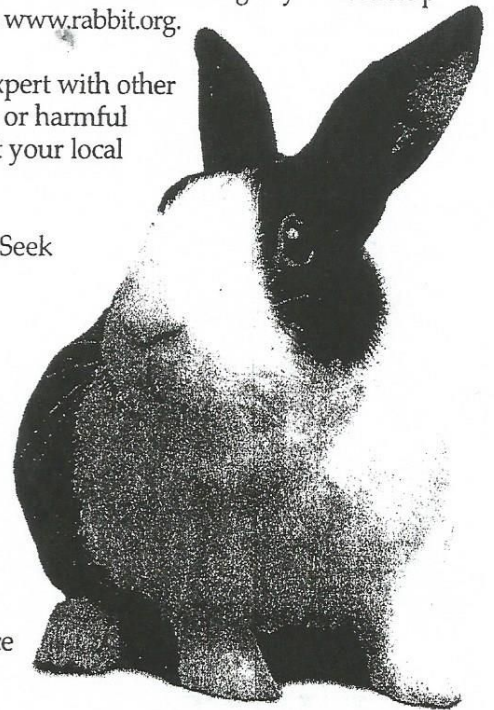


10-POINT PRIMER FOR NEW BUNNY FAMILIES

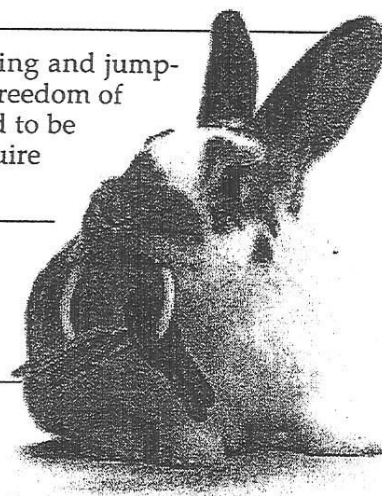
Mary E. Cotter, Ed.D., Licensed Educator, House Rabbit Society (mec@cloud9.net)

- 1) Pine and cedar shavings are not recommended for use with rabbits and other small mammals. Inhaled phenols (the substances that make pine and cedar "smell good") can cause liver changes in rabbits. Clay litters (clumping or non-clumping) are also not recommended. The "clumpers" can clump in the rabbit's GI tract, and dust from plain clay litters can exacerbate respiratory problems.
- 2) Spaying and neutering is recommended for all rabbits. Rabbits can have a litter every 30 days, and can get pregnant within minutes after giving birth. Not only does spaying/neutering prevent unwanted litters, but it also protects female rabbits from uterine cancer (the rate as females grow older ranges from 50-80%), and permits male/female pairs to live happily together without being driven by their hormones.
- 3) Rabbits can easily be litterbox-trained—but you and the rabbit must "negotiate" this process. Start in a small area. Watch to see which corner the rabbit wants to use for urination, and place a litterbox there. Some rabbits need several litterboxes to start.
- 4) The primary component of a mature rabbit's diet should be grass hay (Timothy, Brome, Orchard Grass, etc.). This should be given fresh daily, in large quantities. Hay can be ordered over the internet from various companies (see <http://www.rabbit.org/links/mail-order-resources.html>). Using hay as a litterbox material is ideal; it cushions the rabbit's feet so they stay dry, and encourages the rabbit to munch on hay while he's doing his business. To supplement hay, feed a daily salad of dark green leafy vegetables. Rabbit pellets should be given only in very limited quantities. The unrestricted feeding of pellets leads to obesity and often to bladder sludge. If you use pellets, buy only perfectly plain ones; do not be tempted by the "fancier" pellets with their eye-catching seeds, nuts, corn, and other "tidbits." These ingredients are simply not good for your rabbit over the long term, and some of them are downright dangerous.
- 5) Be sure to "bunny-proof" the areas where your rabbit will exercise. Many — though not all — rabbits are prodigious chewers. They will chew electrical wires, carpeting, and other objects commonly found in any household. Although many people keep rabbits outdoors, this is not recommended. Indoor rabbits live healthier, happier, longer (7-10 years or more) lives.
- 6) Never attempt to "punish" or "discipline" a rabbit. These tactics will often create fear and defensive biting. If you need help with a behavior problem, contact your local HRS representative or visit the HRS web site: www.rabbit.org.
- 7) Rabbits need veterinarians skilled in rabbit medicine. Many wonderful vets are expert with other species, but are not knowledgeable about rabbits, and may administer inappropriate or harmful drugs in their efforts to help. To find a rabbit-savvy veterinarian in your area, contact your local HRS representative, or search the HRS web page: www.rabbit.org
- 8) Anorexia and /or watery diarrhea in rabbits should be considered emergencies. Seek expert veterinary care immediately.
- 9) Rabbits are not recommended for small children. Rabbits are prey animals by nature, and are easily frightened by children's handling. Rabbits are often dropped by children, resulting in broken legs and backs. An adult should always be the rabbit's primary caretaker, and should carefully supervise any children interacting with the rabbit.
- 10) The most common rabbit veterinary problems are: ear mites, ear infections, urinary tract infections, abscesses, tooth problems (incisor malocclusion and/or molar spurs), uterine cancer (in unspayed females), upper respiratory infections (watch for sneezing or runny eyes/nose), gastrointestinal slowdown or stasis, changes in balance or gait. A skilled rabbit veterinarian should be consulted for any of these problems.



9 COMMON RABBIT MYTHS

Myth 1: Rabbits are great, low-maintenance starter pets.	Reality: Although they don't need to be walked like dogs, rabbits are anything but low-maintenance. Their quarters need daily cleaning, and fresh food and water must be offered daily, including a salad of well-washed, dark-green leafy vegetables. Certain rabbit health problems can become chronic and can require regular (and sometimes expensive) veterinary treatment. To complicate the picture, veterinarians skilled in rabbit medicine are often hard to find.
Myth 2: Rabbits only live a year or two, so no long commitment is necessary.	Reality: Well cared-for indoor rabbits can live 7-10 years, and some live into their teens. This is approximately the same life span as some breeds of dogs, and requires the same long-term commitment.
Myth 3: Rabbits do not need veterinary care the way dogs and cats do.	Reality: Although rabbits in the USA do not require annual vaccinations, nevertheless, regular veterinary checkups help to detect small problems before they become big ones. Companion rabbits should be spayed/neutered by veterinarians experienced in rabbit surgery. This not only reduces hormone-driven behaviors such as lunging, mounting, spraying, and boxing, but also protects females from the risk of uterine cancer, the incidence of which can exceed 50% as rabbits grow older.
Myth 4: Rabbits are happiest outdoors in a backyard hutch.	Reality: Rabbits kept outdoors in hutches are often forgotten and neglected once the initial novelty wears off. Far too frequently, they are relegated to a life of "solitary confinement" and are subject to extremes of weather, as well as to diseases spread by fleas, ticks, flies, and mosquitoes all of which can adversely affect their health and their life span. They can die of heart attacks from the very approach of a predator – even if the rabbit is not attacked or bitten. Rabbits are gregarious creatures who enjoy social contact with their human caretakers. The easiest way to provide social stimulation for a companion rabbit is to house him indoors, as a member of the family.
Myth 5: Rabbits are rather dirty, and have a strong odor.	Reality: Rabbits are immaculately clean, and, once they have matured and are spayed/neutered, they go to great lengths not to soil their living quarters. They will readily use a litter-box, and if the box is cleaned or changed daily, there is no offensive odor
Myth 6: Rabbits love to be picked up and cuddled, and do not scratch or bite.	Reality: Although some rabbits tolerate handling quite well, many do not like to be picked up and carried. If rabbits are mishandled they will learn to nip to protect themselves. If they feel insecure when carried they may scratch to get down. Unspayed/unneutered rabbits often exhibit territorial behavior such as "boxing" or nipping when their territory is "invaded" by the owner.
Myth 7: Rabbits – especially dwarf breeds – do not require much living space.	Reality: Rabbits have powerful hind legs designed for running and jumping. They need living space that will permit them ample freedom of movement even when they are confined. Dwarf rabbits tend to be more active and energetic than some larger breeds, and require relatively more space.
Myth 8: Rabbits can be left alone for a day or two when owners travel.	Reality: Rabbits need daily monitoring. Problems that are relatively minor in some species (e.g. a day or two of anorexia) may be life-threatening in rabbits, and may require immediate veterinary attention.
Myth 9: Rabbits do fine with a bowl of rabbit food and some daily carrots.	Reality: The single most important component of a rabbit's diet is grass hay, which should be provided, free-choice, daily. Rabbit pellets should be given only in very limited quantities.





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HOUSING

- Roomy stainless steel or welded wire cage with door at rabbit level. Solid sided cages or aquariums do not allow enough air circulation and predispose bunny to respiratory disease.
- "Resting board" to cover part of wire floor (Plexiglas, wood, cardboard)
- Litter box inside cage to reinforce litter training (see litter below). Clean litterbox daily
- Heavy bowl or parrot feeder (attaches to cage) for pellets
- Heavy dish for fresh foods. Disinfect weekly.
- Water bottle or heavy crock for water. Disinfect weekly.
- Indoor housing is preferred. Gradually increase freedom in bunny safe areas
- If rabbit must be housed outdoors, monitor temperature closely. Bring indoors or set up fans and ice bottles if temperature is above 85 degrees F. Predators (raccoons, dogs, cats, hawks, fire ants etc) can kill a rabbit, either directly injuring or from fright and stress. A screened porch or Florida room is better than a hutch in the yard.

LITTER

- Do NOT use pine or cedar shavings as they contain phenol and other organic compounds that can damage the liver and respiratory tract.
- Do NOT use scoopable or clay cat litter. It can cause illness and intestinal blockage in rabbits.
- Do NOT use corncob litter. It develops mold easily and can cause intestinal impactions
- Organic litters that are safe for your rabbit include Yesterday's News, Carefresh, Feline Pine (this is safe as opposed to the pine shavings because the pellets are made by a heat extrusion process which burns off the phenols and other compounds), aspen shavings, or shredded newspaper (black & white only, NOT colored sections)

LITTER TRAINING

- Place litterbox in corner of cage that bunny is using.
- Fill box with litter and hay in one corner to encourage bunny to spend time in box. Add a few droppings and a urine soaked tissue. Softly praise bunny for using the litterbox
- When bunny is using litterbox consistently in cage, gradually increase area (a puppy exercise pen or small room is good for this). Provide extra litterboxes initially, gradually decreasing the number of boxes as bunny becomes more reliable.
- White vinegar will clean and disinfect any urine "accidents".

- If bunny is using another area for the bathroom, disinfect well and place a litterbox over that area.
- Spaying or neutering will help with good litterbox habits

ENTERTAINMENT

- Chewing and digging are natural bunny behaviors. Provide safe toys to distract bunny from destructive chewing.
- Good playthings/chew toys include cardboard boxes (tape and staples removed), raw untreated citrus or apple branches (no pesticides) or untreated pieces of wood (the bigger the better!), untreated wicker baskets, untreated grass mats, "macaw safe" parrot toys, wire cat balls with bells inside, toilet paper rolls or mason jar rings. Fill baskets, cardboard boxes or paper bags with hay for digging.
- Daily exercise is important to keep bunny lean and strong and to help gut function. Supervised free time in bunny-proofed areas of the house is ideal (see below for bunny proofing). Leave cage door open while bunny is out to allow access to food water and litterbox. A wire puppy exercise pen can provide safe space to run indoors or out. Place a sheet or other cover on top to prevent escape. The height of the pen depends on bunny's size and athletic ability, but in general 3 to 4 feet is adequate. A waterproof floor covered with grass mats can protect the carpet indoors. Provide a litterbox in the exercise pen.



GROOMING

- Brush with soft cat brush, fine wire slicker brush or flea comb. Angora and other longhaired rabbits must be groomed daily. Other rabbits can be groomed as needed, more frequently during shedding. Rex rabbits can be groomed with a sticky tape lint remover or with a damp cloth or hand to remove the fine, short hairs. Grooming time is bonding time, so be gentle and make it a pleasant experience for both of you.
- Nails should be trimmed as necessary. Use a cat nail trimmer and cut tips below the quick. A flashlight can help to see the quick in dark colored nails. Bleeding can be stopped with "quick Stop" or flour dabbed on the end of the nail.
- Routine ear cleaning is not usually necessary. Excessive wax, dry scaly debris or any discharge is abnormal.
- Rabbits have scent glands located in a little pocket on either side of the anus. Most rabbits clean this area themselves. If reddish odiferous wax accumulates, the scent glands can be cleaned with a Q-tip and warm water.
- If fleas are a problem, Advantage can be used at ½ of the cat dose or pyrethrin flea powder can be applied. Rarely, a rabbit can have a severe reaction to Advantage, so use only if there is an infestation. The house can be treated with an insect growth regulator. Rabbits are very sensitive to all

insecticides, so use with caution. If you have any doubt, call your veterinarian before using a product.

BUNNY PROOFING

- Rabbits are curious and explore with their nose and teeth. They like to burrow under things and some like to climb. They can be very resourceful in getting over, around or through barriers. Keep this in mind when making bunny's play area safe.
- Electrical cords are a delicacy for rabbits but can be fatal if chewed. They can be covered with cord protectors, flexible plastic tubing, shower curtain rods, PVC pipe, or automotive tubing if they cannot be placed securely out of reach. Slice the tubing lengthwise and insert the cord.
- Remove all houseplants from bunny's reach. Some houseplants can be toxic if ingested.
- Furniture legs can be protected with hard acrylic corner protectors. The baseboards can be covered with plain untreated wood baseboards to protect them.
- Make sure bunny is not chewing the stuffing from the sofa or chairs. If this occurs, block access to the furniture.
- Provide lots of toys to encourage appropriate chewing and digging.
- Check your bunny proofing frequently!!! And always supervise your bunny during free time.

INTERACTING WITH/TRAINING YOUR RABBIT

- Good behavior is based on a relationship of trust between you and your rabbits.
- When lifting a rabbit, ALWAYS support the hindquarters
- Holding one hand under bunny's chest, scoop up the hindquarters and bring bunny quickly to your chest.
- Most rabbits do not like to be held. If bunny struggles, either restrain him/her firmly and close to the chest OR quickly kneel to the floor and release the bunny.
- Interact with bunny on floor level. While still building trust, allow bunny to come to you without reaching out.
- Most rabbits like to be stroked on the top of the forehead.
- Hand feeding treats like herbs, veggies or fruits helps bunny learn that you are the source of all things good and builds trust.
- Approach from the side, as rabbits have a blind spot directly in front of and underneath their nose.
- Positive reinforcement works best for training. A squirt of water or a loud clap can be used to discipline bunny only if necessary. Rabbits are sensitive creatures, and gentle corrections are best. Physical punishment will ruin your bunny's bond of trust and risks injury to you and your rabbit.
- The more a bunny is gently handled and interacted with, the easier grooming and picking up will become.

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FRESH FOODS

Fresh foods constitute a very important part of your house rabbit's diet. If your rabbit has never had fresh foods, start out gradually. It is a good idea to introduce HAY into the diet and make sure your rabbit is eating it before introducing fresh foods.

Once you establish fresh foods in the diet, you must be consistent in providing it daily. A rabbit's gastro-intestinal tract is VERY sensitive to changes.

Introduce one new food at a time and monitor your rabbit's droppings for 24 hours before introducing another new food. Any diarrhea or soft stool within a few hours after a new food is eaten may indicate that bunny is not yet ready for that particular food. His or her gastro-intestinal tract will become accustomed to fresh foods given daily as long as hay is also provided.

Even young rabbits can enjoy small amounts of fresh food; just be cautious introducing them and monitor your rabbits' droppings and attitude carefully. Rabbit Rescue gives our young bunnies 8 – 12 weeks old a little more than a tablespoon of fresh veggies every day, gradually increasing fresh foods until they reach maturity. Hay is always available to them.

The following are some of the fresh foods that are safe to offer your rabbit. Make sure your rabbit's fresh food is of "people quality". We advise five to eight DIFFERENT fresh foods in alternation daily, totaling as indicated:

FRESH VEGETABLES FOR BUNNY (1 cup per four pounds body weight)

Asparagus	Hibiscus flower **
Alfalfa sprouts	Kale* (!)
Basil	Kohlrabi
Beet greens * (!)	Mints (all)
Bidens spp.	Mustard greens *
Bok Choy	Okra
Broccoli (all parts) *	Parsley*
Brussel sprouts	Pumpkin*
Cabbage (!)	Purslane**
Carrots and tops *	Raddichio
Celery and greens*	Radish greens & sprouts
Chard* (!)	Romaine lettuce*
Citrus leaves and branches **	Snow peas*
Clover and sprouts **	Squash*
Collard greens*	Spinach* (!)
Cucumbers	Sweet potato#
Dandelion (all parts)	Tomato
Endive*	Turnips and greens*
Escarole	Watercress
Green peppers	Wheat grass (kitty grass)
	Yams#

4. FRESH FRUIT

These are considered treats, and should be fed in very limited quantities (no more than two tablespoons a day for a five-pound rabbit!) Good choices are apple, banana (rare treat!), mango, peach, papaya, pineapple, apricot, berries...just about any fruit you would like is okay for your bunny. Just don't overdo.

BUT DON'T FEED THESE DANGEROUS TREATS:

NEVER feed your rabbit commercial "gourmet" or "treat" mixes filled with dried fruit, nuts and seed. These may be safe for a bird or hamster--BUT THEY WILL EVENTUALLY KILL YOUR RABBIT! The high fat and carbohydrate content of these are not healthy for your rabbit's liver and digestive tract.

Also do not feed Iceberg lettuce, cookies, crackers, nuts, seed, salty or sugary snacks, breakfast cereals (including oatmeal) or other starchy snacks. These promote obesity, intestinal disorders and liver damage. Don't do it!

LOVE YOUR PET. DO THE RIGHT THING. FEED PROPERLY!!!

This information is provided to you by Dana Krempels, Ph.D. of the House Rabbit Society, Miami Chapter. For more information, call (305)284-3977.

Rabbit Food Pyramid

DEFINITE NO-NO'S

These are foods that should not be given at any time.

- No Chocolate (poisonous!)
- Cookies
- Crackers
- Breakfast Cereal
- Yogurt Drops
- Pasta
- Bread
- Most "human" treats

Treats

Limit to very small amounts, 1 or 2 times per week; this includes fresh fruits. Consult with your rabbit's vet.

Pellets

Limited, high-quality pellets (no seeds or dried fruits) as directed by your rabbit's vet.

Vegetables

A variety of fresh greens, daily.

Timothy

Orchard Grass

Oat Hay

Brome

Hay

Only very small amounts of Alfalfa, if any. Check with your vet.

Unlimited Grass Hays

This is the staple of your rabbit's diet.



Be sure to consult with your veterinarian on the proper diet for your rabbit's optimum health.

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MEDICAL CONCERNS OF RABBITS

- ❖ Spay or neuter is recommended for all house rabbits. Females are at serious risk of uterine cancer, up to 95% of unspayed females over 6 years old have uterine adenocarcinoma. Spay or neuter helps decrease territorial marking of urine and feces, and decreases aggression. It is easier to bond two rabbits when they have been altered.
- ❖ Rabbits are very good at hiding illness until it's severe. Spend time with your bunny and learn his/her habits so you can more easily detect subtle signs of illness. Monitor food and water consumption, fecal production, and urination.
- ❖ A yearly veterinary check up is recommended for bunnies up to middle age (4 to 5 years old), then every six months as bunny enters his/her senior years.
- ❖ Signs that bunny needs veterinary attention:
 - Soft feces or diarrhea
 - Decreased appetite
 - Decreased fecal production
 - Excessive drooling or a wet dewlap "slobbers"
 - Weakness, esp. in the hind legs
 - Lameness
 - Head tilt, circling, rolling
 - Seizures
 - Lumps or bumps anywhere on the body, but especially on the jaw
 - Excessive tearing, whitish or yellowish discharge from eyes
 - Red, irritated eyes
 - Sneezing, nasal discharge, matter caked on the inside of the front paws "snuffles"
 - Straining to urinate
 - Thick, white urine or bright red blood in the urine (the normal color of rabbit urine ranges from clear light yellow to cloudy whitish yellow to orangish – red.)
 - Flaky, waxy discharge or itching of ears
 - Bald spots, flakes or itchy skin
 - Red, raw oozing skin on the heels "sore hocks"
- ❖ See the veterinarian ASAP if the following occur:
 - Temperature below 100 or above 104 degrees F
 - Trouble breathing
 - Bloated abdomen
 - Broken bones or paralysis
 - Weak, not eating, no fecal production
- ❖ If you think something's not right with your bunny, better safe than sorry, come in for a check up