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CARE OF RABBITS

Adapted from information by the
House Rabbit Society
www.rabbit.org

Lifespan:

Dwarf breeds (under 5lbs) 4-6 yrs

Larger breeds (5-12lbs) 6-8 yrs



- To be house companions, rabbits should be spayed or neutered.
 - Marking territory with urine and spraying urine are common in unaltered rabbits.
 - Hormones often cause females to become very aggressive and males to hump anything that moves. Unaltered rabbits are often frustrated and unhappy.
 - Unspayed females have an 80% probability of developing uterine cancer.
 - Males can be neutered as soon as the testicles descend, around 3 ½ months; females should wait until they are 4-5 months old.
 - The staff of Canyon View Animal Hospital is very experienced in neutering and spaying pet rabbits. We provide them with diligent pain relief and closely monitor them while under anesthesia and during recovery.

Handling:

- All rabbits should be taken out of their cages and handled **daily**. They are social creatures and need companionship. They thrive on the time you spend with them. If they are not given enough attention, they will become cranky and antisocial. Do not get a rabbit if you are unable to spend time with it on a daily basis. At first, they may seem to prefer their cage, which gives them a sense of safety and comfort. With time, they will realize that you are part of their "herd" and will get comfort and companionship from spending time with you.
- To pick up a rabbit, place one hand under the rib cage, the other supporting the back feet; lean forward so the rabbit can be pressed securely against your chest as you lift him.
- **ALWAYS** support the back feet, failure to do so can result in a broken back. Rabbits back legs are so strong that they can break their own backs if suddenly startled by a predator or if they struggle violently when handled.
- Children less than 8 years are seldom able to pick up a rabbit safely; wait until they have suitable manual dexterity, appropriately large hands, and are mature enough.
- **NEVER** use the ears of the scruff of the neck to pick up a rabbit.

Housing:

Rabbits should be housed *indoors*, especially at night.

- Many predators can rip apart even a well-built hutch.
- Predators can cause rabbits to die of shock or broken backs without actually touching them.

It is cruel to keep a rabbit in a hutch or cage without daily activities.

- ◆ They need physical exercise, mental stimulation, and the emotional security of being loved.
- ◆ Hutch rabbits can get very aggressive from boredom.
- Outdoor time supervised by an adult is excellent for rabbits (**Never** leave a rabbit alone outside).

- Although rabbits can tolerate cold down to -20 degrees F if given a solid wooden box filled with straw as protection from the elements, people must provide ice-free water and food throughout the day whatever the weather.
- Rabbits cannot tolerate heat; they may have a heat stroke by 90 F, and be dead by 100 F.
 - ◆ If outdoors, they *must* have shade at all times.
 - ◆ On warm days, a 2-liter plastic bottle of water, frozen overnight and left in the rabbits home, can help keep a rabbit adequately cool.
- Typical "rabbit cages" are poor housing for rabbits (narrow-spaced wire dog crates are ideal).
 - Wire on the cage floor is hard on rabbits' feet and can lead to painful and sometimes life-threatening foot sores. If all you have is a wire cage, place a piece of Plexiglas (obtained from any hardware store) on at least $\frac{1}{2}$ of the cage bottom.
 - Rabbit cages are almost always too small to provide humane housing.
 - ◆ Rabbits' homes should be large enough to provide space for a litter box, ceramic food crocks, a hay holder, water bottle (attached to the outside), and toys, with enough room for the rabbit to stretch all the way out (back feet extended full length).
 - ◆ It should be tall enough to allow the rabbits to stretch to their full lengths when standing on their hind feet; ideally, tall enough to hang a wooden shelf so the rabbits can jump up and down, getting exercise, even when confined to their home.
 - ◆ Rabbits can be litterbox trained and housebroken. Start with a small space and place the box in one corner. Use recycled newspaper litter (i.e. Good Meows—sold at Safeway and pet stores) and **gradually** allow your bunny more access to the cage, then a room, etc.

Diet:

- Timothy hay should be the main staple of a rabbits diet. Have it available at all times for fiber and prevent obesity and hairballs. Do not give alfalfa hay, it contains large amounts of calcium, which is then excreted in the urine as crystals and can cause urine sludging and bladder stone formation. Rabbits under 6 months of age can have alfalfa.
- Vegetables can be given in moderate quantities, avoid cabbage and others that cause gas.
- Dark greens such as collards are best; never give iceberg lettuce (it has no nutritional value).
- A great resource for rabbit diets is oxbow hay company (on the internet). They also offer timothy hay pellets if your rabbit prefers them over free hay.
- If your bunny doesn't like hay, you may give timothy hay pellets. To convert them to hay, try chopping it up into small pieces the size of pellets.

Breeding:

- Companion rabbits should never be bred.
 - The shelters are filled with wonderfully friendly and beautiful rabbits desperately needing homes. Thousands of rabbits are humanely killed in shelters every year because there are no homes for them.
 - If you think that you have homes for a litter of babies, or that you would like to have "just one litter", remember that every home taken by a new bunny means one less home for another.
- Rabbits can begin reproducing at three months of age. If you get baby bunnies, keep them apart from 3 months of age until they are spayed or neutered, no matter who has assured you of their sex (mating can happen in an instant, so don't risk "supervised" play together--it will almost guarantee a pregnancy).



- It is very difficult to sex a baby rabbit correctly until the age of about 2-3 months. Pet store employees (and sometimes veterinarians!) can be mistaken prior to that time.
- When a male and female rabbit are together, they will mate immediately after a litter is born, so a second litter will be on the way when you discover the first litter.

Health:

- Your rabbit needs to be examined yearly. This is vitally important because rabbits often hide signs of illness or injury due to their **strong preservation instinct**. In the wild, if they show signs of weakness, they become easy prey. This instinct does not act to their benefit in the domestic situation. They will literally pretend to act normally at all costs until they are too sick to hide it—at which point they may be critical. Veterinarians are trained to look for early and subtle signs of illness—i.e. weight loss, gaseous bowels, overgrown teeth, muscle atrophy, ear exudate, eye abnormalities, etc.
- Bring your bunny in to us at the **first signs** of illness or injury. They are often extremely ill by the time you first notice that they are sick or hurt. Do not take a “wait and see” approach.
- Rabbits will even pretend to eat when sick. They cannot pretend to defecate however, so it is very important that you monitor the color, amount, and consistency of their feces. Call us if you notice any change.
- Rabbits can have intestinal parasites which can be transmitted to humans (especially children!). Be sure to have a fecal performed to look for worm eggs in their stool. Unfortunately, if worms are not laying eggs the day we perform a fecal, the test may be falsely negative, so be sure to bring us a stool sample if your bunny has any diarrhea (when the worms are more actively laying).
- Normal body temperature: 101.5F (the stress of the visit may raise it to 102.5F).
- Rabbits teeth grow continuously.
 - Normal chewing of food wears the teeth down as fast as they grow if the teeth are properly formed. You may give them the special wood toys sold at pet stores to help prevent overgrowth of teeth.
 - If the teeth are maloccluded (do not come together properly), they must be clipped every 2-3 weeks.
 - Cheek teeth (premolars and molars in the back of the mouth) can also grow abnormally and sharp points can form which dig into the cheeks and tongue. We will check these during an exam—if your rabbit stops or slows down eating, this is often the cause.
- Nails *must* be kept trimmed.
 - Long nails can snag, causing a rabbit to jerk—a nail may be torn out.
 - Long nails cause the foot to twist, resulting in painful arthritis in the shoulders and hips.
- Rabbit urine is thicker than most species. Normal color varies from white, yellow, orange and brown and even bright red at times. Rabbits excrete colors from their food, which may make it red. (If bright red, it could be blood in the urine as well as simple “urine”—if blood is present, it will likely clot and separate from the urine; red urine remains uniformly red). Monitor your rabbit’s urine and call us if you notice any change in the odor, color, consistency or amount.



Angora Rabbit

Congratulations on your new rabbit! Bunnies are wonderful companions—be sure to litterbox train them and give them lots of attention--you will develop a unique and rewarding relationship unlike one you have had with any of your other pets.