

ANIMAL TALK
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Rabbit

Oryctolagus cuniculus



Necessities:

- Chew sticks
- Cage
- Bedding
- Oxbow pellets
- Hay—alfalfa/timothy
- Water bottle
- Food dish
- Place to hide/sleep
- Mineral lick

Extras:

- Litter box/litter
- Toys
- Treats
- Hammock
- Harness/leash

General:

Rabbits are one of the cuddliest of all pets to have. They can be potty trained, learn tricks and are one of the favorite pets for apartment dwellers. Rabbits live 7-10 years and come in a variety of sizes and colors. They are a commitment just like a dog or cat and careful consideration must be taken before purchasing one. They can be **spayed/neutered**, which we highly recommend as it reduces odor, mating behaviors and many health problems, and usually increases the lifespan by a few years.

Handling/Exercise:

The more time you spend with the bunny the more affectionate and happy the bunny will be. Rabbits enjoy being members of the household. We DO NOT recommend that they be kept outside. They are easy prey for predators and are too easily forgotten about. Rabbits are easily leash trained and will enjoy being outside with you to enjoy some hopping and fresh grass. When picking up your bunny it is important to remember that heights are very scary for them so be gentle and support them by placing your hands underneath them and allow them to put all 4 feet up against you. Remember to NEVER pick them up by their ears or by the back of the neck. Recommended reading: Barron's™ "Hop To It", Barron's™ "The New Rabbit Handbook", and "The House Rabbit Handbook".

Housing & Bedding:

Rabbits require a cage that allows room for them to move around and be comfortable (**we recommend nothing smaller than 18 x 30**). Bigger is always better and the size of the adult bunny will be a key factor in the size of the cage. Even though the cage may be of adequate size, daily exercise is very important. Rabbits are much safer being **kept in the house**, warm, dry and safe. The cage should be kept clean at all times so that the bunny's feet are not in contact with the urine as this can lead to foot disease. The cage should be **cleaned at least** once a week but more often is even better. Since rabbits usually go in the same spot, daily scooping can greatly reduce any smell. Do not use household cleaners. When cleaning the cage it is important to use only bleach and water and to rinse thoroughly. We recommend using Care-fresh™ bedding or pine shavings (if you keep the cage very clean), NEVER CEDAR! Even some cat litters may be used.

Diet:

Baby bunnies (7 weeks to 8 months) should be allowed **as much pelleted food as they would like to eat**. Their digestive tracts are still forming at this age so it very important to introduce new things to their diet very slowly and carefully. We carry Oxbow™ bunny foods, which are lifestage-balanced. When feeding Oxbow™ diets follow the instructions on the bag. They also require alfalfa hay.

For adult bunnies we still prefer the Oxbow adult pellets. When feeding these, follow the instructions on the bag. Rabbit pellets (feed -tore quality, alfalfa-based) may be offered daily, but in limited quantities. The uncontrolled feeding of a pelleted diet can lead to obesity, heart and liver disease, kidney stones, chronic diarrhea, and kidney disease which results from the high concentration of carbohydrates, low fiber and high calcium levels in alfalfa-based pellets. Make sure that you buy pellets high in fiber (18% or higher), and that you buy small quantities. Keep the pellets refrigerated or cool and dry to prevent spoilage. Old, rancid pellets can cause a rabbit to stop eating. If you must buy more than 2 months of pellets at a time, freeze them.

The following chart shows the daily amounts to be fed to an 8-month or older bunny. Do not refill the bowl even if the pellets are all eaten before the next day. Overfeeding pellets is the number-one cause of health problems that we see. Keep your rabbit happy by not overdoing it.

2-4 lb body weight - 1/8 cup daily

5-7 lb body weight - 1/4 cup daily

8-10 lb body weight - 1/2 cup daily

11-15 lb body weight - 3/4 cup daily

Please note that these food amounts are for the maintenance of the adult non-breeding house rabbit. For does that are nursing babies, the pellets should be offered free choice until the babies are weaned. After the breeding period is over, resume feeding at the maintenance levels as listed above.

Timothy Hay or Grass Hay - These should be offered DAILY in UNLIMITED QUANTITIES. It is critically important that hay be available at all times for your pet. Rabbits eat small amounts of food frequently throughout the day and withholding hay for long periods of time can lead to intestinal upsets. We prefer the loose long strands of hay, as opposed to the pressed cubes or chopped hay. The fiber in the hay is extremely important in promoting normal digestion and the prevention of furballs. Hay also contains proteins and other nutrients essential to the good health of your pet. We no longer recommend the use of alfalfa hay because it appears to be too high in calcium and carbohydrates which may lead to serious health problems and digestive upsets. Discard any wet or damp hay or any hay that does not have that "fresh" smell. At certain times of the year it may be difficult to get timothy or grass hay. At these times it is okay to use hays mixed with alfalfa or straight alfalfa for a short period of time. The important thing is to **ALWAYS HAVE HAY AVAILABLE TO THE PET**. Remember we are restricting the pellets and the hay is a major source of fiber and nutrients.

Fresh Foods - These foods should be given daily. Rabbits in the wild eat primarily tough, fibrous leaves, bark and other difficult-to-digest plants. Their digestive tract is happiest when it has the most work to do in breaking down cellulose. If your pet is not used to getting any fresh foods, then start out gradually with the green leafy veggies and add a new food item from the list every 5 - 7 days. If the addition of any item leads to diarrhea or unformed stools in 24 - 48 hours, then remove it from the diet.

Remember young bunnies should also be introduced to new foods gradually. However, once your pet is eating these foods, try to give at least 3 types daily. We find that the addition of these fresh fibrous foods helps (along with hay) in the prevention of hairballs and digestive upsets, plus your bunny will love you for it! The following are all foods that you can try on your pet. The total amount of fresh food that can be given daily (once your pet has been gradually introduced to it as described above) is about 1 heaping cup (loosely packed) per 5 lbs of body weight:

Carrot tops, beet tops, dandelion greens and flowers (these are excellent, but no pesticides or fertilizers please!), kale, collard greens, escarole, romaine lettuce (not light-colored leaf lettuce or iceberg lettuce), parsley, clover, cabbage, broccoli and leaves, carrot, green peppers, pea pods (the flat edible kind), Brussels sprouts, basil, peppermint leaves, raspberry leaves, radicchio, bok choy and spinach.

Treat Foods - in small amounts, you can give one of these "treat" foods daily (about 1 level teaspoon per 5 lbs body weight). Strawberries, papaya, pineapple, pear, melon, raspberries, peach or dried whole grain bread. One can alternately give 1 level teaspoon per 5 lbs of body weight of banana or dried fruit.

WE DO NOT RECOMMEND GIVING ANY OF THE FOLLOWING FOODS ROUTINELY BECAUSE OF THEIR POTENTIAL FOR CAUSING DIETARY UPSET OR OBESITY: Salt or sugary snacks, nuts, chocolate, breakfast cereals and other grains (including oatmeal and corn).

Heating & Lighting

Rabbits do not require extra heat as long as your house doesn't get below 65 degrees and they have plenty of bedding to nest in. They also do not require extra lighting other than the ambient light in the room, but it should be light during the day and dark at night to allow for a normal sleep and eating cycle.

Health and Wellbeing:

They are a very hardy animal with relatively few known health problems other than digestive upsets, getting too cold, dehydration or toxic reactions due to airborne toxins. We hope this information is helpful for you. If you have any questions please give us a call. Our favorite vet for bunnies is Dr. Karen Obegi 206-365-1102.