

The Basics of Rabbit Housing

Before you bring your new bunny home, it's important that you have all the right stuff ready for her. Moving to a new location can be traumatic for rabbits (particularly young ones) and the stress may be too much for your bunny if you don't have a cage ready and she has to live in a makeshift cardboard box. All rabbits need a cage they can call their own, even if you intend to let them run free in the house. The cage serves as a "home base" for a bunny, similar to a burrow in the wild, a place where she can retreat for safety and comfort. If you don't provide her with a proper cage, your bunny will pick a corner of the house to call her own -- and since that includes using it as a rest area, you probably don't want her to select a spot behind your clothes hamper or under your couch.

Whether your pet rabbit lives indoors or outside, an all-wire cage is the safest choice. These offer the best protection from predators, children, and other pets such as dogs or cats. Wire cages are also the safest because they are the most sanitary. They will keep your rabbit suspended above its urine and droppings, protecting her from coccidian infections, ammonia buildup, and plain old messy paws. All the Premium Rabbit Homes available via PremiumRabbits.com come complete with urine guards and a slide-out drop tray. These accessories not only keep your rabbit off of its waste, but keep the waste off the floor of your home.

It's important to keep in mind that a proper rabbit cage doesn't necessarily make a proper rabbit home. The cage must be situated in the right environment for your rabbit to stay healthy. The surrounding environment must provide protection from the elements and be low on activity that could stress your bunny. If you keep your rabbit in the house, place it in a quiet room away from the main action. If you keep your rabbit outdoors, you should place the cage in a hutch or a barn to protect it from the weather.

How large should my rabbit's cage be?

As you browse the website of our recommended supplier (PremiumRabbits.com) you will see that they offer rabbit homes in a wide range of sizes. From the pint-sized Dwarf Rabbit Home to the XL Giant Cage that boasts of ten square feet of floor space, you can be sure that they have one the right size for your bunny. But how do you know which one that is?

You can determine the right size cage for your rabbit with a little simple math. According

to the American Rabbit Breeders Association, each rabbit should have $\frac{1}{2}$ of a square foot of cage floor space per pound of body weight. If you want to be generous, and to allow space for feeding and watering equipment, a good rule of thumb is to buy a cage that gives your bunny one square foot of cage space per pound. That way, a 24"x24" cage would be just the right size for a four pound Holland Lop.

When you're talking cage sizes, bigger is not always better. Rabbits are actually more comfortable in a small, snug cage than a giant one (think cozy rabbit burrow). Rabbits should have exercise, but the cage is not the proper place for that. Even a giant size cage is too small for a dwarf rabbit to really exercise in. And if your rabbit is having a grumpy day and doesn't want to come outside, you will find it a lot harder to pull him out of a huge cage than a reasonable-sized one!

How to Feed Pet Rabbits Correctly

There are two elements to keeping your rabbit's diet on track: first is what you feed, second is how you provide it. You must use feeding and watering equipment that keeps the food and water fresh and clean so your rabbit can gain full nutritional benefits from it. Based on our experience in pet rabbit care, we've got some suggestions for you on both points.

Start with the Right Food for Pet Rabbits

Nutrition plays a huge part in your rabbit's health; that's nothing new. But what is fairly new is a brand of rabbit pellets that provides proper nutrition, probably better than any brand has done before. If you haven't tried Sherwood Forest Natural Rabbit Food yet, you should probably check it out.

Many pet rabbit owners don't like feeding their rabbits pellets. They feel that pellets are unnatural and know they sometimes aren't very fresh by the time you get the bag open. That's an understandable point of view, but without a pelleted diet, it can be hard to make sure your bunny is getting balanced nutrition. Sherwood Forest Natural Rabbit Food gives you the best of both worlds by taking a different approach to pellet formulas than most companies. Developed by a long-time rabbit breeder and animal nutritionist, this feed is entirely natural, both in its ingredients and the way it's manufactured. The recipe is simple: sun-cured alfalfa enriched with a whole oil seed blend and fortified with

vitamins, chelated minerals, and essential amino acids. This feed contains NO corn, NO soy, and NO grain at all!

Recognizing that rabbits have different dietary needs at different stages, Sherwood Forest doesn't try to fit everything into a one-size-fits-all pellet. Instead they offer three different formulas, making sure that every bunny gets what it needs most at its stage of life. They even have a concentrated formula that is designed for a diet of half pellets and half timothy hay. Sherwood Forest food is delivered fresh all over the United States.

How much should I feed my rabbit?

The amount of pellets your rabbit should get in a day varies so much with the individual rabbit and the brand of food that it's hard to even give a general answer. The best rule is to feed your rabbit whatever keeps it in good condition. Handle your rabbit daily and check its flesh and fur condition. It shouldn't feel flabby or too soft, because an overweight rabbit is nearly as unhealthy as an underfed one. You can check to see if your rabbit obese by feeling its spine. You should be able to feel the individual bumps on its spine, but they should feel rounded, not sharp.

Next up: the Right Feeding Equipment

Whether you choose a pelleted feed for your rabbit or prefer to formulate its diet yourself, the proper equipment ensures that your rabbit's food stays fresh and unsoiled, and that your bunny has enough but not too much to eat at all times.

Choosing the Right Food Dish for your Rabbit

The number one rule in selecting a food dish: get one that attaches to the cage. This is more important than the material that the dish is made from, its size, or anything else. Get a dish that attaches to the cage. If you don't your rabbit will probably tip the dish and spill the food. Even heavy ceramic crocks that sit on the cage floor aren't as effective at reducing pellet waste, since they allow rabbits to scratch the pellets out easier than dishes that sit up off the floor like the EZ-crock.

Second thing you'll want to consider is the material. In short, plastic and ceramic crocks

work best. Metal or glass dishes are fine for occasional use (like when traveling or giving your rabbit a treat), but they don't hold up to everyday wear and tear, cleaning, freezing, or dropping like heavy plastic or ceramic ones do. Most plastic and ceramic crocks can even be run through your dishwasher.

By the way - a good food dish will also work well as a water crock. With any rabbit bowl, be it for food or water, you should select a size that will hold what your rabbit will use in a day and not much more. If you choose a very large feed or water dish, your rabbit may think it's fun to sit in and will spoil the contents.

What about J-feeders?

J-feeders generally work best for large rabbitries, but they can be handy for the pet owner as well. Borrowing their name from their shape, J-feeders allow you to feed rabbits without opening the cage door. They can also hold a great quantity of feed, making them ideal for momma rabbits with a litter of babies. Enjoy shopping around and discovering whether dishes or J-feeders would suit your bunny and your lifestyle the best.

Don't forget Rabbit Water Bottles

Some pet owners prefer to use dishes to water their rabbits. That's fine, but since bottles can hold more than crocks, and also keep the water cleaner, it's a good idea to have a water bottle on hand in case you go away for the day. Premium Rabbits offers mostly LixitŽ bottles, since that's the best-respected brand in animal watering equipment. But they do in fact have several different styles and sizes to choose from.

What size water bottle should you get for a pet rabbit? Well, the 8oz bottles work great for traveling. The 16oz bottle is a good choice for everyday use. And the 32oz or 64oz bottles are suitable for giant rabbits, does with litters, or other situations where more than one rabbit lives in a cage.

Grooming Pet Rabbits

Housing, food, and water are the three pillars of proper rabbit care. If you've made sure your bunny has the best in those three areas, you're a long way towards keeping him healthy for many years to come. But there are many details you can attend to that will

bring his quality of life up from sufficient to excellent.

Grooming is one of those details. For some breeds, particularly Angoras, proper grooming is the difference between contentment and misery. Angoras must be groomed regularly or they will become tangled in their own wool, which causes many problems. But for most breeds, grooming is a bonus that can help develop a bond between rabbit and caregiver.

Almost all bunnies can benefit from a regular brushing. This will remove the dead hairs and smooth the coat. It will also stimulate oil glands that help protect the coat from dirt, moisture, and even bacteria...not to mention making it glossy and beautiful. It's especially important to remove dead hairs from the coat when a rabbit is molting (shedding). Rabbits lick their own fur to keep it clean, and so when molting can ingest enough of their hair to block their intestines. Brush your molting rabbit daily, then moisten your hands and rub it down to remove extra dead hairs. A slicker brush works pretty well for this task.

Trim Your Rabbit's Claws!

All rabbits also need their toenails trimmed. Some bunnies' toenails will wear down faster than others, depending on how much exercise it gets, but all pet rabbits need their claws trimmed eventually. Failure to keep the claws short will not only result in more scratches to the handler, but also put the rabbit at risk of breaking or pulling a nail. Here's an important tip: only use pet nail trimmers on rabbits! Do not use human nail clippers on your pet bunny. Human nail trimmers are the wrong shape and are more likely to break rabbits' nails than cleanly trim them.

And what about bathing?

Should you give your pet rabbit a bath? The answer is no. There are very, very few circumstances in which you should ever give your rabbit a bath, even with so-called "pet safe" shampoos. Bathing your rabbit will be a traumatic experience for your bunny. It will remove that essential oil from the coat. Besides, it will make your rabbit look like a wreck. If your rabbit gets dirty, put it back in its cage and let it clean itself. Rabbits will almost always go right to grooming themselves after they get wet or dirty, and their own tongues can do a better job at getting them clean than you can. If stains show the next day, you can remove them with hydrogen peroxide or white alcohol. Simply apply the peroxide to the stain with a toothbrush, then sprinkle the area with cornstarch. The

starch will absorb the stain. Brush it out the next day and you'll have a sparkling clean bunny.

Exercise, Training, and Play

Playing with your rabbit, whether it's training it for performance or just for fun, has three huge benefits. First, training or play is healthy for rabbits because it gives them both physical and mental exercise. Second, it will help you enjoy your bunny much more, and lead to a closer relationship between bunny and caretaker, which will be healthy for both of you. And thirdly, watching your rabbit play is one of the most important things you can do for it, because you will observe any changes in behavior or health problems as soon as they appear.

Most rabbits aren't trained to do tricks, but almost any rabbit could be. They can be trained using a clicker, like training a dog. Another option is to purchase a rabbit-safe harness and check out rabbit hopping competitions. This sport has been popular in Europe for years and is now catching on in America also. For more information on training your bunny, check out our *Hoppy Pet Raising Guide*.

Maintaining Your Pet Rabbit's Health

Rabbits are surprisingly hardy. Given the proper housing, diet, and exercise, they have relatively few health problems. They do not need immunizations and most rabbits never see a vet their entire lives. The two keys to keeping them in good condition are to keep the environment sanitary and to observe them carefully, so you can catch any issues before they become big problems. A rabbit's cage doesn't have to be germ-free (and in fact, it shouldn't be), but you should keep it clear of old hay, bedding, or droppings, and go over it with a natural cleaning agent every couple weeks. Most importantly, your rabbit's environment must offer good ventilation. Poor air quality is one of the most common causes of Snuffles and other respiratory infections. Rabbits have much more sensitive noses than people, so if you can smell ammonia around your rabbit's cage, he can smell it much stronger. Using a high quality bedding such as CareFresh in your drop trays can go a long way towards reducing ammonia.