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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. The House Rabbit Society, www.rabbit.org, Nationally and locally, this group provides education and literature about rabbits, foster care and adoption of homeless rabbits, and is the best and most reliable source of all rabbit information.

Where should I house my rabbit?

Our preference is in the house! Rabbits are quite intelligent, social creatures and can be warm, friendly companions. Many rabbits enjoy quiet, snuggle-time with their owners. Indoor rabbits can be housed in a variety of settings such as cages, pens, 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 in any space a rabbit spends time. Exercise pens with a piece of vinyl flooring placed underneath, provide a safe space for play, but also can serve as a rabbit's primary habitat. Collapsible pens are actually our first choice of rabbit housing; they provide lots of floor space, are often less expensive, more versatile, and easier to keep clean than smaller, traditional cages. They can be used around the room perimeter to keep rabbits from chewing on baseboards, linked together to create a larger space. Keep in mind that rabbits like to chew and will chew up plastic and wooden enclosures. The pens we have found to work well are manufactured by MidwestHomes4Pets - they are available on a variety of websites such as Amazon.com and eBay.

Rabbits housed outdoors are more prone to parasitic infestations (warbles, fleas, ticks, etc.), heat stroke, attacks from wild animals, dogs or cats, and behavior / self-mutilation problems due to boredom. Traditional rabbit hutches with wire bottoms attached to the side of the house are unacceptable in our opinion.

Can my rabbit be litter-box trained?

Absolutely! Rabbits are quite fastidious creatures and groom themselves similar to cats. Litter box 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 (or a bowl of favorite greens) in the box. You may have to play around with different types of litter; rabbits develop preferences just like other animals.

What type of bedding / litter should I use for my rabbit?

The beauty of an exercise pen is that it allows for plenty of room for a litter box in addition to room for your rabbit to get around and recline elsewhere. In this case, a cardboard box with some newspaper in it (rabbits will chew and shred both the cardboard and paper and this is totally OK), or a few fluffy towels or throws will do. Rabbits like to have a place to hide, so keep this in mind when planning their living space. Some rabbits prefer to have a covered litter box; others prefer an open setting.

Cat litters should not be used as they ten contain toxic perfumes and cause fatal impactions if ingested. Stick with paper or wood-based litters such as Yesterday's News, Carefresh or Feline Pine. Wood stove pellets can also be used and are usually available in the winter months only and reasonably priced.

Should I have my rabbit neutered or spayed?

YES! Altered rabbits are more likely to be litterbox trained successfully and less likely to spray and mark territory or become aggressive than if sexually intact. It is important to remember that bad habits such as these can't be instantly cured with a surgical procedure: therefore it is important to have your rabbit neutered early in life (4-6 months). However, if you have an older unaltered rabbit, the procedure can be done later in life with additional precautions including spaying females helps prevent uterine cancers which are common in unaltered females. Altered pairs of rabbits can become bonded and live happily together without risk of overpopulation. Rabbit surgery must be done by someone experienced with rabbits so the procedure can be done safely and as pain-free as possible. The House Rabbit Society's web page has a whole FAQ section on spaying or neutering your rabbit.

What kind of toys and activities are safe for my rabbit?

Rabbits are intelligent animals and toys and activities are essential to their well-being. A

bored, lonely rabbit often becomes destructive or depressed. Individual rabbits have their own preferences so if your first toy purchase is rejected, try again. Observe your rabbit's behavior to learn what types of play they enjoy. Common favorites are toys that encourage burrowing, digging, shredding, or throwing such as cardboard concrete forms, boxes, baskets filled with newspapers, balls, baby toys, etc.

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. 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 or ileus (lack of GI movement).

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 promoting rapid growth, and are typically too low in fiber and high in calcium. This is especially true of pellets that are alfalfa-based pellets (while these are fine for young, growing rabbits, Timothy based pellets are preferable for adult rabbits). Fully grown rabbits should eat no more than 1/8-1/4 cup per day per 5 lb. Body weight. **MAXIMUM**. Pellets need to contain at least 18% fiber (more is better), no more than 3% fat, and about 14% (but no more than 16%) protein. We are big fans of the Oxbow Hay Company's (www.oxbowhay.com) Bunny Basics-T (T stands for Timothy). Do not feed pellet mixtures that contain corn, seeds and colored poofies!!!!

Grass hays (Timothy, Oat, Orchard Grass, Oat) should be available at all times and compose the majority of the rabbit's diet. Hay consumption helps with the formation of healthy cecotropes (the glossy "night feces" that you rarely see as the bunnies consume these as part of their nutrient recycling) 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. Alfalfa is a legume, not a grass, and should only be fed to young rabbits or in small quantities to adults. Rabbits that overeat alfalfa hay and pellets are prone to bladder stones and obesity which then leads to "stinky-poop-bunny-butt-syndrome", which is quite unpleasant for everyone.

Fresh greens should also make up a large portion of a rabbit's diet. As with people, variety is the spice of life, so feeding at least 3 different types of greens assures a balanced mix of vitamins and minerals. Adult rabbits should get a minimum of 1 cup of mixed greens per day per 4 lb body weight. Stay away from pale, limp greens such as iceberg lettuce as they contain little nutritional value. Select veggies and fruits can be served in smaller quantities (1TBS. Per 4 lbs. Ideal body weight). Grains, cereals, starchy and salty foods are NOT appropriate rabbit foods even though most bunnies love them. Unless omitted or severely restricted, these things can cause severe gastrointestinal distress.

If your rabbit stops eating you should seek medical attention quickly as gastrointestinal stasis (also known as ileus) 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) Fruit Choices

Alfalfa, radish & clover sprouts
Basil
Beet tops
Broccoli (leaves and stems)*
Brussels sprouts
Carrots and carrot tops*
Celery
Cilantro
Clover
Collard greens*
Dandelion greens & flowers (pesticide free)
Endive*
Escarole
Green peppers
Kale* (!)
Mustard greens
Parsley*
Peppermint leaves
Radicchio
Radish tops
Raspberry leaves
Romaine lettuce (dark, leafy lettuces)
Spinach (!) *
Watercress *
Wheat Grass

Fruit Choices:

Apples
Blueberries
Melon
Orange
Papaya
Peach
Pear
Pineapple
Plums
Raspberries
Strawberries

Do Not Feed:

Cereal grains / products (bread, cookies, crackers, oats, etc.)
Seeds
Peas
Beans
Corn
Grapes
Potatoes
Sweet Potatoes
** Bananas

The above items are high in starch and lead to GI upset, obesity and gas

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

(!)= Use sparingly. High in either oxalates or goitrogens and may be toxic in accumulated quantities over time. Serving should be 1 heaping tablespoon per 4 lbs. body weight.

** = Many rabbit owners use small pieces of bananas as treats or to hide medications

Can my rabbit get along with dogs, cats, and other rabbits?

YES! Many pet rabbits have cats and dogs as their best friends. Since wild rabbits are prey animals, hunting dogs (e.g. Greyhounds, Bloodhounds) typically don't coexist well with rabbits. Close supervision should always be used when introducing animals and allowing them to play together. Rabbits can be very territorial, and serious injuries can occur if proper introduction techniques are not used. More information about bunny dating and "bonding" can be found on the House Rabbit Society website.

When should my rabbit see a veterinarian?

Your rabbit should have a full physical examination by a veterinarian familiar with rabbits twice a year to detect subtle problems such as malocclusion, arthritis, skin, eye, & ear abnormalities, changes in weight, etc. At these exams, your veterinarian will tell you what your rabbit needs in terms of further diagnostic tests. Baseline labwork (blood and urine) is helpful in determining what is normal for your rabbit. 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 seek medical care quickly if abnormalities occur. Domestic rabbits do not get routine vaccinations.

What should I do in case of emergency?

Glenway Animal Hospital is open 7a.m until 6 p.m. every weekday and from 8 a.m. until 12 noon on Saturdays. During those hours, if our rabbit veterinarians are not on duty, the receptionist can refer you to other area practices that see rabbits. For after hours care, discuss our Emergency Options handout with one of our rabbit vets during a routine visit so you are prepared if something happens.

How long can I expect my rabbit to live?

The average lifespan of a domestic rabbit is 6-9 years. There is a lot of individual as well as breed variation, but a good quality diet and preventative medicine and care can help your bun live to his fullest potential.

Where can I get more information about my rabbit?

House Rabbit Society , www.rabbit.org

Buckeye House Rabbit Society , www.ohare.org

Columbus House Rabbit Society , www.columbusrabbit.org

House Rabbit Handbook, How to Live with an Urban Rabbit 3rd Edition, by Marinell Harriman, Drollery Press, a great, easy-to read text on everything pertaining to enjoying your house rabbit and keeping them healthy.

Thanks again for choosing us to care for your rabbit family members' medical needs. If you

have any other additional questions, please do not hesitate to call us at **(513) 662-0224**. Our office is open 7 a.m. - 6 p.m. weekdays and from 8 a.m. until 12 noon on Saturdays. You can also reach us by email at glenwayahstaff@fuse.net. To download client information, get directions to our hospital, visit our pet library or find links to other animal care websites, visit our website at www.glenwayanimalhospital.com. "Like" us on Facebook.