples
 Blueberries
 Melon
 Orange
 Papaya
 Peach
 Pear
 Pineapple
 Plums
 Raspberries
 Strawberries

Do Not Feed

Cereal grains / products
 (bread, cookies, crackers, oats.)
 Seeds
 Peas
 Beans
 Corn
 Grapes
 Potatoes
 Sweet Potatoes
 Bananas
 Above items are high in starch and lead to GI upset, obesity & gas.

How often does my rabbit need to visit a veterinarian?

There are no routine vaccines that we give rabbits. However, your rabbit should have a full physical examination by a veterinarian familiar with rabbits at least once a year to detect subtle problems such as malocclusion, arthritis, skin, eye, & ear abnormalities, changes in weight, etc. Geriatric rabbits (over age 4) should visit the vet at least twice a year. Your rabbit should be taken to your veterinarian if you notice any changes in behavior, bathroom habits and appearance of urine or stool, anorexia, limping, etc. As prey animals, rabbits will often hide their illnesses until they are very sick so it is important to keep up with routine care, careful observation and knowledge of your rabbits' habits and seek medical care quickly if abnormalities occur.

What should I do in case of emergency?

Glenway Animal Hospital is open 7a.m until 7 p.m. every weekday and from 8 a.m. until 12 noon on Saturdays. During those hours, if Dr. Dornbusch Cron is not on duty, the receptionist can refer you to other area practices that see rabbits. For after hours care, see our Emergency Options handout. If you did not receive a copy of this get this (available to download off our website) and keep the numbers handy.

Where can I get more information about my rabbit?

There are many places but the best pro-bunny organization (in our opinion) is the House Rabbit Society. Nationally this group provides education about rabbits, foster care and adoption of homeless rabbits, literature, social opportunities with other bunny owners, etc. Their web site (www.rabbit.org) is full of FAQ's, articles and handouts about rabbits and contact information for all areas of the country. Locally (in Cincinnati) we do not have an organized HRS chapter, but Dr. Dornbusch Cron works closely with the Columbus, Ohio Chapter.

Recommended Reading

House Rabbit Handbook, How to Live with an Urban Rabbit , 3rd Edition, by Marinell Harriman, Drollery Press

Small Mammal Health Series, By Susan Brown, DVM, Midwest Bird & Exotic Animal Hospital. Access this via Veterinary Partner.com.