Caring for Your Companion Rabbit

SaveABunny
a new generation of rabbit rescue

www.saveabunny.org
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Shopping List: The Basics

DIET
- 80% of diet - fresh grass (not alfalfa) hay daily.
- 15% - fresh greens daily; limited fruit treats.
- 5% - timothy based pellets (not alfalfa); 100% pure pellets. AVOID “gourmet” brands with seeds, nuts, and dried fruit.
- Unlimited fresh water daily.
- NO commercial rabbit treats such as yogurt drops, nuts, or flavored chew toys.

HOUSING
- Very roomy INDOOR enclosure. Minimum 6 times the size of an adult rabbit. A large dog pen (X-pen) works well and is flexible.
- Front outward door is preferable to allow your bunny to go in and out independently. Door must be large enough to fit the litter box.
- No bare wire floors for foot/toenail safety.
- Carpet squares, sea grass mats, towels or sheets for bedding.
- Cardboard or untreated wood boxes make ideal resting places.
- Litter box – you may need more than one if you will have a large space available to your bunny.
- Use plant-based litters like Cat Country Organic, Yesterday’s News or CareFresh. DO NOT use wood shavings, clumping or clay-based litters.
- Cozy pet carrier – not too roomy or too small. It is often easier to remove a rabbit from a top-loading carrier. Hard sides are best for using with seatbelts. Place a towel on the bottom for traction.

PLAYTIME
- Rabbits need AT LEAST 4 hours of INDOOR, supervised out-of-cage time each day.
- Home must be rabbit-proofed. Protect furniture/other items you don’t want chewed.
- Plenty of toys to chew, toss, jump on or dig in like willow baskets/balls, phone books, boxes.
- DO NOT purchase a harness or leash for your bunny. They are dangerous and can cause your rabbit serious injury, including a broken back.

RABBIT-PROOFING YOUR HOME
- Rabbit must have access to litter box, food, and water.
- Protect all electrical cords/wires with tubing.
- Remove any household plants at rabbit-level.
- Cover tile or wood floors with carpet; rabbits may climb stairs.

GROOMING
- Brush weekly (or more) to keep rabbit from developing hairballs; use a small cat brush, HairBuster or Furminator is recommended.
- Trim nails every 6-8 weeks.

OTHER PETS
- Rabbits can get along with pet cats and dogs – be sure other pets have no “predator” instincts.
- Rabbits are “prey” animals and are likely to be fearful for their safety.
- Supervised introductions must be done slowly.
- Do not leave rabbits with other pets unsupervised until you are ABSOLUTELY sure there is no danger.

COMPANION RABBITS
- Rabbits are social animals by nature and typically bond for life with a partner.
- Same sex companions are generally not advised unless they are united siblings.
- Rabbits should be introduced to each other before adopting – let your bunny choose her partner.
- Both rabbits must be altered before bonding.
- Meet and greet bunny “dates” are offered upon request/appointment.

TOYS
- Chew toys are necessary for dental health. Provide untreated wood blocks, apple tree branches, sticks, willow baskets, etc.
- Empty paper tubes or cardboard tunnels.
- Cat toy balls, whisk brooms, or phone books.
Veterinarians

Like dogs and cats, rabbits should get a yearly checkup by a veterinarian. Many vets are not familiar with rabbits’ specific health needs so it is best to find an experienced vet before an emergency. *Remember: if your bunny is not eating, it is an emergency!*

**San Francisco**

Dr. Alex Herman  
Dr. Nicola Gillespie  
All Pets Hospital  
269 South Van Ness Ave  
San Francisco, CA  
(415) 861-5725  

Dr. Leila Marucci  
Bay Area Bird Hospital  
2145 Taraval St  
San Francisco, CA  
(415) 566-4359

**North Bay**

Dr. Rachael Griffith  
Tender Care Vet Hospital  
1569 4th St  
San Rafael, CA  
(415) 454-4994  

Dr. Jona Sun Jordan  
Coodington Vet Clinic  
2210 County Center Dr  
Santa Rosa, CA  
(707) 546-4646  

Dr. Robert Jereb  
North Park Vet Clinic  
5700 State Farm Dr  
Rohnert Park, CA  
(707) 585-2899  

Dr. Karlton Pfann  
Bradner Vet Hospital  
347 Lakeville Street  
Petaluma, CA  
(707) 762-3549  

Dr. Debra Scheenstra  
East San Rafael Vet Clinic  
820 D Street  
San Rafael, CA  
(415) 456-4463  
For house calls:  
(415) 893-1554  

Dr. Joy Mueller  
Guardian Pet Hospital  
3501 Industrial Dr #C  
Santa Rosa, CA  
(707) 524-2464  

Dr. Lisa Pesch  
Specializes in acupuncture, herbal and homeopathic remedies.  
245 North Main Street  
Sebastopol, CA  
(707) 823-1491  

**East Bay**

Dr. Lynne Lankes  
4144 Redwood Hwy  
Suite #A  
San Rafael, CA  
(415) 479-2287  

Dr. Mark Ross  
Montgomery Vet Clinic  
4735 Sonoma Hwy  
Santa Rosa, CA  
(707) 527-9330  

Dr. Powers  
East Petaluma Animal Hospital  
1420-B S. McDowell Blvd  
Petaluma, CA  
(707) 765-9098  

Dr. Carolynn Harvey  
20877 Foothill Blvd  
Hayward, CA  
(510) 538-2330  

Dr. Shelby Riddle  
852 Southampton Road  
Benicia, CA  
(707) 745-1135  

Dr. Bynum  
Dr. Sorem  
Dr. Arntz  
Dr. Kim  
Dr. LaMont  
Dr. Berkley  
VCA Bay Area Animal Hospital  
4501 Shattuck Avenue  
Oakland, CA  
(510) 654-8375  

www.saveabunny.org
Emergency and After Hours Care

Before bringing your bunny to any pet emergency clinic, call first to see if they have a veterinarian on duty who treats rabbits.

Pet Emergency & Specialty Center of Marin
901 East Francisco Blvd, San Rafael, CA 94901
(415) 456-7372

Pet Emergency Treatment Service
1048 University Ave, Berkeley, CA 94710
(510) 548-6684

Adobe Animal Hospital
4470 El Camino Real, Los Altos, CA 94022
(650) 948-9661

Hay Sources
Hay sold in pet stores is usually found in small bags at big prices. Given the amount of hay that rabbits need to eat, it’s more economical to buy hay by the flake or by the bale. A flake of hay weighs about 10 lbs, a bale weighs about 100 lbs. If you don’t have space to store a bale, try splitting it with a friend or donating some to a shelter! You can buy hay at the Rohnert Park Animal Shelter (flake), at the Sonoma Humane Society (flake), and at feed stores (bale, sometimes flake).

Books
House Rabbit Handbook by Marinell Harriman
Rabbit Health in the 21st Century by Kathryn Smith
Stories Rabbits Tell by Susan E. Davis and Margo DeMello
The Essential Rabbit by Betsy Sikora Siino
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**Online Information**
SaveABunny – [www.saveabunny.org](http://www.saveabunny.org)
House Rabbit Society – [www.rabbit.org](http://www.rabbit.org)

**Online Supplies**
Binky Bunny (toys & supplies) — [www.binkybunny.com](http://www.binkybunny.com)
Bunny Bunch Boutique (toys & supplies) — [www.bunnybunchboutique.com](http://www.bunnybunchboutique.com)
Bunny Luv (toys & supplies) — [www.bunnyluv.com](http://www.bunnyluv.com)
Funny Bunny Toy Company (toys) — [www.funnybunnytoyco.com](http://www.funnybunnytoyco.com)
Leith Petwerks (habitats, toys & supplies) — [www.leithpetwerks.com](http://www.leithpetwerks.com)
The Busy Bunny (toys & supplies) — [www.busy.bunny.com](http://www.busy.bunny.com)
About SaveABunny

Love animals? Want to make a difference? You’ve come to the right place.
SaveABunny is an award-winning, 501(c)(3) nonprofit, volunteer-based animal rescue organization based in Mill Valley, California near San Francisco. We work with over 30 shelters to make sure abandoned, abused and neglected rabbits get the second chance they deserve.

History
SaveABunny was founded in 1999 and since that time we have been involved with the life-saving rescues of close to 5,000 rabbits. Yet, we are still a small scrappy, resourceful and volunteer-based group. We value your involvement, compassion and support! *Saving the life of a gentle, loving animal who would otherwise be euthanized is a profound experience that will change your life for the better.*

Funding
We are funded primarily through donations and grants, and secondarily through adoption fees and specialty services, such as boarding, rabbit grooming, and limited merchandise sales.

*SaveABunny is an approved 501(c)(3) tax-exempt charitable organization.* SaveABunny’s EIN# is 80-0243372. *Your support is urgently needed and effectively managed.*

Our Mission and Philosophy
We serve both the people and animals in the community through adoption, advocacy, education, outreach and rescue options. We believe that all companion rabbits are worthy of a safe, loving home regardless of breed purity, pedigree, or temperament. We are against the use of rabbits for meat or fur. We encourage people to adopt spayed or neutered rabbits from shelters and rescue groups, such as SaveABunny, rather than purchasing an animal from a breeder or pet store.

According to the ASPCA, rabbits are the third most frequently euthanized animal in the United States. Adopting or fostering a rescued rabbit saves precious lives.

All our rabbits are spayed or neutered and undergo medical and temperament evaluation before being placed up for adoption. We carefully screen potential adopters and require that all rabbits from SaveABunny live indoors as a treasured member of the family. We provide free, ongoing support to adopters, and we make a lifetime commitment to the safety and well-being of the rabbit.

Our adoption contract outlines terms for the proper care of a rabbit and specifies that the rabbit be returned to SaveABunny if the terms of the adoption contract are violated or if the adopter can no longer care for the rabbit.

Scooter - Resident naughty bunny, and SaveABunny ambassador extraordinaire!
SaveABunny: How You Can Help

Your help can make an immediate difference in the life of a lonely animal in need.

✓ **ADOPT:** We have fabulous, loving bunnies in need of forever homes. We will work closely with you to make sure it’s the right match for both you and your bunny. We will provide you with all the information and support you need to have a wonderful life together.

✓ **FOSTER:** Want to help, but are unable to adopt permanently? Sadly, many rabbits have been innocent victims of abuse and neglect and need gentle, patient guardians to help them heal and trust again. Can you help these bunnies get back on their feet until they find their forever homes?

✓ **VOLUNTEER:** Looking for a fun and social way to help animals in need? We have volunteer opportunities suited just for you. You do not need to adopt an animal to help save lives! Whatever your occupation or hobby, there is always a way to help. And of course you’ll meet THE BUNNIES!

✓ **SHOP COMPASSIONATELY:** Please do not shop at pet stores that sell animals. They are contributing to the tragic animal overpopulation problem. Visit our Etsy.com and Ebay.com stores to buy unique items that support our work.

✓ **DONATE:** We are a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and depend on generous donations from people like you to help us save more lives. Donations are tax-deductible and can be made via PayPal on our website. Checks can be made out to SaveABunny and mailed to:

   **SaveABunny**
   P.O. Box 2143
   Mill Valley, CA 94942

✓ **BECOME A MEMBER OF SAVEABUNNY:** Please fill out the last page of this booklet to become a member today and support our rescue and educational efforts.

For more information, please visit our website at

www.saveabunny.org

or contact SaveABunny at

(415) 388-2790 or saveabunny@aol.com

Thank you for your caring and compassionate support!
Bunny Basics

This section serves as an introduction to rabbit care. More information on these topics can be found in the sections that follow.

Personality

- Rabbits are individuals, just like people, cats and dogs. They can be shy, nervous, outgoing, playful, bright, ornery, inquisitive, and opinionated.
- Most rabbits do NOT like to be picked up and held. Most will not sit in your lap. They like you to interact with them on the ground at their level.
- Rabbits are very intelligent and need rabbit-safe toys and other mental stimulation.
- Remember that rabbits are prey animals (unlike cats or dogs) and need to feel safe and secure in their environment. Let THEM approach you.

Company

- Most rabbits enjoy social interaction with people.
- Many rabbits enjoy the companionship of another spayed or neutered rabbit. Let your bunny pick his or her own friend.
- Introduce rabbits slowly in neutral territory, with each rabbit having his/her own housing during this time. Better yet, consult an expert. Rabbits can fight viciously.
- Many rabbits can get along well with cats and well-behaved dogs. Slow and supervised introductions are a must.
- Rabbits do not make good pets for young children—especially in classrooms. Rabbits prefer a quiet, stable environment and can be easily injured by exuberant children.

Health

- Male and female rabbits need to be spayed or neutered for both health and behavioral reasons – even if solitary.
- Indoor, altered rabbits with proper diet and vet care can live to be 10+ years.
- Locate a veterinarian who is experienced with rabbits' unique medical needs before an emergency arises. Have yearly checkups with your vet. See the vet list in Local Rabbit Resources (pages 4-5). For national/international vet listings, visit the House Rabbit Society's website.
- Contact your vet immediately if your bunny has stopped eating, drinking or eliminating. This is an emergency!
- Closely monitor any changes in your bunny's behavior and daily habits for signs of illness. Don’t wait to seek medical attention. Rabbits hide signs of illness and can die quickly.

Grooming

- Rabbits need to be brushed regularly to avoid hairballs. Unlike cats, rabbits can't vomit and can become very ill from intestinal blockage. Longhaired rabbits should be brushed daily and shorthaired rabbits
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should be brushed several times per week.

• Nail trims are needed every 6-8 weeks. You can learn to do this yourself, have a vet do it, or bring your rabbit to a SaveABunny outreach event.

• Rabbits’ teeth grow constantly and require hard items like hay, greens with stems, and toys to chew on to help the teeth wear properly. Have your vet check your bunny’s teeth at every yearly checkup.

Environment

• The bigger the enclosure the better.

• Rabbits should never be on wire because their feet can become sore and infected. Try sea grass mats, towels, and carpet— but make sure they do not eat the carpet. The sea grass can be chewed up and eaten.

• Use plant-based litters, such as Cat Country Organic and Yesterday's News. DO NOT use wood shavings or clay-based litters, such as Johnny Cat. These can cause very serious illnesses in rabbits.

• Place clean litter boxes stocked with fresh hay in a few corners of your bunny’s space. She will tend to pick one or two corners and if that is where you place the litter boxes you may find that your rabbit almost litter trains herself!

• Provide plenty of toys for mental stimulation and to help keep your bunny out of trouble. Introducing new toys regularly or cycling through the toys you allow your rabbit access to will keep toys novel and fun.

• Allow AT LEAST 4 hours of indoor, supervised out-of-cage time per day. Rabbits need lots of attention, playtime and exercise to stay happy and healthy.

• Make sure to rabbit-proof your home by covering electrical wires with a hard covering and removing other hazards, such as plants. Protect any furniture or items you don’t want chewed or damaged. Think of it as having a perpetual 2-year-old in your house.

Costs

• In addition to any adoption fees, initial setup costs usually run from $100 to $200.

• Ongoing expenses will average about $40+ per month.

• Rabbit vet care can be expensive. Checkups average $50 to $100 per visit. Emergency vet care can easily run hundreds of dollars.

• Private spay or neuter expenses typically range from $100 to $300 dollars. Adopting a rabbit who is already spayed or neutered from a shelter or rescue group is MUCH easier and MUCH less expensive.
Rabbit Diet Guide

The healthiest rabbit diet consists of unlimited fresh hay, a small amount of good quality pelleted rabbit food, and fresh leafy green vegetables. Anything beyond this is a treat and should be given in very limited quantities.

Water
Provide unlimited fresh water daily, either in a bottle or heavy/ceramic crock that can’t be tipped over.

Hay
Rabbits of all ages should have an unlimited amount of fresh hay daily. Timothy, oat or orchard grass hay are all good choices for adults because they are higher in fiber and lower in protein which is important for proper digestion. Alfalfa hay is for babies only. Hay is nutritious, and it provides roughage for prevention of life-threatening intestinal blockages and proper digestive bacterial balance. You can serve your rabbit her hay by filling a litter box with hay or using one of SaveABunny’s hay savers. Stuff empty, unbleached toilet paper rolls with hay to give your bunny a project! Do not purchase compressed hay because rabbits need long/loose hay to chew for dental health. See Local Rabbit Resources (pages 4-5) for hay sources.

Greens
Adult rabbits should also have an assortment of fresh greens daily. A daily serving of greens is a pile about 1-2 times the size of your bunny’s head. Make sure greens are washed, haven’t been sprayed with pesticides and don’t have any mold. Introduce greens one at a time and if any causes diarrhea, stop feeding it immediately. See Recommended Veggies and Treats (page 12).

Treats
Avoid yogurt drops and other sugary treats, as well as human crackers and sweets. However, a small piece of fruit or carrot (no larger than an inch), a raisin or a berry will make your bunny very happy! Seeds, grains, and other foods higher in carbohydrates and fat and lower in fiber are not good for a rabbit’s digestion. Be aware of misleading marketing in rabbit food products. Many contain additives that sound important or healthy but serve no nutritional purpose for your bunny and can even be bad for her.

Pellets
In general, feed 1/8 cup pellets per pound of body weight. This is usually about 2-3 tablespoons per rabbit daily. Obese rabbits or rabbits with digestive mobility problems need fewer pellets.

Suggested pellet types: American Pet Diner Timmy Pellets, Oxbow Bunny Basics T (for adults), Oxbow 15/23 (for rabbits under 1 year of age), and Purina High-Fiber Pellets. Avoid rabbit foods that contain dried fruit, nuts, and colored bits, as these are unhealthy for your bunny.

Changing Your Rabbit’s Diet
A rabbit’s digestive system is very sensitive, so avoid drastic changes. However, you will need to change your bunny’s diet if he has been eating an unhealthy diet or he is growing older. Use the 5/5ths rule to reduce digestive upset. Every 5 days change an additional 1/5 of the rabbit’s food to the new kind until 21 days later he is only eating the new kind. Be patient if the rabbit eats around the new food.
**Recommended Veggies and Treats**

**Recommended Veggies**
A variety is necessary in order to obtain the necessary nutrients. Include one each day that contains Vitamin A, indicated by an *. Add one vegetable to the diet at a time, and eliminate if it causes soft stools or diarrhea. Avoid vegetables that are not on this list.

**Select at least 3 daily:**
- Arugula
- Asparagus
- Basil
- Bok choy*
- Borage
- Cilantro
- Clover
- Dill
- Escarole
- Fennel tops
- Lettuce (green, red leaf, or romaine – NO iceberg or light green leaf)*
- Lemon Grass
- Mint
- Snow pea pods (the flat edible kind)*
- Radicchio
- Raspberry & Blackberry leaves – including thorns!
- Swiss Chard*
- Watercress*
- Wheat grass*

**Use sparingly or avoid if rabbit has kidney/urinary tract problems:**
- Radish tops and sprouts
- Beet greens (tops)*
- Carrot tops (Carrots are a treat)*
- Collard greens*
- Dandelion greens and flowers (no pesticides)*
- Endive*
- Kale*
- Mustard greens*
- Parsley*
- Spinach*
- Turnip tops

**Treats (Limited Amounts)**
Carrots and other sugary treats should only be used very sparingly or not at all. Limit the size of any treat to 1 inch. Examples of treats:

- Apple (remove stem and seeds)
- Berries – 1/2 to 1 berry
- Carrots
- Mango*
- Melon (cantaloupe* or other)
- Orange (no peel)
- Papaya
- Peach
- Pear
- Pineapple
- Plum
- Pumpkin

*Be, Chon Chon, & Obe*
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**Rabbits: Outdoors vs. Indoors**

SaveABunny strongly recommends that your companion rabbit be housed indoors. Rabbits are intelligent, sensitive, and have delightfully strong personalities. These personalities emerge when your bunny gets to know you. What a tragic waste of a spirit to put one outside in a cage. Your bunny is a very social animal, and he deserves love and interaction with his human family.

Domestic rabbits are a different species than wild rabbits that can no longer protect themselves successfully from predators. Rabbits living outside generally only live a few years, while indoor rabbits can live 8-10+ years.

The sad truth is that rabbits living outdoors simply can’t be constantly monitored for the small changes in behavior that can signal health problems. Being prey animals, rabbits tend to hide their symptoms until they are very sick. When your bunny lives indoors you can observe him very closely, and you will notice if he is the slightest bit “off.” Monitoring the health of any living being can be a life-or-death issue.

**Rabbits “Just Visiting” the Outdoors**

If rabbits are going to be allowed outside, under no circumstances should they be left outside unsupervised. It takes just a few seconds for the neighbor’s dog to jump the fence and attack or frighten your bunny to death. Rabbits are also natural escape artists and can dig under, chew through, or jump over a fence or gate. We recommend a covered pen outside so the space is small and safe from a variety of threats. Make sure that the area is secured, the grass has not been sprayed with pesticides or fertilizers, and there are no poisonous plants. Other dangers rabbits may encounter outside include:

- **Predators:** Even in the most urban environments outdoor rabbits are vulnerable to predators including feral cats, hawks, dogs, raccoons, and people. There is no such thing as a hutch that is safe from predators. Even in a cage, determined predators can bend or break wire; agile ones can open cage doors. Sometimes even the sight of a predator can trigger an extreme reaction in your bunny including a panic attack during which he can run wildly, twist, and thrash. A rabbit in this state can break his own back or die from a heart attack.

- **Exposure:** Rabbits are extremely susceptible to the elements, especially heat. Temperatures above 80°F can cause heat stroke and death. Heat is the number one killer of pet rabbits outdoors. Signs of heat stress include panting, drooling, rapid breathing or pulse, and lethargy. If your bunny shows any of these signs, wipe down his ears with a cool rag, put him in his carrier along with a large ice bottle and GET TO THE VET IMMEDIATELY – it is a life-or-death situation.

- **Poisonous Plants:** Domesticated rabbits have long since lost the ability to identify toxic plants. We advise making a list of all plants growing in your yard and checking it for poisonous plants at a nursery or on the web at http://rabbit.org/poisonous-plants/ Avoid toxic pesticides and fertilizers.

- **Pests and Parasites:** Rabbits outside are susceptible to fleas, ticks, mites, and worms. These are physically dangerous for your bunny, as well as extremely uncomfortable. Your rabbit will also be vulnerable to deadly diseases and parasites, such as Raccoon Roundworm, fly strike, West Nile, and Myxomatosis.
Housing Your Rabbit

Cages and Pens

- Wire puppy pens (also called X-pens) at least 30” high make great enclosures and can easily be configured into different shapes to match your available space. Most pet supply stores sell these pens. You may need to protect your floor or carpet, and this can be done with using an inexpensive area rug, plastic office chair mat, linoleum remnant, exercise mat, or other bunny-safe covering.

- Leith Petwerks (www.leithpetwerks.com) is a great online source for 1, 2 and 3 story condos. You can also build condos using wire grid cubes, e.g. Neat Idea Cubes, found at office supply stores and warehouse stores. Make sure the flooring is appropriate.

- Cages should have a solid floor. Rabbits should never be on wire because their feet can become sore and infected. Rabbits don’t need commercial bedding. For comfort and traction, try sea grass mats, rugs, towels, or carpet – make sure they do not eat the carpet. Sea grass can be chewed up and eaten.

- Make sure a cage or enclosure is at least 6 times the size of your bunny stretched out and it provides additional room for hopping around, lounging, a litter box, and some toys. The bigger, the better!

- Until you know that your bunny can be left unsupervised, he should be kept in his cage or pen while you’re not at home and at night while you sleep. Rabbits are crepuscular, which means they generally sleep during the day and night but are ready to play at dawn and dusk. Be sure to let them out during the evening when you are home, and if possible, in the morning while you are getting ready for work.

- An X-pen or cage should be seen as the rabbit’s nest, a special place where he can feel safe and secure. Make the nest enjoyable and he will enjoy being there. Keep it stocked with his favorite toys, a clean litter box, and when you put him to bed at night, a nice veggie, fruit, or pellet snack. Front opening doors to cages or pens are best so the rabbit can move in and out on their own.

- Temperatures above 80°F can be life threatening. Fans won’t cool your bunny because rabbits don’t sweat and can’t benefit from evaporative cooling. If your rabbit shows symptoms including panting, drooling, rapid breathing or pulse, or lethargy; wipe down his ears with a cool rag, put him in his carrier along with a large ice bottle and get to the vet IMMEDIATELY! On a hot day leave your bunny in his cage/pen with frozen water bottles/ice packs or tiles that you can cool in the refrigerator.

Rabbits in the House

- When your house (or the part that your bunny will have access to) has been well rabbit-proofed, your bunny can be allowed free run of the home (or part of it) even when you are not home. The more room your bunny has to run around in, the more delightful you will find him as a companion.

- Even when a rabbit has a lot of room to run around, he may still get bored. A bored rabbit is often a naughty rabbit. If you don’t make every attempt to provide your bunny with lots of entertainment, in
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the form of boxes, baskets, brooms, sticks, magazines, phone books, grass mats, etc., then he will make his own entertainment in your carpet, behind your couch, or under your recliner.
Rabbit-Proofing Your Home

Rabbits are chewers and burrowers. Rabbits enjoy small, dark spaces. Rabbits are curious. These are three reasons why you will need to “rabbit-proof” your house prior to letting your bunny out in your home. Rabbit-proofing your home will protect both your bunny and your belongings. It is absolutely necessary if your bunny will be in your house outside of his enclosure. Rabbits can be trained not to chew on certain objects or enter certain rooms, but training should not be the only protective measure. Protective measures and deterrents alone may not be sufficient. Combining the training with removing access to the problem area is the best formula for success. Here’s a list of potential hazards and suggested solutions.

Electrical and Other Cords

Electrical cords are a very serious threat to rabbits. Chewing through a power cord can cause severe burns or even electrocution. Other cords that can be chewed include phone, computer, cable TV, and appliance cords.

Many “obvious” ways to protect cords from rabbit chewing don’t actually work:

- Simply raising the cords above floor level will NOT prevent your bunny from reaching them – remember that when sitting up on their hind legs, rabbits can reach more than a foot in height.
- Placing cords behind furniture may not keep your bunny away from the cords. Rabbits can fit into some pretty tight spaces.
- Bitter sprays often do NOT work, since rabbits tend to like bitter tastes.

Solutions

- **Spiral cable wrap:** This is a flexible plastic sheath that can be wound around the cords. CAUTION: Some rabbits may still try to chew through this. Monitor your bunny closely; if he chews on this, try one of the other alternatives.
- **Cord concealers:** These are hard plastic, come in various colors and sizes, and are usually applied to the wall above the baseboards. These can be more decorative than cable wraps. EZ Hidewire is one type, and is available at some hardware stores and online at www.ezhidewire.com
- **PVC pipe or hard polyethylene tubing:** A slit can be cut through the pipe or tubing and the cords slipped inside. Tubing that is already split is also available.
- **Decorative covers for shower curtain rods:** These are usually 6 feet long and already split lengthwise.
- **Lamp guards:** Tap Plastics (in San Rafael) has these inexpensive clear and colored plastic tubes. They are approximately 1 ½ inches in diameter and 4 feet long.

Wooden Furniture and Baseboards

Rabbits especially love to chew wood. By not allowing him to chew wood, you are going against your rabbit’s basic instinct and necessity to chew. Training your bunny not to chew these items may help, but
just saying “no” will NOT be enough. Again, a bitter spray will probably NOT be effective since many rabbits like bitter tastes.

**Solutions**

- **Plastic plants** are not a good alternative, since the plastic could cause gastrointestinal irritation or blockage if your bunny ingests them.

- **Plant selection**: Select plants that are not poisonous to rabbits. The *House Rabbit Handbook* by Marinell Harriman has a complete list of poisonous plants (indoor and outdoor).

- **Plant location**: Hanging plants from the ceiling or placing them on tables several feet high will prevent the rabbit from reaching them. However, leaves may still drop to the floor, so select safe plants even if you are going to place them out of your bunny’s reach. This is also true for cut flowers.

**Upholstered Furniture and Beds**

Rabbits may not only chew the upholstery that you can see; they may also get underneath the furniture and chew the underside. Some rabbits will climb into the hole they have made and burrow farther. Use caution with recliners, since rabbits may get underneath them and into the mechanism.

**Solutions**

- **Always know** where your bunny is before you lower or raise a recliner.

- **Place a wooden frame** or one made of PVC tubing under the furniture, blocking your rabbit’s access. The frame can be stained and made slightly smaller than the base of the furniture to blend in.

**Carpet**

Carpets can appear to be almost irresistible to some rabbits. Often they will start to pull up or chew on carpets in the corner of the room. They also like to dig at the end of ‘tunnels’ so protect areas where your furniture forms a narrow path – especially to a wall. You can also place a tub of hay, shredded newspaper, or a phone book there for the rabbit to dig. Spaying/neutering can also reduce a desire to burrow.

**Solutions**

- **Protect the carpet** in those areas most likely to be chewed by covering them with ceramic tiles, wood, carpet runners (although the rabbit may also chew on the runner), or clear office chair mats. Office chair mats can be cut to size and put down in places your bunny wants to chew or dig. The spikes on the underside will prevent him from pushing the mat out of the way.

**Other Tips**

Chewing is normal, natural, necessary, and highly enjoyable. Chewers are often intelligent, outgoing, affectionate rabbits who like to be in charge and get attention. Entertaining toys will reduce the desire to chew out of boredom and a companion may reduce chewing for attention. Discipline (clapping hands and saying “no”) has a small role in stopping chewing behavior. Many people find it is easy to have rabbits understand but hard to stop the behavior from reoccurring, especially when left alone.
Recommended Rabbit Toys

Toys Provide Mental Stimulation
Without challenging activities to occupy your bunny when you’re not home, your bunny (especially a solitary rabbit) will get bored. This could lead to depression and/or excessive destruction. The creative use of toys can extend your rabbit’s life by keeping him interested in his surroundings, by giving him the freedom to interact with those surroundings, and by allowing him to constantly learn and grow.

Toys Provide Physical Exercise
Rabbits need safe activities to keep their bodies and minds active. They need things to climb on or crawl under, hop on and around, dig into and chew on. Without outlets for these physical needs, your bunny may become fat or depressed, or may create jumping, chewing or crawling fun with your furniture or other belongings.

Toys Help Protect Your Home
As is clear from the above descriptions, toys are not just for your rabbit’s sake, they also keep your house safe. By providing your bunny with a selection of toys chosen to meet his age, sex, and temperament, you have fulfilled most of the requirements of rabbit-proofing your home.

Some Good Toys to Start With

- Paper bags and cardboard boxes for crawling inside, scratching, and chewing. Rabbits like them much more when there are at least two entry points into the boxes.
- Cardboard concrete forms for burrowing (available at hardware and home improvement stores).
- Cardboard rolls from paper towels or toilet paper.
- Untreated wicker baskets or boxes full of shredded paper, junk mail, straw, or other organic materials for digging. Many rabbits love to shred phone books!
- Hard plastic or wooden cat, bird, and baby toys that roll or can be tossed or hung from the top of the cage and chewed or hit.
- Things to jump up on or climb in, such as a cardboard box with ramps and windows. Also, kitty condos, tubes, tunnels and trees work well as long as your bunny isn’t ingesting the carpet.
- Nudge and roll toys like large rubber balls, empty Quaker Oat boxes and small tins.
- Any toys from www.funnybunnytoyco.com and www.busybunny.com
- Toys with ramps and lookouts for climbing and viewing the world.
- A hand towel for bunching and scooting.
- Untreated wood, twigs, and logs that have been aged for at least 3 months. Apple tree branches can be eaten fresh off the tree. Stay away from cherry, peach, apricot, plum and redwood, which are all poisonous.
Why You Should Spay or Neuter Your Rabbit

**Altered rabbits are healthier and live longer than unaltered rabbits.**

The risk of reproductive cancers for an unspayed female rabbit stands at over 80%, and is virtually eliminated by spaying. Your neutered male rabbit will live longer as well, given that he won’t be tempted to fight with other animals (rabbits, cats, etc.) due to his sexual aggression.

**Altered rabbits make better companions.**

Rabbits are calmer, more loving, and dependable once the undeniable urge to mate has been removed. In addition, rabbits are less prone to destructive (chewing, digging) and aggressive (biting, lunging, circling, growling) behavior after alteration. Un-neutered male rabbits spray, and both males and females are much easier to litter train, and much more reliably trained, after they have been altered.

**Altered rabbits won’t contribute to the problem of overpopulation of rabbits.**

Over 15 million adorable dogs, cats, and rabbits are killed in animal shelters in this country every year. In addition, unwanted rabbits are often abandoned in fields, in parks, or on city streets to fend for themselves, where they suffer from starvation, sickness, and are easy prey to other animals or traffic accidents. Those rabbits who are sold to pet stores don’t necessarily fare any better, as pet stores sell pets to anyone with the money to buy and don’t check on what kind of home they will go to. Many of these rabbits will be sold as snake food or as a pet for a small child who will soon “outgrow” the rabbit.

**Altered rabbits can safely have a friend to play with.**

Rabbits are social animals and enjoy the company of other rabbits. But unless your bunny is altered, he or she cannot have a friend, either of the opposite sex or the same sex, due to sexual and aggressive behaviors.

**Spaying and neutering rabbits is a safe procedure.**

A knowledgeable rabbit veterinarian can spay or neuter your bunny with very little risk to a healthy rabbit. Don’t allow a veterinarian with little or no experience with rabbits to spay or neuter your bunny.

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Litter Box Training Your Rabbit

By nature, rabbits choose one or a few places (usually corners) to deposit their urine and most of their pills (droppings). Urine training involves little more than putting a litter box where your bunny chooses to go. Pill training requires only that you give him a place he knows will not be invaded by others.

The Basic Method

Start with a box in the enclosure and one or more boxes in your rabbit’s running space. If he urinates in a corner of the enclosure not containing the box, move the box to that corner until he gets it right. Don’t be concerned if your bunny curls up in his litter box – this is natural. Once he’s using the box in the enclosure, open the door and allow him into his running space. Watch him go in and out on his own. If he heads to a corner where there’s no box, or lifts up his tail in the characteristic fashion, say “no” in a single, sharp burst of sound. Gently herd him back to his enclosure and his litter box or to one of the boxes in his room. Be careful, however. You don’t want to make the enclosure or the litter box seem like punishment. A handful of hay in the box makes it a more welcoming place. After he first uses the box, praise him and give a favorite treat. Once he uses the box in his room a couple of times, his habits will be forming and you will be well on your way to having a trained rabbit. As he gets better trained in his first room, you can increase his space. Don’t hurry this process. And if the area becomes very big, or includes a second floor, be sure to include more litter boxes, so as not to confuse him. Remember, as he becomes more confident and uses fewer boxes, you can start to remove some of his early “training” boxes.

Other Factors to Keep in Mind as You Litter Train

The Rabbit

✓ **Age:** Older rabbits are easier to train than younger rabbits, especially babies. A rabbit’s attention span and knack for learning increase as he grows up. If you have a baby, stick with it! And if you are deciding whether to adopt an older rabbit, or litter train your older rabbit, go for it!

✓ **Spay/Neuter:** This is often the most important factor. When rabbits reach the age of 4-6 months, their hormones activate and they usually begin marking their territory. By spaying or neutering your bunny, he or she will be more likely to use a litter box (as well as be much healthier and happier).

✓ **Pills vs. Urine:** All rabbits will drop pills around their enclosure to mark it as their own. This is not failure to be litter-trained. It is very important for your bunny to identify the cage as his property so that when he leaves it for the bigger world of your house, he will distinguish the family’s area from his own and avoid marking it. To encourage this, make the rabbit the king of his enclosure. Try not to force him in or out of it – coax him. Do not do things to his cage that he doesn’t like, or do things to him that he doesn’t like while he’s in the cage.
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✓ **Behavior:** Some rabbits love to kick litter out of the box. You can get a covered litter box (with a hood) to help solve this problem. You can also try experimenting with different litters. Some rabbits often back up so far in the litter box that the urine goes over the edge. A covered litter box can also solve this problem. Another solution would be to use a dishpan or other tub with much higher sides. Rabbits may also like to move their litter box around. You can weight it or clip it to the cage or other stationary item to discourage this behavior.

**The Litter Box**

✓ **Types of Litter:** Use a litter made from plants or paper. Some brands to look for: CareFresh, Cat Country, Critter Country, and Yesterday’s News. You can also use horse bedding such as Dry Den (available at feed stores) or wood stove pellets. These have been heat-treated in the manufacturing process, so they don’t present the same hazards as soft wood shavings, which can cause liver damage in rabbits. Silica, clay, and clumping cat litters are dangerous for your bunny, and should never be used. Corn- or wheat-based litters also should be avoided, because rabbits will often ingest them. Placing a handful of hay in each box will encourage its use, or you can use hay as litter. It is helpful to put several layers of newspaper under the hay to absorb urine. Most newspapers today use soy-based ink, which is safe for your bunny. Obviously, you need to change the hay fairly frequently (daily), since your rabbit will be eating it. This method often helps to encourage good litter habits as well as hay consumption, since rabbits often eat at or near the same time as they use the litter box.

✓ **Cleaning and Disposal:** Clean litter boxes often to encourage your bunny to use them. Use white vinegar to rinse out the boxes. For tough stains, let pans soak. Accidents outside of the cage can be cleaned up with white vinegar or club soda. If the urine has already dried, you can try products like Nature’s Miracle to remove the stain and odor. Organic litter can be composted or used as mulch. Rabbit pills can be directly applied to plants as fertilizer.

✓ **Number of Litter Boxes:** The more the merrier, especially if your rabbit is a bit of a slow learner, or is especially obstinate about where he wants his box(es) to go. As his habits improve, you can decrease the number of litter boxes.

**The Environment**

✓ **The Enclosure:** Place the box in the corner of the enclosure that your bunny goes in. With a litter box in the enclosure, when the rabbit is confined when you’re not home, cage time is learning time. Hang the hayrack over the litter box since rabbits often eliminate at or near the same time they are grazing on their hay. Don’t use litter as bedding for the cage, or your bunny will think the entire cage is his litter box.

✓ **Running Space:** Even if your goal is to let your bunny have full run of the house, you must start small. Start with a cage and a small running space, and when your rabbit is sufficiently well trained in that space, gradually give him more space. But do so slowly! If you overwhelm him with too much freedom before he’s ready, he will forget where his box is and will lose his good habits.

✓ **Consistency:** Get your bunny into a daily routine and try not to vary it. Rabbits are very habitual and once a routine is established, they usually prefer to stick with it.

✓ **Compromise:** If your bunny continually urinates in a spot where there is no litter box, put his box where he will use it, even if it means rearranging his cage or moving a table in the living room. It is much easier to oblige him than to try to work against a determined rabbit!

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Safe Grooming and Handling Techniques

Compiled with the assistance of Dr. Carolynn Harvey, DVM

Rabbits can act as if they’re hardy creatures, but they are, in fact, extremely fragile. Care must be taken to maintain their good health. The following basics are necessary to know in order to groom rabbits safely and to help keep them healthy.

**Shedding and Brushing**

Most rabbits shed every 3 months. Every alternate time they’ll have a light shedding that may not be very noticeable. Next they’ll have a heavy shedding that you will not be able to escape. Rabbits are fastidious groomers. They insist on being clean and tidy and will lick themselves like cats. Also like cats, they can get hairballs if they ingest too much hair. However, rabbits cannot vomit. If hairballs are allowed to form they can become gigantic masses of tangled hair and food that can block the stomach exit, causing the rabbit to die of bloat.

Rabbits need to be brushed at least weekly. In addition to removing any loose hair, this weekly brushing session helps prepare them for the multiple daily brushings that they must undergo when their heavy shedding begins.

**Mats**

Rabbit skin is delicate and highly susceptible to cuts, so mats in your bunny’s fur should not be cut off with scissors. Instead, use a mat splitter or mat rake to take the mass apart. Bunny fur usually requires a finer blade than those used for most cats and dogs.

**Fleas and Mites**

Safe treatments to prevent and kill fleas on rabbits include Advantage (imidocloprid), Program (lufenuron) and Revolution (selamectin). The latter is preferred, as it is also effective against various types of mites that cause symptoms of mange, ear canker, and dandruff. These products are available from your rabbit-savvy veterinarian, who can explain dosage and treatment regimens to you at the time of prescription. A flea comb is a non-toxic device that takes more patience, but is both physically and psychologically rewarding. Most rabbits learn to love the attention of being flea combed, and it can be used as a supplement to your main flea-control program.

*The following products should NEVER be used on rabbits:*

- **Frontline** (Apronil) has been linked to neurological damage and death in rabbits, although this product is apparently safe for dogs and cats.

- **Flea powders and shampoos**, even those considered safe for cats and kittens or advertised as “rabbit safe,” are not recommended for use on rabbits. Bathing of rabbits, in general, is strongly discouraged.
because the stress of the bath itself can cause serious health problems, and has in some cases been linked to the death of the rabbit. Flea baths or dips are NOT recommended for this reason.

Most environmental flea control and “bombs” are not recommended, as they may leave harmful residue that the rabbit can ingest. Safer alternatives include borax, worked into the carpet where fleas leave their eggs.

Skin

Scratchy, flaky skin with bald patches is usually a symptom of mites or, more rarely, are an allergic reaction to fleas. Products described under Fleas (page 22) will usually clear up such problems. A veterinarian should be consulted for conditions like open sores or chronic skin inflammation.

Baths

Although a rare bunny may grow up swimming in the family pool and going on camping trips where he paddles around the lake, most rabbits, like their ancestors, do not relish getting wet. Even occasional baths are quite stressful to the average rabbit, and are not recommended. NEVER – unless your veterinarian advises it to bring down a fever – should you give a sick rabbit a bath. Because seemingly healthy rabbits can have undiagnosed problems, it’s best not to subject them to the stress of a bath. If your bunny is badly infested with fleas, there’s a good chance that he is already compromised and may go into shock when bathed. There are many safe alternatives to flea control (see Fleas on page 22). Also, a thoroughly wet rabbit takes a very long time to dry, so spot cleaning the dirty area with an application of baby cornstarch (available at any supermarket in the baby section; do NOT use talcum, as it is carcinogenic) and then gently combing out the dirt with any flea comb is better than a wet bath.

A wet rabbit can quickly become hypothermic. If your bunny is wet to the skin for any reason, be sure to thoroughly blow dry the bunny until even the undercoat is dry and fluffy. Normal rabbit body temperature ranges from 101°F to 103°F. Because rabbit skin is very delicate, and rabbits are sensitive to heat, never use a blow dryer on a setting higher than “warm,” and constantly monitor the temperature of the air on the rabbit’s skin by placing your hand in the air’s path.

Nails

Rabbits who spend all of their time in homes with carpeting and linoleum periodically need to have their toenails trimmed, in the same way as dogs and cats. Because of the infection risk, declawing is definitely NOT recommended for rabbits. If excessive digging or scratching is a problem, then a large box of hay or straw, where bunny can pursue these activities, may help.

Rabbits’ nails can grow to be very long and sharp and can be uncomfortable for the rabbit. If the rabbit has light-colored nails they are very easy to trim. You can see the blood inside the nail (quick) and you
clip just before that point closer to the tip of the nail. The dark-colored nails are harder to see where they should be clipped, but it is still visible. Nails should be trimmed every 6-8 weeks.

**Feet**
If the padding (fur) on the feet is worn down, exposing inflamed or callused skin, then soft dry resting pads/rugs should be provided. Exposed skin that becomes urine-burned or broken is very likely to become infected. Take extra care that rugs and litter boxes are kept clean and dry.

**Incontinence**
A rabbit with a urinary infection or a disabled older rabbit may not be able to project urine away from the body. The result may be saturated fur around the hindquarters. For milder cases, shave the areas that get wet so the skin can dry (remember, rabbit fur takes a long time to dry), rinse the affected areas daily, and follow up with a dusting of corn starch (do NOT use talcum). For more infirm cases, disposable baby diapers – turned backwards so the tabs are up – do wonders for keeping the moisture away from the skin.

**Feces**
Rabbits have two types of feces. Pills are the round, dry feces excreted throughout the day. Conversely, cecotropes are a special type of feces with nutrients that rabbits excrete and consume. Many rabbits will excrete cecotropes and consume them directly without you even noticing. Consumption of cecotropes is natural and necessary for your bunny’s health. Serious dietary deficiencies can result if the cecotropes are not consumed. If you see a grape-like cluster of dark green feces covered in mucous in your bunny’s litter box that are not being consumed you need to take your bunny to the vet immediately.

**Ears**
Excessive ear wax can be lifted out with a cotton swab, being careful not to push on wax in the canal, or you can try a mild ear cleaner containing Chlorhexadine, such as Nolvasan Otic. For ear mite infestation, apply a topical medication such as Mitox. The veterinarian may also prescribe Ivermectin.

**Teeth**
Rabbits’ teeth grow continuously and must be checked to ensure that they are wearing down properly. While you’re brushing your bunny or clipping his nails also look at his teeth to make sure there is not a problem.

**Eyes**
Watery eyes and eye discharge needs to be diagnosed by a vet. In addition to any medications or eye drops, the cheek needs to be kept dry and clean so the area won’t become chafed or bald. Clean tissues will absorb mild wetness. Ophthalmic saline solution (what people use with their contacts) carefully poured onto the cheek will crystallize the tears so that they can be removed with a clean flea comb. A touch of prescription anesthetic powder on a finger can be applied to the area if there are painful lesions.
Medical Concerns for Rabbits

The Importance of Spaying and Neutering
Unspayed female rabbits have an 80% chance of developing fatal reproductive cancer, which makes spaying a medical necessity. For both male and female rabbits, there are significant behavioral benefits of alteration. Spaying/neutering reduces and can sometimes eliminate hormone-related behaviors such as cage aggression, excessive digging and chewing, and, in males, spraying urine. Spaying/neutering also increases the success rate of litter box training. A knowledgeable rabbit veterinarian can spay or neuter your bunny with very little risk to a healthy rabbit.

Digestive Problems and Gastrointestinal Stasis
This is the number one health problem for rabbits. If your rabbit refuses his usual fresh food or any of his special treats, seems particularly lethargic, or has stopped eliminating, you should call your rabbit’s veterinarian right away. We encourage you to observe your bunny’s behavior, activity level and droppings daily. Each rabbit is different and knowing what is normal behavior for your rabbit could save his life.

A healthy diet (see page 5-6) is crucial to maintaining your bunny’s healthy digestive tract. The diet should consist of 80% fresh hay, 15% leafy green vegetables, and 5% pelleted rabbit food.

Hairballs
Rabbits shed their hair every 3 months. Every second shedding is light, followed 3 months later by a heavy shedding. You need to brush and comb your bunny to remove loose fur when they start to shed. Rabbits groom themselves like cats and will ingest all of the loose fur, which they cannot vomit. This is an important factor in rabbit deaths. For this reason, besides regular grooming, they must have constant access to fresh hay every day, as the fiber helps the hair pass through the digestive system. You can also give your bunny cat hairball preparations such as Petromalt or Laxatone once a week when not shedding and daily during her molt. Finally, daily exercise is a key factor in the prevention of hairballs.

Signs of hairballs – droppings will be strung together with thick strands of hair. If the problem persists, the droppings will be free of hair and smaller because the hair is stuck in their system. The rabbit’s stomach will get fatter but their bones will begin to protrude more because they are actually starving. Treat the first signs with as much fiber as possible – hay, tree branches, blackberry vines (thorns and all) and see your veterinarian.

Red Urine
Rabbits’ urine varies in color from clear to yellow to brown to bright red. This is usually not a cause for alarm unless there are additional signs such as sitting and straining to urinate, loss of appetite or fever. When you see red urine, don’t panic. Just keep your eyes open for other signs that might indicate a problem. If in doubt, you can have your veterinarian test to see whether there is blood in the urine.

Cedar and Pine Shavings
These are very bad for your bunny and other pets. The aromatic hydrocarbons released by softwood beddings can cause both respiratory and liver damage in rabbits and other small animals.
**Teeth**

Rabbits’ teeth can be misaligned, known as malocclusion, which means that a rabbit’s constantly growing teeth are not wearing down properly. If the misalignment is bad, the teeth will need to be clipped periodically so that the rabbit can eat. Your veterinarian can do this for you. Usually malocclusion just strikes the front teeth, but occasionally the back teeth can also be misaligned. A symptom is a wet chin that is caused by drooling. If this is the case, your bunny will need his molars trimmed by a veterinarian on a regular basis. In severe cases, the teeth may need to be extracted. Rabbits that have had tooth extractions may need a modified diet (check with your veterinarian for guidelines), but can lead long and happy lives.

**Amoxicillin Danger**

Never let a veterinarian give your bunny amoxicillin. It is a pink liquid antibiotic that smells like bubble gum. Amoxicillin is very dangerous for rabbits, and has killed many more rabbits than it has helped. Any penicillin-based drug can be dangerous for your bunny, so try to find a veterinarian who is knowledgeable about rabbit-safe antibiotics, and who is familiar with the safer drugs such as Chloramphenicol, Tetracycline, sulfa drugs like Septra or TMS, or enrofloxacins such as Baytril or Cipro.

**Bacterial Infections**

The first indication of an infection may be a runny nose or eye, sometimes a high temperature, sometimes a rattling sound from the lungs or (rarely) a coughing sound. It is important to see your veterinarian as soon as the first symptoms of any infection appear, as they are more easily cured when caught in the early stages. The bacteria you may hear the most about is called *Pasteurella*. This used to be a major problem, but with the newer antibiotics this bacteria can often be eliminated or controlled with the use of antibiotics. Most of the symptoms described are quite common for many types of bacteria, so it is important to have your veterinarian do a culture to identify the bug.

**Surgeries**

Make sure your rabbit is in good health prior to elective surgeries. Food and water should NOT be removed from a rabbit the evening before surgery, as rabbits cannot vomit during surgery. Any change in diet can upset a rabbit’s sensitive digestive tract and cause problems in post-operative recovery. After surgery, make sure the rabbit’s cage is clean, and check his incision site daily for swelling or discharge. Try to get your bunny to eat again as soon as possible after returning home. To coax him to eat again, you may have to offer a variety of treats, including his regular pellets and hay. If your bunny has not eaten for 48 hours after surgery, consult your veterinarian.
Is Your Rabbit Sick?

Rabbits are at the bottom of the food chain and in the wild the weakest are the first to be preyed upon. Thus, rabbits instinctively hide illnesses and injuries to avoid detection by predators. This may be a good survival tactic in the wild, but for domestic rabbits, hiding their symptoms of illness only misleads their caretakers and prevents prompt medical attention. People who live with rabbits need to be particularly attentive to subtle changes in behavior or litter box habits. If your bunny usually greets you with leaps and bounds and is now lying in the back of the cage when you approach, this could be a cause for concern. Couple this behavior change with no droppings in his litter box and food left untouched, and you could have a very sick rabbit.

The following information is offered as a layman’s guide to some rabbit ailments. Be sure to find a good veterinarian before your bunny gets sick. When your bunny is ill, you will need immediate help and won’t have time to shop for a vet. If you are ever wondering about your bunny’s health, call your veterinarian for advice.

Symptoms to Watch for and Possible Causes

- **Loss of appetite or lethargy:** Even a rabbit can have a “bad hare day.” But if your bunny refuses his usual fresh food or any of his special treats and seems particularly lethargic, you should call your rabbit’s veterinarian right away. We encourage you to observe your bunny’s behavior, activity level, and droppings daily. Each rabbit is different, and knowing what is normal behavior for your bunny could save his life.

- **Inability to settle into a comfortable position:** Not being able to sit still and changing body positions constantly can indicate discomfort. This may be caused by gas bubbles in your rabbit’s gut. Rabbits can’t burp or be flatulent so gas can build up in their digestive system. Call your veterinarian for guidance. Built up gas can slow the digestive system and become an emergency.

- **Body heat:** Rabbits regulate temperature by their ears. Very cold or hot ears may indicate a fever or drop in body temperature. Coupled with other warning signs, this could warrant a trip to the vet.

- **Runny eyes or nose, labored breathing, or chronic sneezing:** These could indicate an upper respiratory infection, a blocked tear duct or other problems. See your veterinarian.

- **Wet chin or drooling:** Usually a sign of tooth problems or malocclusion. You may also notice a reduced appetite and difficulty eating hard foods such as whole carrot. Left untreated, tooth problems can lead to infection of the jawbone, which is very difficult to treat. Depending on the severity, your bunny’s teeth may need to be trimmed regularly. In severe cases, teeth can be pulled.

- **Tooth grinding:** Loud tooth grinding is a sure sign of pain. Note: This tooth grinding is different from the softer “tooth purring” you may hear when you snuggle and kiss your bunny’s face.

- **Obsessive licking or hanging on pen or cage by teeth:** These can also be indicators of tooth pain.

- **Excessive itching, scratching, or head shaking:** Fleas ear mites and/or fur mites are the usual culprits. In some ear mite cases, scabs can be seen in the ear canal. Your veterinarian will decide what treatment is needed. If one rabbit in your house has mites, it is best to have all the rabbits checked, as mites can be transferred easily. Flea infestations can kill rabbits, dogs and cats by causing a deadly case of anemia. Safe treatments to prevent and kill fleas on rabbits include: Advantage (imidicloprid), Program (lufenuron) and Revolution (selamectin). A flea comb is a non-

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toxic device that takes more patience, but is both physically and psychologically rewarding. Most rabbits learn to love the attention of being flea combed, and it can be used as a supplement to your main flea-control program. **NEVER use Frontline (fipronil). It has been linked to neurological damage and death in rabbits.**

- **Loss of balance or head tilt:** This is most often a sign of wry neck, which is an inner ear infection, but could also be an indication of *E. cuniculi*. This can occur very suddenly. Although treatment can be lengthy, and improvement not noticeable for about 10 days, wry neck may be cured if treatment is begun quickly.

- **Sore hocks:** This is when the fur on the rabbit’s hock, or heel, is worn down to the bare skin or, in severe cases, to the bone. Causes are numerous, including wire cage bottoms with no resting area, a damp resting board, wet bunny beds or dirty litter boxes. Overweight and large-breed rabbits are particularly prone to sore hocks, as are the Rex breeds, since they do not have a lot of padding on their feet. If there are open wounds on your bunny’s hocks or if the area is swollen, see your veterinarian. To prevent sore hocks, give your bunny a soft, clean resting area. Also, keep your bunny’s weight within normal range, and examine your rabbit regularly.

- **Blood in the urine or straining to urinate:** The two may or may not go hand in hand. While certain foods can turn urine red, actual blood in the urine can be a sign of cancer, bladder infection or urinary stones. If your bunny is straining to urinate or is “leaking” puddles outside the litter box, you should be concerned. You may also notice urine scald, caused when urine-soaked fur keeps the skin underneath damp and irritated. Antibiotics maybe needed, so take your rabbit to his veterinarian.

- **In one end, out the other:** Your bunny’s litter box contains a wealth of information. A healthy digestive tract will produce large, round fecal pellets. Increasingly smaller, irregularly shaped droppings or droppings strung together with fur (or carpet) may indicate a problem. Proper grooming by you, especially during a molt, and plenty of fresh hay will help produce optimum digestive tract health, along with appealing to the rabbit’s urge to chew.

- **Sudden change in litter box habits:** Your rabbit may not like the litter you use or may be objecting to a change in environment – like a new housemate (human or animal), new home, or new ritual. A rabbit may also be in pain from arthritis or an injury and can’t jump in and out of his litter box comfortably. However, this can also be a symptom of a medical issue including kidney/bladder infection or an *E. cuniculi* infection. See your veterinarian to rule out these possibilities.

- **Lumps and bumps:** Abscesses and tumors can be serious and should be checked right away by your veterinarian.
Giving Your Rabbit Medication

Never self-medicate your rabbit. Always consult your veterinarian on prescription and non-prescription medications. If your veterinarian suggests a treatment, ask how to administer the medicine. Often your bunny will be perfectly behaved when your veterinarian demonstrates how to give the medication. This good behavior does not always occur in your home. Here are some tips for medicating your rabbit:

**Tips for Giving Medication**

- ✓ Figure out the best place to perform the procedure. Some rabbits are most cooperative on the floor when relaxed. Some may hop away if you fiddle with them on the floor – use a table, bed, countertop, or lap. Make sure it is safe for your rabbit! You can wrap a particularly feisty rabbit in a bunny burrito – place your bunny on top of a towel then wrap the towel around them and secure tightly, but not too tightly. Wrap around their legs and body.

- ✓ Set up all of your supplies before you try to start anything or secure your rabbit. Unscrew tops, measure medication, and load syringes before messing with your rabbit.

- ✓ Maintain a cheerful and patient attitude. If you get tense or frustrated it will only make your rabbit more stressed. Talk to your bunny, sing songs, rub ears – do anything you can to make her feel calm.

- ✓ Develop a routine – same order, same time, same place – that way the rabbit knows when it will happen and when it won’t.

- ✓ Disguise pills by grinding them and mixing them in applesauce, banana, or other fresh fruit. You can also load these mixtures in a syringe. Push the syringe to the back of the rabbit’s mouth and squirt.

- ✓ Pull the lower eyelid out to form a little pocket or lift the upper lid back and drop eye drops onto the eye. After you have added the medication you can hold the eye shut and massage it to spread it.

- ✓ Many rabbits don’t like ear drops so make sure you can secure your bunny wherever you are performing the procedure. Get the nozzle close to the ear but do not insert it past the opening. Try not to touch the nozzle to any part of the ear because your bunny will shake its head. Once the drops are in, you can massage the base of the ear to help it go down.

- ✓ If your rabbit stops eating, your vet may suggest that you syringe feed your rabbit. This can be difficult – so be patient! Secure your bunny and tuck the nozzle into the corner of your rabbit’s mouth and aim it to the back of your rabbit’s mouth – if you don’t aim correctly, it can come out the other side of the mouth. Keep squirting as the rabbit chews. When you have fed enough, wipe off the mixture from the rabbit’s mouth and your work area.
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*On behalf of the rabbits, we thank you!*