



# Rabbit Adoption Handbook



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## CONGRATULATIONS!

Dear Rabbit Adopter,

Congratulations on your new family member! Bringing a new rabbit into your home—and your life—is a big commitment that comes with many benefits and joys. Thank for you choosing to adopt and save a life.

Rabbits are relatively new to being recognized as loving and engaging companion animals. Though they are quiet and don't require walking, rabbits do need routine physical and mental stimulation and interaction. If you are a new rabbit guardian, please take advantage of all the information in this handbook and always feel free to contact us if you have questions on how to care for your new pet.

For our part, we are committed to helping you make your new family member's transition into your life a success.

Sincerely,



Jennifer Scarlett, DVM  
Co-President



Jason Walthall  
Co-President

## SET UP FOR SUCCESS

### Meeting Your Rabbit's Needs

Adding any new family member, especially the four-legged kind, requires a certain amount of equipment and some adjustments to your home for everyone's safety and comfort.

Here's a list of must-have supplies for a great start with your new rabbit:

#### Basics

- An exercise pen or rabbit habitat
- Rabbit pellets
- A variety of leafy greens
- Heavy ceramic food and water bowls
- Hidey house (may be a cardboard box with two entrances cut out)
- Rabbit carrier
- Litter box (must be big enough for your rabbit to lie down in)
- Paper-based litter or newspaper
- Hay or orchard grass
- Enzymatic cleaner

#### Rabbit Care

- Nail trimmer
- Soft curry brush and "hair buster" brush

#### Training and Mental Stimulation

- Phone books for bunnies who like to dig
- Play-alone toys (toilet paper tubes, apple branches for chewing)
- Interactive toys (things for throwing, like hard plastic baby keys)
- Treats, such as small pieces of carrot or fruit
- Electrical cord covers

## Setting Up Your Home

### Safe Haven

Whether your rabbit's safe haven will be her home base for much of her life or if you are planning to have your rabbit live free-range, much like a house cat, they must begin with a safe haven. This confined, safe area allows your rabbit to make a gradual transition and is where your rabbit will stay until she is completely comfortable with her new home (which could take days or even weeks). This is also a place she can retreat to anytime she needs a little space and alone time.

**Where?** The ideal safe haven is an x-pen in a room where people spend a fair amount of calm time, like the living room or a bedroom. Alternatively a large rabbit condo—at least 6 times the size of your rabbit—is a good safe haven.

**What?** Cover the floor with towels or blankets (a hardware store linoleum remnant may be a good barrier between the blankets and your flooring). Provide a litter box filled with edible hay, water and food dishes, some play-alone toys (such as phone books or hard plastic baby toys), and a hidey house.

**Tip:** Other animals in the home? Be certain that your other animals cannot get into the rabbit's safe haven.

### Household Hazards

Remember, rabbits are curious by nature. Keep your rabbit safe from these common household hazards:

- **Cords.** Bundle up and hide any electrical wires or cords. Rabbits find them tempting to chew on, and they may try to pull out plugs. Many hardware stores carry hard plastic cord covers.
- **Plants.** Many plants are toxic to rabbits. Put your plants in areas your rabbit can't access.
- **Unsafe hiding places.** Block access to dangerous places for rabbits, such as behind stoves, refrigerators, washers, dryers, etc.
- **Chemical rub-off.** Use natural, nontoxic cleaners in your home. Rabbits are fastidious groomers and easily pick up chemical residue on their fur and feet from contact with harsh cleaning agents. Ammonia-based cleaners and phenol disinfectants are particularly dangerous.
- **Poison.** Human medications (especially aspirin, acetaminophen, and NSAIDS), veterinary medications, insecticides, rodenticides, household cleaners, chemicals, and paints can all cause severe injury or death to rabbits. So can many human foods. Secure all cupboards, closets, and cabinets—use childproof latches when possible.
- **Open windows/doors.** Rabbits may want to explore the world and can be easily hurt without your constant supervision. Be certain all members of your household understand how careful they must now be about leaving doors and windows open.
- **Chewables.** Rabbits may try tasting anything in your home that they can access. Many household items may cause stomach blockages, and you may have many things that you would rather stay chew mark-free. Put small items away and block off other areas from your rabbit. Furniture legs may be protected with hard plastic or foil.

## For a Happy and Healthy Rabbit

### Play and Training

Environmental enrichment through play and training (yes, rabbits can be trained) means a healthier *and* easier-to-live-with rabbit. Active rabbits with a stimulation-rich environment are less anxious, sleep more, and are more likely to maintain a healthy weight. They should be out of their pens for at least 2 hours a day and do best if you sit on the floor and let them come to you.

**Tip:** Unless they are fully supervised, rabbits must remain indoors. For more information, see *Entertaining and Training Your Rabbit* on page 9.

### Mental Stimulation

Bored rabbits are a lot like children. Unless you give them something fun to do, they will make their own fun. An energetic rabbit might chew on table legs or dig at the carpet. Encourage your rabbit to be physically and mentally active by giving her a variety of toys, puzzles, and other brainteasers.

Here are some options\* for exercising your rabbit's mind:

- Throwing toys, such as hard plastic baby keys or cups
- Chewing toys, such as untreated apple branches, wicker balls, or sea grass mats
- Phone books, for rabbits who like to dig
- Food-dispensing toys, you can make your own by putting treats inside hay inside paper sandwich bags or toilet paper tubes

\*Always choose safe, rabbit-appropriate toys. Beware of small, loose objects or string that can be ingested. Check with your vet before introducing your rabbit to a new product.

## Rabbit Care

### Grooming

Rabbits have a lot of fur and despite meticulous self-grooming, they do shed, usually when the seasons change. Use a soft rubber curry brush or a Hair-Buster comb and groom your rabbit regularly. To make sure she enjoys the experience, give her little tasty treats while you groom her. Regular nail trims will also be necessary.

**Never bathe your rabbit**—this can cause shock or illness.

### Food and Water

Have one sturdy ceramic food bowl or food-dispensing toy and one sturdy, heavy ceramic water bowl for each rabbit in the household. Pay careful attention to how much food your rabbit eats. It's crucial for her health that she eats well, and any loss of appetite should cause concern. Discuss feeding with your veterinarian the first time you visit with your rabbit.

### Medical Concerns

Rabbits hide illness very well, so watch carefully for signs of illness. Some things to watch out for:

- Is your rabbit eating, drinking, and using the litter box regularly?
- Is she lethargic?
- Is she drooling? Do her teeth look long or uneven?
- Is she sneezing? Does she have watery eyes?

**If your bunny is not eating or pooping, this is a life-threatening emergency. Go to a vet immediately!**

### **Visits to the Veterinarian**

Rabbits don't need booster shots, but they do need annual checkups with a rabbit-savvy veterinarian. Make sure your veterinarian has experience with rabbits and sees rabbits regularly. Be prepared, too, for emergencies. Have the name of emergency veterinary services handy, and know how to get there in a hurry if necessary.

### **Multi-Rabbit Households**

Rabbits are social animals, and often enjoy having another rabbit friend. Rabbit to rabbit introductions can be very difficult—please solicit help from someone experienced in rabbit bonding. If there are other animals in your household, such as cats or dogs, a slow introduction and supervision is very necessary. For more information, see our *Introducing Rabbits* handout.

## **ARRIVING HOME WITH YOUR RABBIT**

Predictability is a key element of rabbit happiness. Rabbits thrive when they know a) which part of the world is theirs and b) what to expect from their human family. That's why it's best to resist the urge to lavish your rabbit with attention the moment you bring her home, and instead let her adjust to her new home (and territory) in her own time. A calm, unhurried transition at a rabbit-appropriate pace can prevent many stress-related behavior problems, such as digging, biting, scratching, excessive grooming, and litter box aversion.

Here's how to do it:

### **The First Hour**

1. When you arrive home, take the rabbit carrier into your rabbit's safe haven. If you haven't set up a safe haven yet, do so before opening the carrier. Provide food and fresh greens.
2. Open the carrier, slowly tip it to the side, and let your rabbit decide whether she wants to come out to explore.
3. Whether or not she comes out of the carrier, leave your rabbit in her safe haven.

### **The First Few Days**

Visit the safe haven often during the day, but let your rabbit decide the pace of interactions. Never force attention or petting on your rabbit; she will ask for it when she's ready.

When your rabbit is completely comfortable in her safe haven and feels at home with everyone in the household, you may begin allowing supervised access to the home, a little bit at a time. Pay a lot of attention to where she goes and what she is interested in. Be sure to put away items that may be chewed on and block off hiding areas before allowing increased access. Blocking access to power cords is particularly important.

### **Going Forward: Creating a Routine**

- Feed your rabbit the same brand of food at the same time every day.
- Add hay every day; a rabbit should eat approximately their size in hay every day.

- If your rabbit is confined to a condo or x-pen, set aside time every morning and evening to give her supervised time to exercise.
- Groom and pet your rabbit every day.
- Clean the litter box at approximately the same time every day.
- Establish a noise and activity level for your household that isn't stressful to your rabbit.
- Reward your rabbit consistently for behaviors you like, such as returning to her enclosure on command.
- Feed your rabbit a healthy salad at the same time every day.

## **LIFE WITH YOUR RABBIT**

### **Bonding With Your Pet Rabbit**

#### **Talk To Your Rabbit**

At first your rabbit may not want to interact with you. It is scary moving to a new home. Get her used to your presence by talking to her in a calm reassuring voice. Some rabbits need a slower approach than others. It is important to be patient—sit in your rabbit's enclosure and read her a story without forcing interactions. Pay attention to signs that your rabbit is feeling more comfortable and secure in her space and with you. Signs include: self-grooming, eating/drinking, playing, and approaching you.

#### **Hand Feed**

Offer your rabbit treats to begin to give her positive associations with you. Limit sugary treats such as banana chips, carrot slices, and raisins to less than a tablespoon per day. You may offer greens as well—your rabbit may be more comfortable taking a long piece of parsley from your hands than getting close enough for a raisin. You can speak quietly and encouragingly during this time.

#### **Petting**

Once your rabbit eats comfortably from your hand, you can begin gently petting her. Almost all rabbits enjoy having their foreheads petted with soft pressure. Most rabbits enjoy having their ears, cheeks, and upper backs touched. Most rabbits really do not like having their chins or bottoms touched. After your rabbit is fully comfortable with being handled, she should spend about two hours outside her enclosure per day. Alternatively, she may now be allowed to explore the house slowly, if she is eventually to be free-roaming.

**Tip:** Never put your fingers directly in front of your rabbit's mouth. She cannot see directly in front of her nose and may think it is food and take a "taste."

#### **Handling Your Rabbit**

Most rabbits do not like to be lifted. Practice the following techniques without lifting your rabbit far off the ground until you are comfortable and confident. Do not allow children to pick up rabbits until the children are older and only when supervised.

1. Move slowly and calmly, avoid quick hand movements.
2. Steady your rabbit by placing a hand on her forehead—a small amount of pressure is calming.
3. Place one hand under your rabbit's ribcage and elbows.



4. Scoop your other hand under your rabbit's rear end.
5. Hold your rabbit close to your body, with all four feet against your chest or lap.
6. When putting your rabbit back down, keep a secure hold until very close to the ground and place her gently down, rear end first.

**Never** lift or restrain your rabbit by the scruff or ears. This can cause severe injury.

## ENTERTAINING AND TRAINING YOUR RABBIT

To be physically and behaviorally healthy, your rabbit needs outlets for her innate rabbit abilities. That means opportunities to run, chew, dig, jump, and hide in safe shelter. She also needs plenty of respectful attention from and interaction with you.

### Indoor Only

It is necessary to keep your rabbit indoors. This may sound like an unnatural life for a rabbit—and in a sense, it is. But like it or not, we live in a world that isn't safe for rabbits to roam in, whether in cities, suburbs, or the countryside.

**Rabbits may live 8-15 years indoors, but outdoor rabbits often live less than one year.**

Compare the hazards of these two lifestyles:

#### Outdoor Hazards

Predators  
Inclement weather, hunger, and thirst  
Diseases  
Getting hit by a car  
Parasites (fleas, worms, ticks, mites)  
Being stolen or mistreated by strangers  
Fear

#### Indoor Hazards

Boredom  
Weight gain due to inactivity  
Household poisoning or accident

Given that you can easily alleviate—or completely eliminate—the indoor hazards by playing with your rabbit, enriching her environment in various ways, and rabbit-proofing your home, it's easy to see how the indoor-only lifestyle is superior.

If you want to spend time outdoors with your rabbit, you may set up an x-pen or an escape proof area for them as long as you are constantly supervising them when outdoors—it only takes a moment of inattention for a hawk to carry your beloved pet away.

### Environmental Enrichment

Enriching your rabbit's environment is key to having a healthy, happy rabbit.

- Rabbits love to chew. Give them safe toys to do so, such as untreated wood, apple branches, willow, sea grass, or cardboard toys.
- Rabbits also love to dig. Phone books are great for practicing this instinct.
- Rabbits love to run. Make certain there aren't hiding spots (like under the couch) or dangerous chew hazards (like electrical cords) in their exercise space.
- Rabbits need a place to hide and feel safe. A cardboard box with two entrances cut into it is a nearly-free and easily replaceable solution.

## Litter Box Overview

The best way to introduce your rabbit to her new home is to confine her to one room or area—her safe haven. A further benefit to this approach is that it helps prevent litter box problems. However confident and ready to explore your rabbit is, keep her confined to the safe haven until she is using the litter box consistently.

## Litter Box Do's and Don'ts

### DO

- Have enough boxes. You need one litter box per rabbit in the household.
- Use paper-based litter or line the litter box with an absorbent layer of newspaper.
- Keep the litter box topped off with fresh, edible hay.
- Dump out the box every two to three days, or at least weekly.
- Use mild dishwashing liquid or hot water and vinegar to clean the box occasionally.
- Place the litter box in a quiet, private area—your rabbit may prefer a corner.

### DON'T

- Get a box that's too small; your rabbit needs space to turn around, dig, and cover.
- Use clumping litter, clay litter, scented litters, or treated wood litters.
- Use strong chemicals or disinfectants to clean the box.
- Use a litter box liner or a restrictive box.
- Place the litter box near anything noisy, like a washing machine or furnace.

**Tip:** If you have a multi-story house, have litter boxes on each level.

## Litter Box Problems

First, it's important to know that your rabbit isn't going outside her litter box out of spite. She is either stressed, marking territory, or avoiding the litter box because she doesn't like it. Rabbits can form aversions to the litter box for a variety of reasons, so do a bit of sleuthing. Litter box problems are common and usually very fixable.

## Troubleshooting Litter Box Problems

1. Check all the do's and don'ts above to make sure you're following the guidelines.
2. Your rabbit may choose a corner or spot that is inconvenient for you. Place another litter box in this spot and wait for your rabbit to start using it. Then slowly move this box to where you would prefer it to be. You may have to compromise and keep a second box in a slightly less convenient area of your home.
3. When exploring a new room or being introduced to a new friend, it is common for rabbits to leave droppings as territorial markings. Some rabbits leave small amounts of droppings outside of the litter box during play sessions. These are easily swept up when it is time to go to bed. Putting them into the litter box will give your rabbit the message of what is expected.
4. If your rabbit is persistently peeing outside the litter box or is leaving misshapen or soft droppings, please consult a veterinarian.

**Tip:** Never yell at or punish your rabbit for not using her litter box. It will only make her afraid of you.

## Training Your Rabbit

It's time to dispense with the myth that rabbits can't be trained. Not only can you train your rabbit to come when called, or go through an agility course, but you also can change unwanted behaviors, reinforce behaviors you like, and help her become less fearful and more confident.

## **Positive Reinforcement**

Training your rabbit through positive reinforcement means using your rabbit's natural motivations to teach her which behaviors you like and which you don't. The trick is to find the right motivations—treats are a great place to start. Most rabbits love to work for raisins!

## **A Word on Punishment**

Never use physical punishment. A rabbit's response to yelling or physical punishment is stress—and stress is the leading cause of behavior problems and may contribute to an early death. It also erodes the trust between you and your rabbit and prevents learning.

## **Unwanted Behaviors**

Using positive reinforcement methods doesn't mean you never say "no" to your rabbit. You just say it in a way she understands instead of using human language.

Either:

**Avoid the situation.** Restrict your rabbit's access to a place, person, or object. For example, limiting her territory to an x-pen wherein she reliably uses the litter box.

**Redirect** her to an acceptable channel for her behavior.

For more about rabbit training and behavior, see the *House Rabbit Handbook* by Marinell Harriman or *Clicker Training Your Rabbit* by Joan Orr and Teresa Lewin.

## COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

**Myth: My rabbit doesn't use the litter box out of spite or because she can't be trained.**

**Reality:** Your rabbit is not spiteful and she can be trained. Rule out medical causes, but most house soiling issues arise because your rabbit does not know what is expected of her. Keep her in a small area where she reliably uses the litter box and allow her more territory very slowly.

**Myth: My rabbit chews on my things because she is naughty.**

**Reality:** Absolutely not. Your rabbit has constantly growing teeth and a constantly moving digestive tract; therefore, she has a strong instinct to chew. Provide more desirable chew toys and limit her access to precious and/or dangerous items.

**Myth: Rabbits don't require much space.**

**Reality:** Most pet store cages are far too small for rabbits and can cause muscle atrophy and respiratory issues from living on top of their own urine and feces. Rabbits should have enclosures at least 6 times their size and at least 2 hours per day outside these enclosures to exercise. Alternatively, rabbits may have free roam of a well rabbit-proofed home.

**Myth: Rabbits can't be trained.**

**Reality:** They most certainly can be. Just like chickens, dolphins, giraffes, dogs, and hippos, rabbits can indeed be trained. Integrating training games into your rabbit's everyday routine is a great way to enhance her well-being and quality of life.

**Myth: Rabbits are easy starter pets for children.**

**Reality:** Most rabbits do not like to be held. They can kick strongly when they feel unsafe and can injure themselves easily and severely if dropped. Rabbits prefer interaction on their own terms.

**Myth: Rabbits are inexpensive to care for.**

**Reality:** Not every veterinarian will treat rabbits. Therefore rabbit veterinary care can be quite expensive. As prey animals, rabbits often hide illness, so that once you notice, the situation requires emergency attention, which can also be expensive.