

# Basic Rabbit Care

**Diet:** A sound rabbit diet consists of fresh hay, good-quality pellets, and fresh vegetables. Anything beyond this considered a "treat" and should be offered in limited quantities only.

- Hay is essential for rabbit health as the roughage provided by hay reduces the risk of gastrointestinal problems. Untreated wood twigs also provide roughage (see bunny proofing below).
- Pellets should be fresh and relatively high in fiber (20-25% minimum crude fiber).
- Offer a variety of pesticide-free vegetables, including leafy greens and root vegetables. Add one vegetable to the diet at a time. Eliminate any item that causes soft stool or diarrhea.

Alfalfa, radish & clover sprouts  
Basil  
Beet greens (tops)  
Bok choy  
Brussels sprouts  
Carrot tops

Celery  
Cilantro  
Clover  
Dandelion greens & flowers  
Escarole  
Green peppers

Mint  
Parsley  
Pea pods (flat edible kind)  
Peppermint leaves  
Radicchio  
Radish tops

Raspberry leaves  
Spinach  
Watercress  
Wheat grass

	Alfalfa Hay	Grass Hay	Pellets	Veggies	Fruit
 12 weeks Credit: Gina Matarazzo	100%	0%			
Postpubescent: ~7 mos. to 1y	75%	25%			
 Adult ~1-5y	0%	100%			

Offer young rabbits unlimited amounts of calcium and protein-rich alfalfa hay and alfalfa-based pellets. Very young rabbits, between 7 to 12 weeks, should not be offered vegetables and NEVER fruit as devastating gastrointestinal problems can arise. As the rabbit matures, gradually reduce the quantity of pellets offered and

## Rabbit Diet

### Leafy Greens

These foods should make up about 75% of the fresh portion of your rabbit's diet (about 1 packed cup per 2 lbs of body weight per day).

Leafy Greens need to be rotated due to oxalic acid content and only 1 out of three varieties of greens a day should be from this list

- Parsley
- Spinach
- Mustard Greens
- Beet Greens
- Swiss chard
- Radish tops
- Sprouts (from 1 to 6 days after sprouting sprouts have higher levels of alkaloids)

### Leafy Greens (low in oxalic acid)

- Arugula
- Carrot tops
- Cucumber leaves
- Endive
- Ecarole
- Frisee Lettuce
- Kale (all types)
- Mache
- Red or green lettuce
- Romaine lettuce
- Spring greens
- Turnip greens
- Dandelion greens
- Mint (any variety)

- Basil (any variety)
- Watercress
- Wheatgrass
- Chicory
- Raspberry leaves
- Cilantro
- Radicchio
- Bok Choy
- Fennel (the leafy tops as well as the base)
- Borage leaves
- Dill leaves
- Yu choy

### **Non-Leafy Vegetables**

These should be no more than about 15% of the diet (About 1 tablespoon per 2 lbs of body weight per day).

- Carrots
- Broccoli (leaves and stems)
- Edible flowers (roses, nasturtiums, pansies, hibiscus)
- Celery
- Bell peppers (any color)
- Chinese pea pods (the flat kind without large peas)
- Brussel sprouts
- Cabbage (any type)
- Broccolini
- Summer squash
- Zucchini squash

### **Fruits**

These should be no more than 10% of the diet (about 1 teaspoon per 2lbs of body weight per day). Note unless otherwise stated it is more nutritious to

leave the skin on the fruit (particularly if organic), just wash thoroughly. If you are in doubt about the source of the fruit and you are concerned about chemicals in the skin, then remove it.

- Apple (any variety, without stem and seeds)
- Cherries (any variety, without the pits)
- Pear
- Peach
- Plum (without the pits)
- Kiwi
- Papaya
- Mango
- Berries (any type)
- Pineapple (remove the skin)
- Banana (remove peel; no more than about 2 1/8 inch slices a day for a 5 lb rabbit... they LOVE this!)
- Melons (any- can include peel and seeds)
- Star Fruit
- Apricot
- Currants
- Nectarine

Bunny proofing your home is part of living with a house rabbit. It is natural for rabbits to chew on furniture, rugs, drapes, and, most deadly of all, electrical cords. Young rabbits (< 1 year of age) are more inclined to mischief and require more confinement and/or bunny proofing than mature rabbits. Since bunny proofing can be extensive, some owners confine house rabbits to one or two rooms instead of allowing access to the entire home.

Protect your rabbit and your home:

- It is imperative that electrical cords be hidden or covered with tubing or hard plastic casing since one bite by your bunny could be fatal. Arrange furniture to hide cords and electrical outlets. Conceal cords within vinyl tubing, found at hardware stores, so that the rabbit cannot reach them. Split the tubing lengthwise with a utility knife so the cord can be pushed inside.
- Use Plexiglas to cover wallpaper or part of a carpet. Tack a thin strip of untreated wood over a baseboard to protect it from bunny teeth. Place grass mats on the floor to protect carpet or rugs.
- Gates, such as those used to keep children and dogs out of certain areas, are another way to create a safe area for your bunny. If your rabbit seems overly interested in chewing the gate, try decorating it with permitted chew toys (see below) as a diversion.
- Remove poisonous plants and other toxic substances as well as any small objects that could be ingested from the rabbit area.

Provide plenty of attention and offer safe, chewable items so that your rabbit is distracted from furniture and rugs

- Untreated wicker baskets and wood
- Willow bark balls
- Grass mats, jute and hemp doormats
- Cat balls or other cat toys that roll or can be tossed
- Hard plastic baby toys. Make sure that the rabbit is not eating and ingesting these toys!
- Large tubs of hay, newspapers, or a towel can be offered as an outlet for digging.
- Nudge and roll toys like large rubber balls, empty Quaker Oat boxes and small tins
- Create a climbing area with baskets, boxes, and pillows
- Paper bags and cardboard boxes for crawling inside, scratching, and chewing
- Tunnels can be made from open-ended cardboard boxes, cat tunnels, and cardboard propped up against the side of a wall.
- Untreated wood twigs and logs that have been aged for at least 3 months. Apple tree branches can be eaten fresh off the tree. Stay away from: cherry, peach, apricot, plum and redwood, which are all poisonous.
- A cardboard box stuffed with hay, straw, or shredded paper makes an inexpensive play box.
- Yellow Pages for shredding
- Straw whisk broom

## Temperature & Humidity

Place the cage in the coolest, least humid area of the house away from heat and drafts. A temperature range of 16-21°C (60-70°F) is ideal for pet rabbits. Temperatures in the upper 80s and higher can potentially cause fatal heat stroke. During hot weather, leave a frozen bottle of water in the cage and wet down the ears to help cool the bunny. Cool tiles can also be offered as a refreshing spot on which rabbits can lie in warm weather.

**Handling:** Offering your hand for a rabbit to sniff, much as you would to a cat or dog, is not the best way to introduce yourself to most rabbits. Most rabbits do not like to have the tip of the nose or chin touched either. Instead begin by gently stroking the top of the head.

Rabbits possess a relatively lightweight, delicate skeleton paired with extremely strong, well-developed back and leg muscles. With improper handling, rabbits that struggle or kick run the risk of a broken back or leg. Veterinary staff can demonstrate the proper way to pick up a pet rabbit. NEVER lift a rabbit by the ears or scruff.

### References & Further Reading

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Quesenberry KE, Carpenter JW (eds). Ferrets, Rabbits and Rodents: Clinical Medicine and Surgery, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. St. Louis, MO: Saunders; 2005.

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## PET RABBIT CARE

1. Rabbits are to be examined by your veterinarian every 6 months. Your veterinarian can teach you how to observe for overgrown teeth and toe nails, sore hocks, discharge from the eyes, ears, nose, skin, and genital areas because these abnormalities may be signs of potentially serious and life-threatening problems. The amount and consistency of bowel movements should also be monitored on a regular basis.
2. All rabbits should have hopper feeders, sipper tube waterers, and wire bottom cages, with clean fresh water always available. Clorox® should be used at 1 tablespoon per quart of water for disinfections of the cage and utensils.
3. Rabbits should be fed a good **FRESH** commercial diet especially formulated for rabbits. Supplements such as quality alfalfa or timothy hay provide fiber and bulk. Fresh, clean vegetables, such as lettuce and carrots, plus Cheerios, granola, oats and oatmeal, though not necessary, can be fed occasionally. Any food changes should be done gradually over a period of two to three weeks to prevent diarrhea and digestive upsets.
4. Rabbits are prone to heat stroke. Rabbits should be maintained in temperatures between 40<sup>0</sup>F and 85<sup>0</sup>F. Excessive slobbering or moisture around the mouth or dewlap may be a sign of excessive heat.
5. Rabbits are very prone to spinal trauma and subsequent paralysis. Rabbits are generally picked up by the scruff of the neck with one hand with the rear legs supported at all times by the other hand.
6. It is advisable to neuter male rabbits if there are problems with marking territory, urine spraying, and aggressive behavior.