



## Royal Animal Hospital – Rabbit Care

Rabbits are affectionate animals that respond well to gentle treatment. They clean themselves as cats do, so there is generally no need to bathe them. The usual life span is 5-7 years, although they can live quite a bit longer. Bucks (males) tend to be somewhat more affectionate than does (females) but it really depends on individual personality.

### You Will Need:

1. a cage large enough for him to stand up in and hop around easily
2. a water bottle
3. Food bowls...heavy crock type work best.  
You'll be surprised at how strong your pet is, he can toss a light plastic bowl across the room.
4. SUPA RABBIT EXCEL or KAYTEE Exact and hay
5. salt wheel
6. litter
7. travelling carrier

Decide ahead of time where the cage will go. It should be in a sunny area (but not in direct sunlight, which can cause heat prostration and fur discoloration), free from drafts (which are hazardous). Find a spot relatively quiet, not near a TV or stereo. They prefer it a little cooler than you, so don't put it near a radiator.

### Feeding:

Be sure he has plenty of fresh water and hay at all times. Feed pellets according to weight. These pellets contain nearly all the nutrients he needs, so you don't need to make a salad for him. If you have to change diets do so slowly. Add a little of the new feed to the old for at least a week to get him used to it. If you change too fast he may refuse to eat. You can give him a small amount of rinsed vegetables after he's about 3 or 4 months old, but the main part of his diet should be pellets. He needs roughage to prevent hairballs, which are often fatal. Unlike cats, rabbits cannot vomit, so prevention is the best treatment. Make sure he always has fresh hay or alfalfa straw as roughage. He may sleep and play in it but he'll eat it too. You might want to try putting rice straw mats in the cage (available as floor covering at Pier They love to chew and toss them around. Papaya enzyme tablets, available at health food stores, will also do a lot to cut down on hair balls. Usually 1-2 a week is sufficient. Some owners give 1 a day, although it can contribute to weight gain. Do not overfeed, since excess fat will cause health problems, especially in breeding rabbits.

If you see "string-of-pearls" feces (feces strung together with strands of hair), you are seeing the start of a hairball problem. Increase straw and papaya tablets, call your vet ASAP.

If you want to give treats (useful in training), a couple of raisins or grapes, or a small slice of fruit or vegetable is great, just don't go overboard.

Because they're creatures of habit, they prefer the water they're used to. If you move to an area with a different water supply you may have to do the same thing you'd do when switching feed. Bring a gallon of the old water with you and gradually add the new to it. He may refuse to drink if it's suddenly changed. Always keep a salt wheel readily available in the cage.

#### **Litter:**

There are a number of things you can use, such as commercial rabbit or cat litter, pine shavings, or newspaper. Do not use cedar shavings, they can cause severe respiratory problems. If you try cat litter, be sure it doesn't have too strong an odor or he may not want to use it. Commercial rabbit litter is good, but it's hard to find. Whatever you use, always use the same thing or he'll get confused and "accidents" will be frequent. Be sure the litter box is emptied and washed out 2-3 times a week at least. You'll see 2 kinds of dropping. Normally the droppings are round and may be dry or somewhat damp. These are fairly inoffensive and can be swept up easily. You'll sometimes see soft, sticky clumps. They're called "night feces". They contain undigested material and nutrients. Don't worry if he eats them, it's perfectly ok since that's how he gets his vitamin D.

#### **Handling:**

Always lift under the arms with one hand, using the other to support his hind end. The hind legs are very strong; by kicking out unsupported he can easily twist and injure his spine. **DO NOT EVER LIFT BY THE EARS! Although many people believe it is correct, it absolutely is not! It causes extreme pain and damage. Do not pick up around the middle or by the legs.**

Whenever he's held be sure he's properly supported to be sure he doesn't fall if he squirms. Remember that rabbits are afraid of heights. Unless he feels secure he will scramble to save himself. By covering his eyes he will often calm down and not try to jump from your arms.

Once you've had him home for a week or so, and he's used to his new environment, handle and pet him as much as possible. Rabbits crave affection more than most animals.

#### **General Care:**

Check his teeth. If they're growing too long, crooked or broken, call your vet. Be sure there's something in the cage for him to chew. A piece of untreated pine works well.

Check his nails frequently. If too long they will cause him discomfort, as well as scratch you quite badly. You can get your vet to clip his nails, but you can do it yourself. If the nails are white you'll be able to see a little pink in them, which is the vein. When you cut, be sure to take off only the tip, being careful not to cut into the vein. If you do accidentally cut too deep use styptic powder to stop the bleeding and comfort your pet - it hurts! If the nails are dark be very careful. Take off only the tip.

Rabbits moult several times a year, and also in cases of sudden temperature changes. It's important that he be brushed frequently, each day is not too often. You can get a rabbit brush at most pet stores. Once used to it, most will happily accept brushing.

#### **Call Your Vet If:**

1. he refuses food or water for 12 hours
2. he doesn't urinate or defecate for 12 hours

3. droppings are different than normal, or if he strains
4. he has a discharge from the eyes, nose, mouth or genital area
5. he drools, pants, wheezes, sneezes frequently or seems to have trouble breathing
6. he seems listless, in pain or grinds his teeth
7. he suddenly becomes aggressive for no reason
8. teeth are broken, crooked, seem too long

If you notice anything that seems abnormal, don't be reluctant to call your vet. He or she will be able to reassure you.

Most vets will treat rabbits but few are really experienced with them. Those that are will be able to diagnose a problem quicker and cheaper than someone who doesn't usually deal with rabbits. Try to get a referral from a local breeder or call around to find someone with small or exotic animal experience.

### **General Tips:**

Rabbits enjoy attention but, like people, sometimes they just don't want to be bothered. Remember that your pet is a living creature, not a toy. Sometimes children are rougher than what's healthy, so they need supervision when handling a rabbit. A scared or abused rabbit can inflict a very nasty, painful wound.

You'll know he's scared if the eyes look wild, if you can see the whites of the eyes, or if he thumps the ground hard with hind leg (this is a warning of danger to the rest of the herd). If he growls (rabbit do vacalise sometimes) pushes your hand away or turns his back on you he doesn't want to be bothered. It's probably inevitable that someone will be bitten or scratched at some point. Resist temptation, DO NOT HIT OR YELL at him. Put him back in his cage. Because you don't want him to avoid the cage, always pet him after putting him back in, if it's not a punishment.

When he wants affection he will nudge you or try to climb into your lap. This is usually a good time to try brushing him.

You'll probably see him "chinning", or rubbing his chin on an object. He's using a scent gland to mark his territory (humans can't smell it but other animals can). He may even "chin" you.

Don't leave him alone for more than a couple of days. If you're going to be away longer make sure that someone will give him fresh water, food, litter and attention. If you can't get a friend to do it you'll have to board him with your vet or a local kennel that has facilities away from other animals. Use a traveling carrier for short trips, making sure he has access to water. Don't leave him in a car unattended; the temperature can quickly become unbearable. Eighty degrees seems a little warm for us but it can be much too warm for a rabbit.

Be very careful when he's exposed to strangers (teach them how to lift and handle him) and other animals (dogs, cats and snakes are natural predators). A single bunny can be very loving, but remember he's a social animal and requires a lot of attention. If you decide to get a companion for him, remember that you'll need a much larger cage if you intend to house them together. You'll need a separate cage at first, until you see how they get along. Introduce them slowly. Try to have someone holding each at first to prevent a fight. If they don't get along, they'll have to be caged separately. Although there are

exceptions, generally two of the same sex will fight. A buck and a doe will often live happily together but they'll BOTH have to be neutered if you don't intend to breed them, for health reasons and to prevent aggression (as well as baby bunnies!).

A buck needs to be neutered to prevent spraying and testicular tumors. A doe needs to be neutered to prevent mammary tumors (common in fertile, inbred does) and to protect yourself! Non-neutered does can be VERY aggressive when in heat, and often bite without warning.

Sometimes when he's content, especially if you're petting him, you may hear him softly clicking his teeth. This is a sign of pleasure and is not to be confused with grinding of the teeth, which is an indication of pain.

To some degree it is possible to train a rabbit, as long as you don't expect too much. You can teach him certain commands, such as NO, GO HOME and so on, but you must not expect that he will do what you want all the time. If he does what you want more than half the time he's doing pretty well! A rabbit will never accept commands as a dog will. It takes time, effort and vast amounts of patience. Using small treat rewards and gentle handling will make the job much easier. Just remember that you cannot train him to do something he would not do naturally...if you want your slippers fetched, get a dog!

To teach him to go back to his cage, put him in front of it when it's time and gently nudge him forward, saying "GO HOME" continuously. At first he'll probably run in the other direction, but when he does hop inside pet him and give him a small treat. As he gets it, try it from farther away each time. After a while (probably at least a month of daily training) he'll start to surprise you. Like any other command he won't listen all the time but it'll be often enough to make life a whole lot easier. When He First Arrives: Put him in the cage with fresh water, food, litter and salt wheel. Leave him undisturbed for 24-48 hours to give him time to adjust. He'll pick a spot to use as a bathroom (away from his food and water), so if you decide to train him to a litter box, put it in that spot after a few days. Speak to him softly, using his new name to get him to respond to it. After a day or 2 you can begin to handle him and let him out of the cage.

Ideally, he should be allowed to run free at least twice a day, for at least an hour. Never let him out unsupervised since rabbits love to chew electrical cords, wood and rugs. To stop him from chewing electrical cords, rub Tabasco Sauce, Texas Pete or other hot or bitter flavor on the cords. It usually only takes a couple of times before he gets the message.

Stopping rug-chewing takes more work. The best thing is to try to teach him the meaning of NO. When he chews the rug, stop him while saying "NO, NO, NO" firmly, but do not yell (a scared rabbit will not learn). If he continues (which he will, in the beginning) pick him up and put in back in the cage, saying "NO, NO, NO" all the while. This is by no means a quick fix, but he'll get it eventually. It usually takes a minimum of a few weeks to a few months to teach him what NO means. Face it, although they're sweet and cuddly they're not rocket scientists. Once he's got it you should be able to stop most bad behavior by saying NO.

If he has an accident outside the cage or litter box, use the same method. If he's left droppings put them in the litter. Be sure to wash the accident site carefully or he'll continue to go back there.