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CARING FOR YOUR RABBIT

Rabbits make great pets and are easily cared for. They can often be litter box trained and can even be allowed to roam loose in the home. A rabbit's average life expectancy is 5-7 years, however with good husbandry rabbits can potentially live into their early teens. The following information can help you in your decision to have a rabbit as a pet.

Brief history:

Rabbits have been domesticated for ~2000 years but have only been kept as pets since the 16th century. Most of the pet rabbits in the United States are descendants of European breeds. There are >100 breeds of rabbits worldwide with ~50 breeds recognized in the US. Many rabbits in the US are mixed bred rabbits. Rabbits are often placed in three categories as listed below.

Size	Weight	Examples
Small Breeds	<2 kg (<4.4 lbs)	Netherland dwarf Lion head Mini-Lop Dutch breeds
Medium Breeds	2-5 kg (4.4-11 lbs)	Rex English Spot Angora Belgium Hares
Large to Giant Breeds	>5 kg (>11 lbs)	New Zealand White English Lops British Giants Flemish Giants

Housing:

The type of enclosure you chose to keep your rabbit in depends on whether your rabbit will be kept indoors or outdoors.

Outdoor enclosures must have the following specifications.

- A hutch with a minimum of 3 walls, roof and floor and the opening must be facing away from the prevailing wind. Rabbits are cold tolerant and can survive in an unheated hutch provided it is dry, draft free, and has bedding for snuggling into.
- Shade and plenty of water. Rabbits are heat sensitive and may die of heat prostration if kept in temperatures exceeding 80 F. During the summer you can try placing a frozen milk jug in the cage for your rabbit to lie against or bring your rabbit indoors.
- The hutch should be sturdy to prevent predators from injuring your rabbit.

Cage specifications

- Rabbit Size	- Hutch size
- Small breeds	- 24" x 30" x 18"
- Medium breeds	- 30" x 30" x 18"
- Large and Giant breeds	- 48" x 30" x 18"

- If the floor of the hutch is wire then provide a flat area with a deep straw layer for your rabbit to stand on to prevent foot sores, this is especially important in large and giant breed rabbits.
- If the floor is solid then provide a deep straw layer to absorb urine and prevent soiling.

- Avoid using carpet in cages as rabbits can chew and swallow fibers that can lead to a fatal intestinal obstruction.
- Some rabbits can be litter box trained. Use a litter box with recycled paper or plant pellet litter. Do not use clumping litter.
- Keep the cage clean, dry and ventilated.
- You can minimize your rabbit chewing on the cage by providing plenty of ink free cardboard such as toilet paper or paper towel rolls stuffed with hay as toys for chewing and playing.
- Pet rabbits should be allowed to exercise outside of their hutch for a minimum of 1 hour per day. This helps to prevent obesity and promotes good gastrointestinal health.

Feeding:

The majority (90-95%) of your rabbit's diet should be composed of fresh grass hay for fiber. The remainder of the diet can be composed of pellets and fresh vegetables.

Hay should be fed according to the following guidelines

- Grass hay (timothy, orchard, oat, botanical, etc) should be fed free choice
- Avoid alfalfa hay except in pregnant or nursing females, then you can feed 50% alfalfa and 50% timothy hay.
- Do not feed wet or moldy hay as it can be toxic.
- Good quality hay will be light green and smell like grass.

Pellets should be fed according to the following guidelines

- Should compose a minimal part of any pet rabbit's diet
- Use fresh pellets composed of timothy hay

Vegetables can be fed according to the following guidelines

- Should compose a minimal part of any pet rabbit's diet
- Leafy greens are the best tolerated
 - o Lettuce (avoid iceberg), spinach, dandelions, blackberry leaves, grasses, and parsley
- Adult carrots and carrot tops are okay
- Minimize foods high in sugar or protein
 - o Fruits, baby carrots, tomatoes, corn, etc
 - o Seeds, nuts, oats, grains, beans, etc
- Avoid foods in the cabbage family
 - o Cabbage, broccoli, brussels sprouts, cauliflower, etc.
- Feeding a few veggies daily is safer than feeding a lot once weekly.

Avoid sudden changes in diet to prevent GI upset.

Provide clean water daily.

Handling:

Rabbits frighten easily and should be approached calmly. Never pick a rabbit up by the ears. Rabbits have a delicate spine and require good support of their back legs when being picked up. Do not tightly wrap a rabbit in a towel as this can lead to a back injury.

Routine Care:

Your rabbit may need to be brushed or groomed daily to prevent mats from forming on the fur. Toenails should be trimmed once a month and are similar to trimming a cat or dog's toenails. Non-breeding rabbits should be spayed/neutered between 4-6 months of age to prevent unwanted behavioral issues and prevent cancer. Your rabbit should be seen by a veterinarian yearly for a wellness exam.

Behavior and Socialization:

Rabbits are highly social creatures and benefit from being kept in groups of 2 or 3 as apposed to being kept alone. If a rabbit does need to be kept as an only rabbit, then it may benefit your rabbit to have a stuffed plush toy that is not consumable to provide the rabbit with a "companion". Rabbits will also bond with other species such as cats or dogs, this should be done under close supervision to prevent injury.