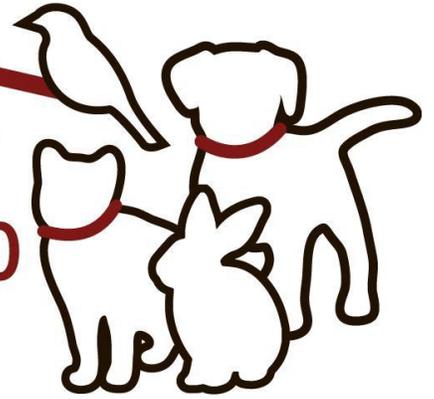


The Humane Society of  
& Kitchener Waterloo  
& Stratford Perth



**Congratulations on your new family member!**

Thank You for adopting from the HSKWSP. Please read this valuable information to help assist you and your rabbit friend make a comfortable transition into its fur-ever home.

## Adopting a New Rabbit

Are you considering a rabbit as a companion? Here's the information you need to get started!

Rabbits are very high-maintenance pets. After initial start-up costs, expect to spend approximately \$700 each year for a single, healthy rabbit. The average lifespan for a spayed/neutered rabbit is 8-12 years. Rabbits are highly social and need the opportunity to socialize and exercise outside of their cage for at least four hours every day. Lastly, their diet and housing require daily maintenance.

Most rabbits were owned by somebody once, and now they have lost that security. Uncertainty and change are hard on rabbits, and shelter life can be hard on them, adding to their anxiety and fears. It is easy for adopters to assume that when a shelter rabbit goes home, they'll be so thankful and relieved they'll just settle in as quickly as can be. Sometimes that happens (lucky for you both!), but for many rabbits, adoption feels like more upheaval in a life already too full of change, and it takes them a while to adjust. Fortunately, there are certain things that you can do to ease the transition from shelter to home.

### Have Patience

This is the key to helping your new family member settle in. Understand that your shelter rabbit may be anxious. It's essential to give her lots of patience and guidance. It takes time to help a shelter rabbit become a confident family pet.

### Establish A Schedule

Routine is essential to rabbits, especially those who come from chaotic, uncertain circumstances. Establish a schedule for your new rabbit's meals, playtime, quiet time and stick to it. It is easy to be excited about bringing a new pet into your home, but it is important to be clear and consistent in your expectations.

### Build Trust Slowly

Developing a bond between you and your shelter rabbit will take time. Remember, they have a history, and they may be slow to trust and respond to you. Be sure your rabbit has enough confidence and faith in you before you put them into potentially stressful situations, such as meeting other pets, rabbits or people. As much as you'll be eager for relatives and friends to meet your new arrival, understand that your shelter rabbit will be overwhelmed by all the changes. They need time, sometimes weeks, even months, to get to know and feel safe with her immediate family and environment. When you do introduce your rabbit to new people, start by asking friends/family/visitors to ignore them and not make them the focus of their attention. This gives your rabbit time to calm down. They might even have to wait for 5-10 minutes for this to happen, but it's beneficial in building your rabbit's social skills. Once your rabbit is relaxed, ask the visitor to slowly approach, speaking softly. No patting or picking up the rabbit, just a quiet, polite greeting.

## Housing

Finding the type of housing that fits your rabbit's needs and your lifestyle takes some research. There are many options available, and some cages that are marketed to rabbits are actually unsuitable. It is important to provide appropriate housing to ensure your rabbit remains happy and well exercised. The ideal living situation for rabbits is to be free-range in a home, similar to a dog or cat. The next best option is to use large pens and provide at least 4 hours of time to exercise outside their enclosure every day.

## **Run Free**

Since rabbits can be litter trained (refer to page 10), they can be given free run of your home, just like cats and dogs! Keeping rabbits free-range in your home creates a happier, better-socialized animal and a stronger relationship between you and your rabbit. There are some things to take into consideration before allowing your rabbit to have access to the house, such as “bunny-proofing” and managing interactions with other animals in the house.

## **Exercise Pens**

An excellent housing option is a 4ft by 4ft exercise pen. These are sold specifically for rabbits or as dog pens. Either is fine, as long as it provides a large area for the rabbit, is well enclosed, and high enough to prevent escapes (36 inches or higher). If using a pen on a hard-wood or uncarpeted floor, you can provide a mat or blanket for flooring, as many rabbits cannot stabilize themselves on smooth flooring and will slip or splay their legs. You may wish to use a sheet or towel on carpeting to provide some protection from potential digging or accidents.

## **NIC Cubes**

A good, and less expensive, alternative to purchasing a cage or pen is a home-made “Neat Idea Cube Condo.” These cages are constructed from 14" x 14" wire grid panels sold to make cube bookcases. They can be attached with cable ties/zip ties, and can be built up in levels, or simply joined to create a less-expensive pen. Make sure, when creating levels or flooring, you attach a wooden board with carpeting or other soft material, to create a level floor that will not harm the rabbit’s feet. As with all caging, the cube condo should be large enough to comfortably house a rabbit and its necessary supplies.

## **Dog Crates**

If your rabbit must be enclosed for part of the day, a large-sized dog crate is a good alternative to a cage. If large enough, it is possible to add a second level within the crate to provide more living space for the rabbit. Again, these should be solid-bottomed and meet all of the other necessary housing criteria discussed above.

## **Store-bought Cages**

With rabbit cages, bigger is definitely better. Whatever the size of the rabbit, the cage should be proportionately large enough for them to adequately move around and exhibit all of their normal bunny behaviour. Large cages can be purchased at most pet stores or bought second-hand to reduce cost. However, you should be aware that most commercial cages are too small for rabbits. It may take a bit of searching to find an adequately-sized enclosure. If cages are used, they should be hard-bottomed with dimensions of 36" L x 24" W x 24" H. It should have enough height for a rabbit to stand inside. There should be space for a covered area for hiding, food and water bowls, a litter box, and still enough room to take three hops from end to end. The enclosure should be made of non-chewable material with doors opening on the side rather than top to allow the rabbit to hop in and out on its own. Multiple-level cages are acceptable as long as each level is large enough to meet the above requirements, and ceilings are not too low on each level. Cages should also be on or near ground level rather than elevated. This allows the rabbit to easily hop in and out of the cage. It also prevents it from linking its anxiety about being handled to going in the cage. Cages should be safe, happy places for rabbits, and they should never be confined as a punishment or in any way that would create negative associations with the cage. Access to the cage during out time will also give the rabbit a “safe” place to go when frightened or alarmed. Rabbits have delicate little feet! Unlike many animals, they do not have pads on their feet, which leave them prone to

injury. Many rabbit cages are designed with wire floors to allow droppings to pass through and make cleaning easier. Unfortunately, these floors often cause their feet to develop painful ulcers that are at risk of infection. As such, wire bottom cages should never be used. If you already have one, cover it with cardboard or a wooden plank, and add soft towels or blankets for your rabbit's comfort. If you are concerned about cleaning time, you can always litter-train your rabbit, which should significantly cut down your workload. Rabbits naturally leave droppings in one area and are happiest with a designated litter spot for this natural behaviour.

### **Toys and Things**

Rabbits need lots of stimulation to be happy and prevent destructive behaviour. They love to toss their toys, so anything they can pick up and throw is great. Wooden or hard plastic rattles provide lots of entertainment. Wooden chew toys help to prevent overgrown teeth and chewing of inappropriate items. A cardboard box filled with paper or old phone books or grass mats sold in pet stores are great ways to divert digging behaviour from carpets or furniture. If your rabbit is single, a stuffed animal with no buttons or other easily swallowed fixtures can help serve some of the needs for companionship and cuddling that a bonded partner usually fulfils. Rabbits will often groom and sleep with their teddy bears and draw comfort from their presence. Remember, even large cages or pens cannot adequately make up for time spent out of the cage exploring, running, and interacting with people. Cages/pens are meant to be safe places for rabbits during those times when you are unable to provide them with safe, supervised out time.

### **The Great Indoors**

Unlike wild rabbits, domestic rabbits cannot withstand life in the outdoors and should be housed exclusively indoors. Outdoors, rabbits are vulnerable to diseases spread by wildlife, attacks by predators, and exposure to the elements. Even in a predator-proof cage, the very presence of a predator can be enough to send your rabbit into shock, a severe and potentially fatal condition. Rabbits kept outdoors are also less likely to be well-socialized and friendly with people. To protect your rabbit and give it the best chance at a long, healthy, happy life, keep your rabbit indoors with you. This will also ensure that your bond with your bunny grows while creating a fulfilling relationship.

### **I Want to Be with You**

Just as your rabbit is unlikely to bond well with you if kept outdoors, a rabbit kept in a backroom or caged for most of the day will be less happy and friendly. Rabbits are social animals and require a great deal of interaction with their human family members to prevent fearfulness and aggressive behaviour. If you cannot keep your rabbit free-range, it is important to let your rabbit out for exercise and interaction at least four hours each day. The best place to keep your rabbit's cage or pen is in a room that you will spend a lot of time in, like the kitchen or living room. This way, your rabbit will become accustomed to your presence – your sounds and activities – and will be less frightened and friendlier with you. Like dogs and cats, rabbits are not happy to be left alone or without stimulation, and can take out their frustration in destructive ways. Remember, a happy rabbit is a part of your daily life and receives love and attention just like any other member of your family! While rabbits enjoy spending time exploring their environments and being with people, you will notice that they also need their alone time. As prey animals, they need a place where they can feel safe and hidden, so they should have hiding places for when they feel like they need a rest. Rabbits can be frightened by new sounds or sights and take comfort in knowing exactly where they can run to hide if need be. A hide box works well for this purpose. You can buy hard plastic or wood huts from a pet store or simply make one yourself out of a cardboard box. Whatever you choose, make sure you provide this essential habitat feature to ensure that your rabbit feels safe and secure.

## Hot and Cold

Rabbits are very sensitive to fluctuations in temperature, and extremes of hot and cold can make them quite ill. Rabbits are particularly heat sensitive and are better able to withstand cool temperatures than hot temperatures. Be sure to keep your bunny housed away from cold or drafty spaces, as well as hot areas like in direct sunlight. During the summer, if you do not have an air conditioner, you can provide a fan safely out of reach. Another good way to cool down your rabbit is to buy a couple of loose ceramic tiles and cool them in the freezer or fridge. Provide them for your rabbit, alongside blankets and towels if the rabbit doesn't want to lie directly on the tiles.

## Safe and Sound

Rabbits have delicate ears and are very sensitive to loud noises. Their enclosures should be located away from televisions or stereos and other loud areas, such as the basement where a band practices or the nursery where a baby is crying. The quieter the surroundings, the less stressed and happier your rabbit will be.

## Safety Proofing Your Home for Your Rabbit

### Cords and Wires

In wild dens, rabbits would chew off any roots growing through their tunnels to keep them open. In your home, they will help "clean the den" by chewing away all of those pesky cords! Unfortunately, chewing cords is dangerous for your rabbit and can cause electrocution and is a hazard in your home. To protect your rabbit and prevent electrical fires, keep them well out of reach. Rabbits can be very industrious and crafty, getting into spaces you wouldn't expect, so you can cover cords and wires using cord protectors or hard plastic tubing, which can be purchased at most hardware stores.

### Houseplants

Many houseplants are toxic to rabbits. Rabbits are excellent jumpers and climbers, so keep in mind that they might be able to reach plants on higher surfaces. Also watch out for falling leaves. Below is a list of plants that are toxic to rabbits:

Agave(leaves), amaryllis(bulbs), apples(seeds), azalea, birds of paradise(seeds), bloodroot, buttercup(leaves), black locust(seeds), boxwood(leaves/twigs), buckeye(seeds), buckthorn(berries), caladium, calla(rhizome), castor bean(seed), Christmas rose, cone flower, crown of thorns, daffodil, daphne, delphinium, dubcane(dieffenbachia), eggplant(plant), elderberry(unripe berries), elephant ear, flowering tobacco, foxglove, holly(berries), horsechestnut(nuts), hyacinth, iris, ivy(boston and English berries), jack-in-the-pulpit, Jerusalem cherry, jimson weed, jonquil, lantana, larkspur, lily-of-the-valley, lupine, mayapple, mistletoe(berries), morning glory(seeds), mustard(root), narcissus, nicotiana, nightshade, oleander, philodendron, poison hemlock, poison ivy, potato(green), privet(berries), ranunculus, rhododendron, rhubarb(leaf blade), rosary pea(seed), snow-on-the-mountain, sweet pea(seeds), sweet potato, skunk cabbage, tansy, tomato(leaves), tulip, Virginia creeper(berries), water hemlock, wisteria(seeds/pods), yew(berries).

Remember that many cut flowers and Christmas trees are also treated with pesticides or other chemicals that are toxic to rabbits. Fertilizers used in houseplants can also prove toxic if ingested by your rabbit. To ensure the health and safety of your furry companion, it is best to keep their living space and play area plant-free. Want to give your rabbit a healthy alternative to nibble? Most herbs, grasses and many vegetables are safe for rabbits and can be grown in containers in your home for your rabbits.

### **Baseboards and Wooden Furniture**

Provide plenty of chewing material like willow and apple branches, safe wooden and willow chew toys and cardboard rolls and boxes. Some rabbits might also nibble your baseboards, wooden furniture, or other chewable items like books. Keep in mind that some of these might be toxic, such as baseboards hiding lead paint, or stains and varnishes on furniture. To protect your rabbit and your possessions, the best way to get your rabbit to stop chewing on inappropriate items is to try to get them interested in appropriate chew items. Encourage your rabbit to chew these items with praise, pets and treats. When your rabbit is chewing inappropriate items, you can offer it one of its chew toys instead.

### **Property Destruction**

Rabbits do not distinguish between your \$100 shoes and an empty toilet paper roll. To prevent damage to your property, keep things you do not want to be chewed out of reach and encourage chewing of appropriate materials. Rabbits can also develop intestinal blockages from the ingestion of synthetic materials, yet another reason to keep inappropriate “chew toys” inaccessible to your rabbit.

### **Grooming & Nail Trimmings**

Rabbits clean themselves naturally, so baths should be avoided. Use a wet towel to spot clean when necessary or partially submerge soiled areas in the water. Brush your rabbit on a regular basis, and more frequently during their 4 yearly sheds to prevent hair from building up and potentially blocking their digestive tract. Rabbits have delicate skin, so purchase a brush specially designed for rabbits. Rabbits require nail trimmings every 2 months: use small animal nail trimmers and be careful just to remove the tip and avoid the vein that runs into the nail, called the quick.

### **Diet and Nutrition**

Rabbits have unique nutritional requirements that involve a mixture of many different food types. The primary food source is unlimited quantities of fresh hay and water, followed by vegetables and good quality pellets. Additional food items, like fruits, can be provided as “treats.” If your rabbit’s diet is complete there should be no need for additional vitamins. Follow these nutritional guidelines to help keep your rabbit happy and healthy!

#### **Water is life**

Provide your rabbit with unlimited quantity of fresh water, and be sure to change the water daily. Water can be given in a heavy bowl, so the rabbit cannot overturn it. Most rabbits prefer a bowl and that is what we use in the shelter – so it will be what they are most accustomed to using.

#### **Hay is not only for Horses**

Hay makes up the basis of a healthy rabbit’s diet. Rabbits, and several other small mammals, require hay roughage to keep their digestive tract moving smoothly. Help your bunny stay healthy by providing unlimited amounts of fresh hay. Rabbits’ teeth are also constantly growing and are kept trimmed by chewing hay. The best hay for adult rabbits is Timothy Hay. Meadow Grass and Brome Hay can also be used for a variety or to encourage reluctant hay eaters. They also produce two types of droppings, one of which are not actually feces, and are ingested in order to absorb important nutrients. Young rabbits (1-7 months old) should be fed alfalfa hay, and should be weaned onto timothy hay from 7 to 12 months of age. Alfalfa contains too much calcium for adult rabbits and can cause bladder and kidney stones. A

favourite place to munch on hay is the litterbox. Not only do rabbits enjoy this, but it also helps with litter training! You can put hay directly in the litter box or a box next to and accessible from the litterbox. If you put the hay in the litterbox, be sure to change it daily to provide clean, unsoiled hay at all times. Hay can be bought from farms in bales or large quantities at a lower cost than the bagged hay sold at pet supply stores. Store hay in a cool, dry place where there is air circulation to prevent mould from growing. Large quantities can be stored in a cardboard box or plastic bin with the lid slightly off. Bagged hay from pet supply stores can be kept in its bag.

### Eat All Your Vegetables!

A good mix of fresh vegetables should make up the next largest part of your rabbit's diet. Small quantities of vegetables should be introduced, one vegetable at a time, at around 12 weeks old. Adults need at least 2 cups of vegetables per day for every 6 pounds of body weight. Here is a list of popular veggies that are safe for rabbits:

Alfalfa sprouts, arugula, basil, bok choy, beet greens (tops), broccoli\*, carrots† and tops, chard, cilantro, dill, endive, kale\*, parsley, mint, lettuce (no iceberg), raddichio, spinach\*, radish tops, watercress

\*High in calcium, feed 1-3 times per week only

†Carrots are high in sugar and should be fed in restricted amounts 1-3 times per week maximum.

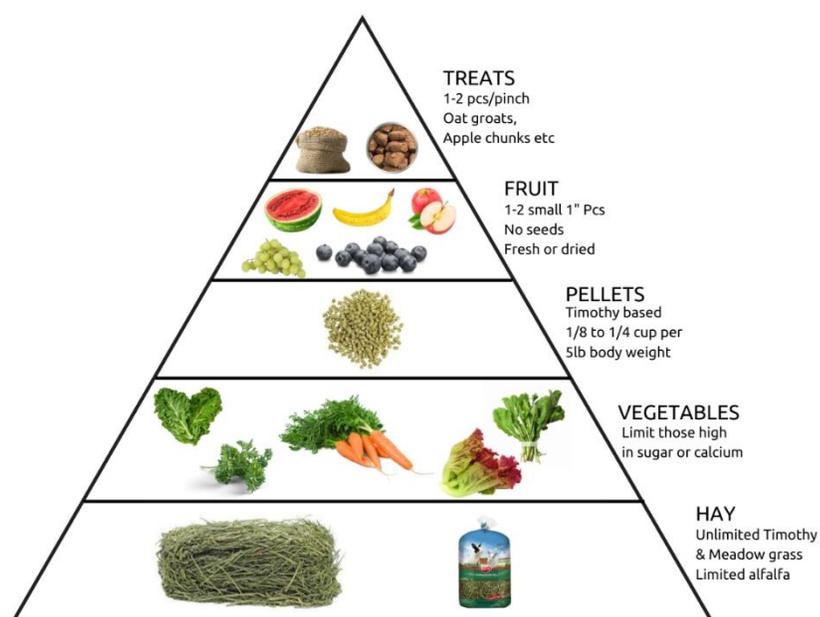
Not all vegetables are safe for rabbits, including most houseplants, so be sure to check with your veterinarian or a trusted rabbit resource before giving something new. If your rabbit has gotten into plants or other unsafe greens, contact your rabbit-savvy veterinarian immediately. Other toxic foods include almonds, acorns, walnuts, nutmeg, avocado, apple and pear seeds, coffee, chocolate, bulb flowers, potatoes and sweet potatoes, and green beans.

A variety of vegetables each day will provide more complete nutrition. Adults who have not shown any intolerances can be fed a mixture of 6 or more vegetables each day with only small portions of each.

Rabbits are especially sensitive to pesticides, so the best choice for fresh fruits and vegetables is organic. If not feeding organic produce, ensure that you carefully clean and peel all fruit and vegetables before feeding to reduce pesticide ingestion.

### Pinch of Pellets

There are a wide variety of rabbit pellets sold in stores, but a good quality pellet should contain at least 18% fiber. For adult rabbits over 1 year, pellets should be derived from Timothy Hay. For rabbits under 7



months, pellets should be derived from alfalfa hay. Rabbits between 7 months to 1 year can slowly be transitioned onto Timothy Hay-based pellets. Pellets should also be very low in calcium and protein. Pellets are not the main source of nutrients for your rabbit and are actually considered a supplement to hay and veggies. As such, they should be given in limited quantity. A 5-7 pound rabbit should only be getting  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup to  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of pellets per day maximum. Rabbits can become obese if they are given too many pellets and unhealthy treats. Obesity in rabbits is a very serious health concern and shortens their life span significantly, as well as increasing the risk of other health problems. A healthy, balanced diet with regulated amounts of pellets and treats will help to give your rabbit a long, healthy life.

### Trick or Treat

Rabbits are true herbivores, which means they do not eat animals or animal by-products. Some stores will sell yoghurt drop treats or treats with seeds and corn, neither of which are good for or easily digested by a rabbit. Remember, that just because a product is marketed for rabbits does not always mean it is suitable for them.

The best treat for rabbits is fresh fruit, and it can be given in quantities of about 2 tablespoons a day. Most rabbits have a sweet tooth and will go nuts for high-sugar fruits like dried cranberries, bananas and papaya. These are great to use during training, but should be fed in moderation, about 1 to 3 times a week. Many rabbits also like to munch on fresh grass. "Cat grass" containing oats, barley or wheat sprouts can be bought in seed form and planted or already growing in containers.

### Daily Diet by Age

Birth – 3 Weeks	Mother's milk
3-4 Weeks	Mother's milk, nibbles of alfalfa and pellets.
4-8 Weeks	Mother's milk, access to unlimited alfalfa and pellets.
8 Weeks to 7 Months	Unlimited alfalfa-based pellets, unlimited alfalfa hay, small quantities (under $\frac{1}{2}$ oz.) of vegetables introduced one at a time from 12 weeks on.
7 Months to 1 Year	Slowly wean from alfalfa hay to unlimited timothy hay, grass hay and oat hays. Decrease pellets to $\frac{1}{2}$ cup per 6 pounds of weight, slowly increase vegetables, introduce fruits as treats (1-2oz. maximum per 6 pounds of weight).
Adult	Unlimited timothy hay. $\frac{1}{8}$ cup to $\frac{1}{4}$ cup pellets per 5-7 pounds of weight. Minimum 2 cups vegetables per 5-7 pounds of body weight and no more than 2 tablespoons of fruit as treats.

### Papaya Enzyme

Many vets recommend the use of Papaya Enzyme tablets, which can be bought from a drug or health store and can also be found at some pet supply stores. Rabbits, like cats, are expert groomers. They groom themselves and each other diligently for cleanliness and as a social activity. However, unlike cats, rabbits cannot regurgitate hairballs which may otherwise get stuck in their digestive tract, potentially causing serious blockages. This can result in a condition known as GI stasis, in which the digestive system is no longer moving. If your rabbit shows a decrease in appetite or in droppings or stops eating or producing stool altogether, this is an emergency situation, and you should take him to a rabbit vet immediately.

Fresh papaya and pineapple contain enzymes that help break down hair in the stomach and help keep their digestive tract moving smoothly. Be sure to provide fresh fruits rather than canned fruits since canning fruits destroy enzymes. An alternative to this is chewable, flavoured papaya enzyme tablets. You can give the rabbit 1 tablet daily per 5 pounds of weight.

Brushing your rabbit regularly, particularly during high-shedding times, helps reduce the amount of hair they ingest and keeps them both looking and feeling good!

## Health Care

Veterinary costs can be more expensive than that of cats and dogs. In the veterinary world, rabbits are considered non-traditional species and must be treated by a qualified non-traditional pet veterinarian. Rabbits living in Ontario do not currently require vaccinations. In certain areas of Canada and the United States, rabbits should be vaccinated against Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease. Your veterinarian will be able to determine if any vaccines are required for your rabbit where you live. Even if no vaccinations are required, rabbits should see the vet yearly for a check-up or whenever a health concern arises. Prior to adopting: Find a rabbit-savvy veterinarian in your area and inquire about their rates for check-ups and other common procedures.

### Spay/Neuter

To help control rabbit overpopulation and for your rabbit's health, it is important to have your pet spayed or neutered. In rabbits, this procedure has been shown to:

- Double their life expectancy.
- Decrease cancer development by 80% in females.
- Decrease the frequency of destructive behaviours and territoriality.
- Increase the ease of litter training.

### Common Medical Concerns

Since rabbits are prey animals, they tend to hide their illnesses to avoid being left behind by their group. Therefore, if you notice any change in behaviour, consult your veterinarian immediately. As a general rule of thumb, if your rabbit stops eating and producing fecal pellets for even 12 hours, it is considered a medical emergency requiring veterinary attention immediately.

Other signs of illness may include but are not limited to: respiratory issues (wheezing, sneezing, heavy breathing), head tilt, discomfort, injury, blood in stool and/or urine, discharges, tumors, cysts, drooling, and of course, any change in behaviour. Below is a list of common medical concerns:

- Obesity: This is by far the most common health problem that rabbits face. Rabbits should eat a pellet-restricted diet and have at least 4 hours of exercise each day.
- Dental Disease: Since rabbits' teeth grow constantly, a common medical problem involves overgrown teeth or teeth that are misaligned. Teeth problems can be painful and, if left untreated, can be fatal, so take your rabbit to the vet at the first sign of illness.

- **Digestion:** Rabbits have very delicate digestive systems that can be easily irritated. Provide a consistent diet with appropriate food to help prevent digestive problems, and keep them away from toxic foods and other objects that are harmful once ingested.

## Litter Training

Like cats, rabbits can be litter-trained with relative ease. Rabbits naturally urinate and defecate in only one or a few places and are happiest this way. However, there are some biological and behavioural differences that make rabbit litter-training unique.

### Starting Out

Training a rabbit to use the litterbox is generally quite simple. Start by placing the litterbox in their designated “toilet” spot (where the rabbit has been urinating and defecating in his home). The rabbit will often get the idea and start using the box soon after. Rabbits respond well to scent clues, and to help steer your furry companion to the litterbox, place any urine or droppings that are deposited elsewhere into the box. Use a tissue or paper towel to clean up stray urine and place it in the litterbox. If the rabbit chooses a new litter spot, simply move the box to the new spot and continue putting droppings into it. After one or two moves, the rabbit should catch on.

Rabbit digestive systems are constantly moving, so providing unlimited amounts of hay in a hay rack above the litterbox or in the litterbox or in a container accessible from the litterbox will encourage the rabbit to go there. Remember, if putting hay in the litterbox make sure to change the hay daily, so the rabbit always has clean hay.

Rabbits will also play, dig, or lounge in their litterboxes. This is completely normal behaviour. Rabbits like to take their time with the process, munching a bit of hay, finding a good spot, flopping out for a bit, etc. Rabbits produce an average of 350 droppings per day, so they will be spending a lot of time in their litterbox. Positive reinforcement never hurts. Give a treat (a small piece of fruit or favourite veggie) when the rabbit uses the litterbox. Never shout at or physically discipline a rabbit for unwanted behaviour. The rabbit will only fear you and will not respond positively. If you see your rabbit urinating or defecating outside the box, gently “herd” her into the box or, if she doesn’t mind being held, place her in it and reward her for using it.

### Aged to Perfection

Older rabbits, even those never exposed to the concept, are often much easier to litter-train than young rabbits. Be patient with babies, as they will pick up the behaviour as they mature if you continue to provide a litterbox and pay attention to their chosen toilet spots. Adopting an adult rabbit will often make this process substantially easier.

### Pristine Please

Rabbits do not naturally bury or cover their droppings as cats do. They can also be very picky about cleanliness. You should dump and refill the litterbox every 2-3 days and clean the box with vinegar, dish soap or specially marketed rabbit-safe products (sold at pet stores) weekly or when especially soiled. Never use harsh chemicals, as rabbits are very sensitive to environmental toxins.

### Size Matters

Litterboxes should be sized for the rabbit. Avoid corner litterboxes that do not comfortably contain a rabbit. The rabbit should be able to comfortably fit their whole body in the box and ideally lie down in it. Bonded pairs should have two litterboxes next to one another or a litterbox big enough to comfortably fit both together, as using the litterbox is an activity they will often take part in together. Sometimes a rabbit will favour urinating in a corner of the box and may occasionally over-reach, going down the outside of the box accidentally. Some rabbits also enjoy using their litterbox for digging, which can create a mess. High-sided will solve both of these problems.

### **Litter Types**

The best types of litter for rabbits are recycled paper litter products, like CareFresh and Yesterday's News. They are safe and highly absorbent. Another good option is Aspen shavings. To keep your rabbit healthy, it is important not to use the following products: pine or cedar shavings, corn cob bedding, regular newspaper, or clay/clumping kitty litter. These products are known to cause respiratory problems, liver damage, and/or are harmful if ingested.

## **Trouble Shooting**

### **Territoriality**

Rabbits, even spayed or neutered ones, will often start "marking" when another rabbit has been brought into the home. This is their way of saying, "this is my house." They will often leave fecal droppings around the other rabbit's cage or pen and will sometimes urinate there as well. Once they have become accustomed to one another, this behaviour should stop. When rabbits are bonded, territoriality is no longer an issue, and litterbox use should resume.

### **Such a Thing as Too Free?**

If your rabbit is going to be "free-range" in your home, which is highly recommended, don't let him have full run of the place all at once. Start by confining the rabbit to one room and providing more than one litterbox. Rabbits may choose more than one "toilet" place in their room, and a litterbox in each location will help the rabbit learn more quickly. If your rabbit is in an enclosure, remember to offer one litterbox inside the cage and at least one in the designated space for "free time". Once the rabbit has mastered her room, she can be given more freedom. Again, take it slow. If your home is large, the rabbit may get confused or simply be too lazy to go all the way back to the litterbox. Open up one level at a time and provide several litterboxes around the house to help remind the rabbit where to go. As litter habits improve, the number of litterboxes can be reduced. Many rabbits will still leave the occasional fecal pellet around their home to let you know it is "their" space. This is especially likely if you have rearranged their living space or cleaned their belongings recently, and they no longer smell like "rabbit."

### **Health Problems**

Some lapses in litterbox use are indicators of health problems. If you notice your rabbit is not producing droppings, is straining to urinate, or if your litter-trained rabbit suddenly urinates or defecates outside the litterbox, contact your rabbit-savvy veterinarian immediately. These symptoms might indicate serious medical issues like kidney failure, bladder infections, or GI stasis.

### **Psychological Issues**

The stress of any kind can often disrupt a rabbit's litter habits. This can include moving to a new home, a change in routine, visitors to the home, lack of attention, or any unsettling change. This stress can be caused by something as simple as a bad litterbox experience, such as a loud or sudden noise when the

rabbit was in the box, making it a “scary” place. If the physical illness has been eliminated as a cause, try determining what might be causing the rabbit stress. Help to build the rabbit’s confidence through rewards for going in the box and try moving the box to the rabbit’s new chosen spot. This can be a difficult process and patience and praise will go a long way.

### **What is normal?**

Most people are surprised to learn that rabbits produce two kinds of excrement: fecals and caecal matter. Fecal pellets are round, dry and often contain hay fibers. They are easy to clean up and should not be loose or too moist, which are signs of illness. Rabbits also produce caecal droppings, which are rarely seen. This is because rabbits eat their caecals, often as they expel them. This is perfectly healthy and natural as caecals contain unabsorbed nutrients that a second digestion can extract. If your rabbit ever leaves these uneaten they will appear as a collection of very small, wet, balls stuck together in a pile and are usually easily differentiated from normal fecal pellets.

Rabbit urine is normally pale yellow in colour. White urine for several days may indicate excess calcium in the diet. Rabbit urine may occasionally turn dark yellow, carrot orange, brown or bright red, and this is commonly caused by antibiotic use, heat stress, or consumption of carrots, spinach or other beta carotene-rich vegetables. Bloody urine in rabbits is quite rare. There are, however, instances in which a medical problem is indicated. If concerned, it is best to have your rabbit examined by a vet.

### **Allergies?**

If you or a member of your household suffers from seasonal allergies, you might be allergic to the food or bedding rabbits use. If you think you might be affected, spend some time around these products prior to adopting.

## **Rabbit Behaviour**

### **Learning to Read a Rabbit - Body Language**

Recognizing basic body language is important for more accurately identifying a rabbit’s emotional state.

#### **Stance**

A rabbit’s stance can indicate its emotional state. Try to observe whether the rabbit appears tense or relaxed. This will give you a good overall picture of its state of mind.

- **Periscoping:** Rabbits assume this position when they are exploring, curious or intrigued. They stand upright and alert to get a better view of their environment.
- **Lying flat, head on ground:** This is a posture assumed by contented, relaxed rabbits looking to get head pets. Rabbits will often relax into this state when being petted or will lie down to give you the sign they wish to be pet. Either way, their chin will rest on the ground and their front legs will be relaxed on the floor, not tense.
- **Lounging:** When rabbits are flopped on the ground with both legs spread out together behind or to the side, they are comfortable and relaxed.



#### **Ears**

Rabbits use their ears to indicate their feelings towards a person or situation. A good rule of thumb is the more open their ears are to you, the happier they are, and the more closed off or backwards facing the ears, the less happy the rabbit.

Ear signals can be quite difficult to identify on lop-eared rabbits. They are often only able to lift one ear at a time or not able to lift their ears at all. However, their stance and other body language signs will give good indications of their state of mind.

- Happy, Friendly, Alert: both ears up and facing forward.
- Nervous, anxious or annoyed: one ear up, alert and one ear back.
- Sleepy, relaxed: ears drooping to the sides.
- Aggressive: ears either up or laying straight back, with ears facing backwards.

## Eyes

Rabbit eyes are very expressive and similar to humans' in their display of emotion. Round, bulging eyes indicate a very frightened rabbit, wide eyes an alert rabbit, droopy eyes, a calm, relaxed, sleepy rabbit, and closed eyes a happy, relaxed, or sleeping rabbit.

Rabbits can nap with their eyes open, or go into "rabbit trances" where they "zone out" for a bit. They will have relaxed eyes in both cases. If a rabbit appears frozen, but tense, with eyes bulging, this is extreme fear.

- Fear: round, bulging eyes.
- Relaxed. Calm and Comfortable: drooping, less-round eyes.
- Interested, Alert and Attentive: Round eyes, but no tension.
- Relaxed and happy (and possibly asleep): eyes closed.

## Activities

### Happy, Playful

- Binkying: Acrobatic running, jumping and twisting in the air Playing: Tossing, rolling, or flipping toys, boxes or other items.

### Comfortable and Content

- Flopping: Falling onto one side and stretching legs out, relaxed.

### Annoyed or Angry

- Thumping: Stomping feet on ground to create a loud noise. This is a natural system to warn other rabbits and scare off predators. The rabbit will usually turn its back on you after thumping and flick its feet.
- Feet flick: Kicking back legs out in the air and flicking them, usually in the direction of the offending party.

### Frightened

- Frozen: Stiff crouched or standing posture. Appears tense, heart racing
- Running frantically: An attempt to evade a threat, particularly someone chasing them or trying to pick them up.
- Wide-eyed: eyes large, round and bulging out.

- Yawning: when accompanied by the other fearful behaviour above, indicates anxiety.

#### Marking Scent

- Chinning: rubbing of chin and cheeks on things and people. This is one form of scent-marking for rabbits. Others include marking territory with urine and fecal droppings.

#### Vocalizations and Sounds

- Tooth Grinding: Gentle tooth grinding during petting is the equivalent of a cat purring and indicates a very happy, contented rabbit.
- Tooth Chattering: Loud tooth grinding or chattering indicates fear or pain.
- Grunting: Indicates aggression or confrontational behaviour, usually with another rabbit.
- Honking: An amorous sound, usually heard when circling a mate or a human substitute.
- Shriill Scream: Indicates serious pain or fear.

#### Handling

Rabbits are very delicate and prone to injury from improper handling. Rabbits do not generally like to be held, and will often kick violently in an attempt to escape. Their hind legs are so powerful that, if held incorrectly, they can kick hard enough to snap their spines.

#### Approaching a Rabbit

The least threatening way to greet a prey animal is calmly, quietly and slowly. Getting down to their level will make them feel more at ease. You can sit on the floor with them and, if possible, you can lie down on the floor and let them smell you, explore you and greet you at their own pace. Sitting is also preferable to standing or crouching. If you sit calmly and quietly, the animal will come to explore you, eventually climbing on you, burrowing under your legs or behind your back, and generally using you as a playground.

#### Petting a Rabbit

The best way to pet a rabbit is to start by softly stroking the animal's forehead. Prey animals' eyes are on the sides of their head, allowing better range of vision. However, as a result, they cannot see directly in front of them. Make sure the animal can see your hand approaching to avoid startling or scaring it.

Do not present your hand under a rabbit's nose to be sniffed as you would a dog. Rabbits cannot see the hand approaching this area, and will be uncomfortable, either seeing your hand placement as a demand that you be groomed (a dominant stance) or a confusing and threatening gesture.

Generally, rabbits do not initially like their noses, necks or lower backs touched as these are areas prone to bites by aggressive rabbits. However, rabbits that have been abused or seriously hurt by being picked up by their ears in the past will often prefer only their backs touched, as they are sensitive to head touch.

When a rabbit is comfortable with the head pets it will settle into a relaxed stance, flat on the ground with its chin resting on the floor. At this point you can experiment with stroking from the forehead backwards down the body. If the rabbit is uncomfortable, it will jump up and you can go back to a simple head pet. When rabbits are very comfortable, they often enjoy getting cheek rubs and gentle rubbing at the base of their ears. Every animal is different, so pay attention to their body language for indications of what they enjoy and what they do not.

## **Bonding with your Rabbit**

Rabbits generally do not enjoy being picked up, and will cuddle with you on their own terms. A good way to spend time with your new rabbit, especially if it is shy, is to sit with your rabbit and let it explore you. Offer yummy snacks and treats. Once he seems comfortable with you and is approaching you calmly, try petting your rabbit around his ears. Speak softly to your bunny and avoid sudden movements. With this gentle handling, you are sure to gain your rabbit's trust.

Like with people, rabbits' personalities can vary; some can be shy or outgoing, sweet or grumpy, placid or playful. Get to know your rabbit's personality and treat it accordingly: for instance, shy rabbits will need more socialization in order to feel comfortable around people.

In general, rabbits are extremely social and need daily interaction to be happy. The most important thing to do to keep your pet happy and healthy is to spend time with them every day and provide plenty of environmental enrichments inside and outside the cage.

## **Rabbits and Children**

Are you a parent with young children considering adopting a rabbit? There are many things to consider before deciding to bring a rabbit into your home with children.

Unlike dogs and cats, rabbits are prey species, and they require very delicate care and calm households in order to feel safe and secure. As such, adults should always be the primary caretakers, and interactions between young children and rabbits should always be supervised. It is important that children know how to interact properly with rabbits, and how to handle them without causing any harm. With time and supervision, a positive relationship will develop between your children and your rabbit, which will serve as the foundation for learning empathy and respect for living beings.

## **Considerations Prior to Adopting**

### **Children in your near future?**

To keep a rabbit happy, they require a minimum of 4 hours of time out of their cage/pen each day to exercise and socialize, as well as daily maintenance. New parents sometimes find that they do not have the time for a rabbit. Since rabbits are such loyal pets, re-homing is stressful, so time considerations are important prior to adopting.

### **Money, Money, Money**

Providing adequate care for a rabbit, especially if the rabbit develops medical issues, can be an overwhelming strain on people's finances. Before adopting a rabbit, do some research on common medical issues and contact a rabbit-savvy veterinarian to get an idea of the cost of meeting a rabbit's long-term medical needs.

### **Allergies**

People with hay fever or grass allergies will be allergic to the food that rabbits eat. Some people are allergic to rabbit fur as well. It is important to take precautions before adopting to ensure that everyone in the home can happily live with any new furry companions. Speak with your family doctor, or spend some time around rabbits prior to adopting.

## **Pregnancy**

Unlike cat excrement, rabbit droppings and urine cannot cause toxoplasmosis, and pregnant women are perfectly safe spending time around rabbits and even cleaning their litter boxes.

## **Tips for Having a Rabbit with Children**

### **Selecting the Right Rabbit**

It's important to find a rabbit with the right personality for your family. Take into consideration that some children might become frustrated with a rabbit that is shy, and some rabbits are very scared of sudden movements and as such would likely be frightened of energetic children. Older, spayed or neutered rabbits are generally calmer and tend to be better pets for children, and since their personalities have settled, you will be able to choose a rabbit with a personality that will work with your family. A general rule of thumb is the younger the child, the larger the rabbit should be. Larger rabbits are a bit hardier and won't be as tempting to pick up. You should still look for a confident, easy-going rabbit, regardless of size to avoid putting it in an environment that is stressful for it.

### **Learn and Teach**

Do your research and learn to recognize rabbit behaviour and body language. Also get to know your rabbit as an individual – what scares them, calms them, stresses them out. Once you understand your rabbit, teach your child to recognize the rabbit's signs. For instance, if your rabbit is softly grinding her teeth in happiness, ask if your child hears it and explain that it means she is happy and enjoys being pet. If your rabbit scratches or bites your child, explain that this is what rabbits do when they are frightened and explain what the child has done to scare the rabbit so it can be avoided in future interactions.

### **Lead by Example**

Children are expert imitators and are very observant of their parents and other role models. The best way to show your child how to behave around a rabbit is to let them observe your own interactions with the rabbit. Let your child watch you grooming, petting, or holding the rabbit and encourage them to ask questions. If you practice empathy, respect, and understanding of the rabbit, your child will learn the appropriate ways to interact with animals and will become a more responsible, informed caregiver.

### **Supervised Play Sessions**

When introducing children to rabbits, it is helpful to set up short, supervised petting sessions. During these sessions, sit quietly and calmly together and guide your child to gently pet the bunny. With young children, provide plenty of direction to ensure that they are petting softly. Until your child is old enough, or until they learn how to properly interact with rabbits, it helps to supervise their time together to ensure that everyone leaves these petting sessions happy. For example, if the rabbit hops away, it is important to not restrain or chase it. Let it feel that it can leave if it does not feel safe, and it will be more likely to return for attention in the future. Keep sessions short to begin with, that way you can all leave on a positive note.

### **Bonding via Food**

A great way for children to bond with rabbits is through food. Children love to share their snacks with their pets, so teaching your child which types of food your rabbit can share is important. Setting up designated "feeding times" is a fun way to keep your rabbit on a fixed feeding schedule and allow your child to be the one providing the greens. A neat idea to help involve young children with feeding is to

make a list of rabbit-safe food with pictures and hanging it by the refrigerator so they can pick out greens on their own!

### **Give your Rabbit Space**

A great way to let your rabbit explore your children is to have your child do an activity on the floor (homework, watching TV, reading) and allow the rabbit to explore and grow calm around the child. Many rabbits like to take things slow, and setting up interactions where your children are not paying attention to the rabbit gives it a chance to explore at its own pace.

## **Considerations for Specific Age Groups**

### **Infants**

Rabbits are expert jumpers and can get into most cribs or playpens with ease. In order to prevent any injuries to the baby or the rabbit, never leave babies younger than 6 months of age alone with a rabbit. Remember to keep your rabbit housed away from your baby, since rabbits can be frightened by loud, high-pitched noises like crying.

### **Toddlers**

From 6 months to around 2 years of age, children start exploring their environment more and will begin to take a greater interest in your rabbit, so this is a perfect opportunity to teach your children how to properly interact with rabbits. Start with supervised petting sessions as detailed above. It also helps to set up boundaries about what you can and cannot do with the rabbit. For example, since rabbits' spines are so delicate, children this young should not pick up rabbits. Similarly, your rabbit should never be chased, and the litter box and droppings are off-limits. Not only will this help the rabbit be comfortable around your child, but it will help maintain proper hygiene around the house.

### **Young Children**

For children 2-7, you can continue supervised petting sessions, but can also slowly begin giving them more freedom of interaction and responsibility. For children 7+, you can begin to demonstrate appropriate holding, as well as letting them help to clean the rabbit's cage and litter box and help supervise the rabbit during play time

### **Older Children**

Children over 10 are starting to become capable of safely holding rabbits, so you can begin to teach this skill. There are many books about rabbit care designed for children which is a great way to teach your child responsibility for the rabbit. While a child should not be the primary caregiver for your rabbit, you can definitely involve them with daily tasks.

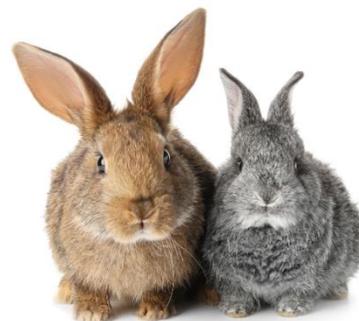
## **Bonding Rabbits**

Rabbits are happiest living in pairs. While they love and enjoy human companionship, there are certain social needs that even the most loving owners can never completely fulfil. Rabbits living in bonded pairs are generally healthier than singly kept rabbits: they experience less stress, have stronger immune systems, and have longer life spans on average. While there are many benefits of living in pairs, bonding two unfamiliar rabbits is a delicate process and can be quite stressful for the person involved. If you can,

it is ideal to adopt two already-bonded rabbits, but if you want to bond your current rabbit to a partner, the following information will help guide you through this tricky, but ultimately rewarding, experience.

## The Essentials

Rabbits must be altered before attempting to bond them. Unaltered rabbits are territorial and more prone to aggression, both of which can make bonding impossible. You should wait two months after spaying or neutering before attempting to bond to allow the hormones to settle down. A three or more bond is possible but much more difficult. It is usually most successful if you begin with two already-bonded rabbits of the same sex and introduce a third rabbit of the opposite sex. You should go through the same steps as you would with two rabbits, but make sure never to try to bond three single rabbits at the same time. Always work with two rabbits at a time and be prepared for a three-way bond not to work out. Your rabbits might be happier with just their current bond partner.



## How to Choose a Partner

### Complimentary Personalities

Two dominant rabbits are unlikely to get along and two submissive rabbits may not connect with one another. The best combination is one submissive and one dominant rabbit. Try to determine which best describes your rabbit and look for the opposite quality in potential bonding partners.

Dominant rabbits tend to assert themselves more in general and may exhibit behaviour such as grunting or charging when you reach for their food bowl or a favourite toy or treat. Submissive rabbits tend to be more easy-going and laid-back. Keep in mind that behaviour patterns may be entirely different when dealing with other rabbits and interactions with humans only serve as loose guidelines to their personality type.

### Girls and Boys

The easiest bond, in general, is one male with one female. However, it is fairly common for the same sex to bond and sex is far less important than personality in selecting a potential bonding partner.

### Age and Activity Level

Rabbits of the same approximate age (two adults, two young rabbits, etc.) are more likely to share the same energy level and personality types. Older rabbits tend to be more easy-going and relaxed, and younger rabbits are more playful and excitable. However, every rabbit is an individual, and you should get to know your rabbit's personality before determining the right kind of match.

Size, breed and colouring are unimportant in bonding. What is more important is personality. Even though one rabbit should be dominant and the other submissive, both rabbits should be similar enough to meet one another's needs. A playful young rabbit may prefer another energetic rabbit over a calm, sedate one, and vice versa.

## **How to Begin the Bonding Process at Home**

### **Neighbours**

After adopting a rabbit that would be a suitable bonding partner, you should begin by housing the rabbits in pens next to one another with at least two feet between them to start and then move them closer if going well, in order to prevent fighting through the bars.

### **Sharing Scents**

A good first step to get the rabbits accustomed to one another is to swap their litter boxes and allow them playtime in the other's cage (without the other rabbit). This will help the rabbits to get used to the smell of one another even in "their territory." Good signs at this point are interested in one another without grunting or thumping. If you see your rabbit flopping down against the side of its enclosure closest to the other rabbit, this means your rabbit is relaxed and happy. The litterbox swapping stage should be continued for about 2 to 3 weeks before proceeding to meetings. You can also pet the rabbits in turns, first one, then the other, to get them used to one another's scent and to associate the other rabbit's smell with an enjoyable, relaxing activity like petting if this is something the rabbit enjoys.

### **"Dates"**

If your rabbits have shown no signs of aggression or fear through their cages, the next step is to let your rabbits meet. This should be done in a neutral territory, such as a pen neither of them has used before or a room neither have been in before. Prepare for the possibility of fighting, which can happen quickly and lead to serious injuries. If you wear oven mitts, then you can easily separate two fighting rabbits without getting bit yourself! Keeping a spray bottle on hand is helpful to distract them. Take the bonding process slow to help prevent fights. Rabbits often hold grudges, and bonding after a fight is much more difficult. Learning to recognize early signs of aggression or fear is essential to fight prevention.

These signs can include ears back, tail up, tense muscles and stance, grunting, chasing and biting. Mounting is normal behaviour unless the other rabbit is frightened by this or reacts aggressively. These sessions should initially be only a couple of minutes long if everything goes well and they should be separated at any time when they show aggression. You can also help to make this a more positive experience by offering toys, pets and treats to both rabbits. If the first date goes well, you can repeat the dates each day and increase the time together by a minute or two each session. Continue to closely monitor every session and be prepared to separate them if they become aggressive. If the rabbits are aggressive or fearful in these sessions, it is okay to take a step back and repeat the litterbox swapping for another week or so. Every relationship moves at its own pace, so don't be frustrated by having to move back a step or feeling stuck at a certain stage. It's all part of the process!

### **Taking it to the Next Level**

When your rabbits are successfully enjoying their out time together in neutral territory, you may begin allowing them to share one or both of their enclosures under supervision. To begin, clean the litterboxes and cages to try to make them as neutral smelling as possible. Then, you can either put them both in the same pen, or have them out in the same room with both pens opened to allow them to enter and leave at will. Be on hand to stop any aggression or territoriality. The rabbits should still be apart when you are absent or not actively engaged in supervising them.

## Soulmates

When your rabbits are spending all of their time out together and exhibiting bonded behaviour – flopping and sleeping together, sharing a food dish and grooming one another – you can move them in together on a permanent basis. Maintain a watchful eye to help ensure that the bond stays positive. Rabbit bonds are beautiful in their love and devotion, and will surely bring joy to your entire household!

## Your Role

Beyond being the ever-present referee, closely watching for signs of aggression and intervening to prevent fights, you should also be the one setting the tone of the interactions. Make sure you are calm and relaxed and show love through petting, cuddling and playing with your rabbits. If one or both of the rabbits already loves and trusts you, you can be an effective tool in showing them how to include the other rabbit in these experiences. Be patient, flexible, and observant throughout the process. Every rabbit relationship works differently and at its own pace. Find out what seems to work with your rabbits and what doesn't in order to help guide the process.

## Rabbits and Other Animals

Rabbits thrive in bonded relationships with other rabbits and will happily share their home and love with their human companions. Rabbits can also live peacefully with animals of other species, but these relationships take a lot of work and supervision. Some animals can become your rabbit's best friend, while others should never be allowed into contact with rabbits. It is important that rabbits never share their pens, cages or rooms with any animal other than their bonded rabbit companion, and should never be left with other species unsupervised.

### Best Matches: Cats and Dogs

Cats and dogs are the safest species to introduce to your rabbit, but even so, not all cats and dogs would be appropriate companions. Personality is the most important consideration.



### Prey vs. Predator

Your domesticated cat or dog may be the sweetest, cuddliest companion who wouldn't hurt a fly, but remember, their natural instincts tell them to hunt small mammals. As predators, their play behaviour is designed to make them good hunters. They often wrestle, chase, pounce on and nip in play. Rabbits, on the other hand, are naturally prey animals. They don't hunt their food and thus do not need to practice these skills. Their form of play is therefore very different. Rabbits will run, do acrobatic jumps and flips in the air and toss inanimate toys. The way cats and dogs play is frightening to rabbits, who recognize it as threatening predator behaviour. Rabbit skin is very delicate and paper thin, so it is important that rabbits are neither around nor part of dog and cat play time. Cats and dogs can also send a rabbit into shock by scaring it too much, which, if left untreated, can be fatal. To ensure the safety of your rabbit, be sure that interactions with other pets occur when all animals are calm and only when you are available to supervise.

### Personality

Personality is always the best indicator of a potentially successful inter-species relationship. Calm, mellow cats and dogs and outgoing, easy-going rabbits are the best possible match. In general, older cats and

dogs are more likely to exhibit these traits than younger animals. Still, each one is different, and you should assess your animal's individual personality before deciding whether to introduce it to other species. Some cats and dogs have higher prey drives than others and are more motivated to chase prey species. Some rabbits also tend to be jumpier than others and are likely to run in fear from cats or dogs, which might, in turn, trigger the other pet's predatory instincts. In both cases, these animals should be kept separate from one another to prevent any harm from coming to the rabbit.

## **Other Species**

### **Small Mammals**

Most rabbits don't tend to interact well with other small prey species, such as guinea pigs or hamsters. The natural activities of smaller mammals can clash with those of rabbits, who, when frightened, deliver a solid kick which can sometimes lead to injuries of either species. Therefore, to keep all of your small domestics happy and healthy, it's best to keep them separate at all times.

### **Dangers of Disease**

Rabbits are prone to zoonotic diseases (diseases transmitted between species), both as carriers and receivers. A common example of this is Bordetella, a bacteria of the respiratory system, which some rabbits can carry their whole lives without showing any symptoms. However, these bacteria are highly contagious. Some species, like guinea pigs, have a higher susceptibility to respiratory infections, and bordetella can be fatal to these animals. Rabbits and guinea pigs should never be housed together and should not be allowed contact or to share food or water dishes.

### **Social Life**

Rabbits are highly social and benefit from being bonded to another rabbit. Only another rabbit can truly meet the emotional and social needs that rabbits require to be happy. They rely on each other to groom, cuddle, and provide comfort and consistency in stressful situations. Even other "prey" species, like guinea pigs, cannot adequately satisfy these needs, as they rarely groom or cuddle to the extent rabbits do. If you feel that your rabbit is lonely or that you are not meeting all of his or her needs, please consider bonding to another rabbit. Never try to bond your rabbit to another species.

### **Ferrets**

You may not think of your ferret as a threat to a rabbit, especially a rabbit two or three times its size. However, ferrets are carnivores, just like cats and dogs, with the same predatory hunting instincts and extremely high prey drives. In fact, ferrets were historically used for hunting rabbits. Rabbits and ferrets should never be allowed contact and should be kept in separate rooms if you choose to have both species in your home.

### **Birds**

While birds do not seem to be the most threatening species to share a home with a rabbit, they can be dangerous and should be very closely supervised if you choose to keep both species. Like barking dogs, loud birds can hurt rabbits' sensitive ears and cause them stress. Birds also use their sharp talons and strong beaks to explore their surroundings and defend themselves if threatened. This could pose a serious danger to fragile rabbits.

## Tips for Introducing Rabbits to Other Species

### Learn to Read Your Rabbit

Do your research before putting your rabbit in the stressful situation of an encounter with your cat or dog. Learn to recognize basic rabbit body language and signals and to identify when they are feeling calm, afraid, aggressive, or ill. Also take the time to get to know your rabbit as an individual and his or her unique personality. Some rabbits are shy, some are outgoing and playful, some are calm and relaxed. Learn about your rabbit and his or her moods and make sure your rabbit is well-socialized with humans before introducing other animals. Your rabbit should see you as a source of safety and protection, and building a relationship of trust takes time.

### Train and Restrain

In order to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all animals involved and to foster a positive relationship with your dog, engage in consistent training methods and solidify your relationship with it before introducing other animals. Your dog should be an expert in “lie down and stay” before meeting your rabbit. Vigorously exercising your dog before encounters will help to expend additional energy. Allow the dog to calm down fully from the excitement of exercise before introductions. Similarly, cats should always be closely monitored and should have a positive relationship with you before engaging in rabbit meetings.

### Supervise

Every step of the meeting process should be carefully monitored and controlled by you. Remember, you don't want to put either animal in a position to be harmed, and this is where close supervision comes in. Even after your animals are living happily together and even with cuddly, loving interactions, you should not leave them alone together. If your rabbit is free-range, keep it in a separate room at night or when you are away from home. Cats and dogs will always be predators and will react to situations of stress, fear, or boredom by falling back on their instincts.

### Go Slow

If your rabbit or other pet is new to your home, give your rabbit an adjustment period of at least one or two weeks before introducing other animals. This ensures the rabbit is accustomed to its surroundings and feels safe in its environment and human family. When first introducing the animals, slower is better. Take your time; rushing things can cause anxiety and leave permanent fearfulness between your animals.

To begin, keep the rabbit in a confined area, like a pen or cage, with a hiding spot that removes the rabbit from view of the other animal, and allow the cat or dog into the room. Dogs should be kept on leashes and, at any sign of aggression or over-excitement or if the rabbit appears very frightened, end the session and remove the dog. When the dog is behaving calmly and quietly, especially if it is lying down relaxed, give praise and rewards to show it that this is the appropriate way to act around rabbits. The ideal outcome is to have your dog lying down, very relaxed, even if the rabbit is hopping around its cage excitedly.

Cats should be closely monitored for similar behaviour. Again, signs of excessive fear in the rabbit or excitement in the cat should be addressed by removing the cat. As with dogs, positive reinforcement is always most effective. Reward calm, relaxed behaviour with petting, treats, and praise.

Keep these sessions short. Even if the session goes well, limit to about 15 minutes to ensure that it ends on a good note. You can repeat the 15-minute session daily for about one week. If the cat or dog is calm during all of these sessions, you can let the rabbit out of its cage/pen to allow them to meet.

Once you are at the point where you allow the rabbit to hop around freely, it is still important to keep your dog on leash and closely monitor and guide their interactions. Continue to keep sessions down to 15 minutes and repeat daily until all animals involved are relaxed and show no over-excitement or fear. Once you have reached this point, dogs can be let off leash, but continue to supervise closely.

### **Calm Yourself**

Remember, you are the most powerful tool in the “meet and greet” sessions. Animals are very observant and will pick up on even your most subtle signs of anxiety or stress. Your companion animals should trust you to protect them, but this means they will also trust you to determine what situations are dangerous or threatening. If you show fear or anxiety, they will assume the situation is “wrong” somehow and will also be unsure and therefore more likely to react with fear and aggression. The best way to ensure that all animals are calm and relaxed around one another is to lead by example. If you are calm and collected while remaining observant and in control, your animals will be less likely to feel fear or excitement, and will recover more quickly from any such feelings.

## **Training Your Rabbit with Positive Reinforcement**

Many of the unwanted behaviours displayed by house rabbits usually stem from a lack of socialization in the rabbit’s previous home, either with humans and the rabbit’s living environment.

### **Removal and Redirection**

Chewing your favourite slippers, your antique coffee table, or the book you are half-finished are common rabbit activities. Some rabbits prefer to chew fabric, others paper or wood. Some rabbit owners have to replace all the baseboards in their home due to their rabbit’s chewing activities. Having a fully rabbit-proofed space is important as chewing unsafe materials can be dangerous for rabbits, especially if they ingest pieces of the item or chew lead paint, dyes, wood stains or other toxic materials.

This unwanted behaviour is perfectly natural and important for rabbits, but the action is directed at inappropriate items, so the rabbit should be taught and provided plenty of appropriate items to chew, dig and destroy (such as all-natural apple or willow branches). Chewing is an essential activity for rabbits and necessary to keep teeth ground down and prevent overgrowth, so chewing should never be discouraged, but rather train your rabbit to re-direct their chewing to appropriate, safe, designated items. When the rabbit chews on an inappropriate item, such as furniture, try to get the rabbit’s attention and offer the chew toy instead to redirect the behaviour. If the rabbit is drawn to certain items, such as clothing or books, remove the temptation by storing all unsafe or inappropriate items out of the rabbit’s reach.

Digging carpets or furniture is also a natural activity for rabbits whose wild counterparts burrow underground for safety. Grass mats that are safe for digging and chewing can be found at pet supply stores and provided as alternatives. Another solution is a cardboard box full of paper or old phone books. Just make sure the rabbit is digging, rather than chewing and ingesting, dyed papers. When the rabbit engages in digging in inappropriate places, remove the rabbit and place it on the digging mat or in the box. If the rabbit persists in digging in a specific area, place the digging material in that location to try to engage the rabbit in appropriate digging. Some stubborn rabbits need to be blocked from an area of a room or carpet using a baby gate or strategic arrangement of furniture.

## **Positive Reinforcement**

Rabbits are sensitive animals. Disciplining them through verbal or physical correction will only cause fear and a distrustful relationship between you and your rabbit, and the rabbit will associate these fearful events with you rather than with the behaviour. You should never shout at or physically correct a rabbit.

The best way to deter unwanted behaviour is to reward positive behaviour. Rabbits long to belong to your family group and to receive praise and gestures of love. If a rabbit is chewing on furniture or inappropriate items, reward them for chewing on their designated chew toys or apple branches. If they are digging your carpet, couch or floor, reward digging in a box or grass mat. If your rabbit is urinating or leaving droppings outside the litterbox, reward them for using the litterbox. Rewards can entail offering a favourite treat or just simple positive attention such as praise and petting. Many rabbits are food-motivated, so reserving a favourite treat for positive reinforcement is a good way to focus the rabbit's behaviour. Rabbits are intelligent and will quickly learn which behaviours get rewarded and will repeat those behaviours rather than those that do not elicit a positive response.

Positive reinforcement training can be used to teach your rabbit to do tricks, such as lie down, give a paw, spin in a circle, stand on hind legs or even jump through a hoop. Positive reinforcement training of new behaviours will not be addressed here, but there are many great resources available on positive reinforcement training methods, such as "clicker training", which can be used to engage in the fun and stimulating process of training.

## **Consistency and Patience**

Remaining patient throughout this process is important. Not reacting emotionally to unwanted behaviour by your loved pet is difficult but essential to overcoming these issues. Calmly addressing these issues through positive reinforcement and redirection is the only way to ultimately alter the behaviour. Rabbits thrive on routine and consistency, so make sure you always respond to behaviour in the same way with the same intensity no matter how you feel. Whether the rabbit chews a piece of paper from a waste basket or nibbles a corner off of your expensive antique furniture, your response should be the same. Do not punish the natural behavior. Rather shape it into a positive one by providing appropriate outlets and positively reinforcing use of them. Remember to be flexible. If you just can't stop your rabbit from chewing on an item, remove the item from reach or block off the area. It can take time to change behaviours, especially if it is an ingrained habit, but with patient, consistent efforts, you will succeed in eliminating inappropriate behaviour while maintaining a positive relationship with your rabbit.

## **Biting or "Aggressive" Behaviour**

### **Nipping or Biting**

It is important, first and foremost, to differentiate between nipping and biting and chewing. When rabbits "bite" food, toys, furniture, clothes or any other inanimate object, it is generally considered chewing rather than biting (with the exception of surrogate partner stuffed animal toys).

Nipping is a light bite used as a means of communication for various reasons. Because rabbits have very few vocalizations, they often nip other rabbits to let them know they are in the rabbit's way, as a "love bite" to express happiness or to get their attention. All of these scenarios can be translated to the rabbit-human relationship. Rabbits will sometimes nip humans when the human is sitting in their way, and they wish them to move when they are happy and cuddling up, or if a human stops or doesn't start petting them when they want it. Nipping is generally soft and does not hurt or break the skin. It is not a serious issue that requires training. Rather, identifying situations that lead to nipping (sitting across a favourite

running route, sitting next to the rabbit without petting it, etc.) can help you to alter or eliminate the causes of nipping. For example, if your rabbit nips for attention, when you cannot or do not want to continue petting your rabbit, stand up and move away from them.

Biting is more insistent and generally harder and sharper than a nip. It usually indicates a response to an extreme emotion, such as fear, anxiety, or defensiveness. Eliminating biting is a matter of identifying and eliminating the cause of biting. Healthy, happy, comfortable and content rabbits will almost never bite. Creating situations and environments that help your rabbit feel more relaxed and confident will reduce instances of biting.

### **Mistaken Biting**

One of the most common reasons for “biting” is when children, or adults, smell like food. Rabbits have poor eyesight at close ranges and cannot see directly in front of their face. Items placed in front of their nose, out of sight, are primarily identified by scent. Traces of food on your hands from recently eating, or from feeding the rabbit, can lead the rabbit to assume it is being offered food and may lead to biting. Wash hands carefully before petting or interacting with your rabbit to help eliminate this common cause of biting.

### **Nervous, Fearful Biting**

The number one reason rabbits bite is from fear. As prey species, rabbits are high-stress animals frightened of many things, including loud noises, sudden movements, being chased, cornered or grabbed, and an array of other individual stressors. If your rabbit is nervous, try to create a quiet, calm environment for it. Do not try to pet or pick up a nervous rabbit. Allow the rabbit to come to you and explore you at its own pace. Only move forward to petting, grooming or handling when the rabbit is happy and receptive with each new step. Do not force interactions on a rabbit. A fearful rabbit will see this as a threatening gesture and is more likely to react with biting. Moving slowly, staying calm and quiet and being patient are all key to helping a rabbit learn to trust you and enjoy interacting with you. With time and consistent positive interactions, your rabbit will gain confidence and allow more interaction.

If your rabbit is only occasionally fearful, try to identify environmental or situational stressors and eliminate them in future interactions. Were you moving towards them too quickly? Was there a loud noise in the background? Was there a new smell, sight or sound? Rabbits are highly sensitive to even the most minute changes, so pay careful attention to what may be causing your rabbit to be nervous and try to create a more relaxing environment for future interactions.

One mistake first-time rabbit owners often make is to present their hand under the rabbit’s nose to be sniffed before petting them, as one might a dog or cat. Not only is this a blind spot for rabbits, which may lead to mistaken biting, but rabbits who are claiming dominance with a new rabbit will present themselves under the other’s mouth to be groomed. This can lead to biting and fearfulness from prey animals who already recognize you as a predator species. You should be the one to take the submissive position as a groomer to encourage them to feel comfortable about your presence. Approach a rabbit from a low level and move towards it from the side or above, and pet its head in gentle strokes. This will show the rabbit that the reason you are coming towards it is to offer affection and will make your approach less scary in future.

### **Territorial or Possessive Biting**

Rabbits are naturally territorial animals and will mark their space using saliva and urine to let other animals know that it belongs to them. Rabbits will often engage in territorial behaviour in the home, claiming areas

as theirs and defending them against intruders. They can also claim objects such as toys, food or dishes, or even people, and will similarly defend them against others. Rabbits will usually claim their enclosure if they are not free-range in the home and may act defensively if you try to enter it, pet them or pick them up from within it. The larger the enclosure, the less chance of territorial behaviour, so expanding the cage size is a good place to start with rabbits who grunt, charge or bite when you enter their cage.

The best way to address this behaviour is to stop infringing on the rabbit's area if possible. A cage or pen with a floor-level opening is ideal to allow the rabbit to enter and exit on its own, rather than being forced in or out each time. Letting the rabbit out of the cage before cleaning it, giving food or water, or touching toys will eliminate aggression during these activities. Allowing the rabbit to have a space that they are never grabbed or bothered in, such as a hide-box or cage, is important to their sense of security and comfort, especially for more nervous rabbits. Avoiding going into or bothering the rabbit when it is in the cage is the best way to eliminate territory or possessive behaviour.

Many rabbits exhibit territorial behaviour because of cage frustration: a sense of anxiety and frustration at being kept in a cage that is too small, or not having enough exercise time outside of the cage. Rabbits kept in large enclosures or free-range or who are let out of the cage at least 4 hours a day are less likely to bite in the cage. Make sure your rabbit has ample opportunity to explore, exercise and release pent-up energy before returning to the cage. Try to make the return a positive experience by offering the rabbit a treat when it returns to the cage on its own. You can teach a command phrase, such as "bedtime" or "go home," using positive reinforcement to teach the rabbit to return to the cage freely and happily.

### **Other Causes of Biting**

Rabbits who normally do not bite may bite when in pain or discomfort. If your rabbit is behaving abnormally, take it to a rabbit veterinarian and rule out any medical concerns before trying to address the issue behaviourally. Rabbits going through puberty or other hormonal changes may bite or exhibit other unwanted behaviours. Spaying or neutering your rabbit helps reduce hormonal fluctuations and consequent behavioural concerns.

