

# Rabbit

## Care Guide for New Owners

Rabbit

Exotic Pet

Social Animal

Spay/Neuter Required

### Quick Facts at a Glance

<b>Species</b>	Oryctolagus cuniculus (domestic rabbit)
<b>Lifespan</b>	8 to 12 years with proper care
<b>Adult Size</b>	Varies widely by breed; 2 lbs (Netherland Dwarf) to 20+ lbs (Flemish Giant)
<b>Activity Cycle</b>	Crepuscular (most active at dawn and dusk)
<b>Temperament</b>	Social, curious, and highly intelligent; bonds deeply with owners
<b>Housing</b>	Minimum 4x2 ft enclosure; free-roam is strongly preferred
<b>Diet</b>	Unlimited timothy hay + leafy greens + limited pellets
<b>Litter Training</b>	Yes, rabbits can be litter trained reliably
<b>Spay/Neuter</b>	Required before adoption from Boggy's Buddies; critical for health
<b>Good with Kids?</b>	Yes with supervision; rabbits dislike being picked up and can kick hard
<b>Lifespan</b>	8 to 12 years

### Meet the Rabbit

Rabbits are one of the most misunderstood pets out there. They are often purchased on impulse, treated like low-maintenance starter pets, and then surrendered when their owners realize just how complex and rewarding they actually are. The truth is, a well-cared-for rabbit is one of the most interactive, affectionate, and entertaining companion animals you can share your home with.

Rabbits are social, intelligent animals with big personalities. They learn their names, develop preferences, get excited about treats, and form real bonds with the people who care for them. They

also have a lifespan of 8 to 12 years, so bringing a rabbit home is a long-term commitment that deserves serious thought and preparation.

At Boggy's Buddies, all rabbits are spayed or neutered before adoption. This is a firm policy because it is one of the most important things you can do for a rabbit's long-term health and quality of life.

## Where They Come From

Domestic rabbits descend from the European wild rabbit, *Oryctolagus cuniculus*, which is native to southwestern Europe and northwestern Africa. Wild rabbits live in large social groups called warrens and are constantly active, foraging, digging, and exploring across large territories. They are crepuscular, meaning they are most active at dawn and dusk, and they spend the middle of the day and the middle of the night resting.

Humans began domesticating rabbits around 600 AD, originally for food and fur. Over centuries of selective breeding, hundreds of distinct breeds emerged with dramatically different sizes, body shapes, and coat types. Today, domestic rabbits range from the tiny 2-pound Netherland Dwarf to the massive Flemish Giant, which can exceed 20 pounds. Despite all this variation, their core behavioral and nutritional needs remain deeply rooted in their wild ancestry.

### Prey Animal Instincts

Rabbits are prey animals, and this shapes everything about how they behave and how they communicate stress. They instinctively hide signs of illness or weakness, which makes monitoring their health especially important. A rabbit that suddenly stops eating, stops moving, or sits hunched and still is in serious trouble and needs a vet immediately.

## Housing and Habitat

Housing is where most new rabbit owners get things wrong, because the advice in pet stores is consistently outdated and inadequate. Small hutches and wire-bottomed cages sold as rabbit homes at pet stores are not appropriate for rabbits as a permanent living space. Rabbits need space to run, jump, flop, and explore.

### Space Requirements

The bare minimum for a rabbit enclosure is 4 feet by 2 feet of floor space, but this is truly a minimum and should be paired with several hours of daily free-roam time outside the enclosure. A rabbit confined to a small cage 24 hours a day will develop physical and behavioral problems. Many experienced rabbit owners simply rabbit-proof a room or a large section of their home and allow the rabbit to live free-roam full time. This is the gold standard for rabbit welfare.

### Recommended Enclosure Types

#### Puppy Pens / Exercise Pens

X-pens or exercise pens are one of the most popular and recommended enclosure setups for rabbits. They are large, expandable, relatively inexpensive, and easy to clean. A minimum of 36-inch height panels is recommended to prevent jumping out. X-pens can be arranged in different configurations and expanded as needed, and they give the rabbit a large floor area without requiring a dedicated room.

#### C&C; Grid Enclosures

C&C; (Cubes and Coroplast) enclosures work very well for rabbits when built large enough. They allow for full customization, are easy to clean, and can include multiple levels. Build the bottom with solid coroplast to protect feet. The main caution is that some rabbits are determined climbers and will attempt to scale the grid walls, so always ensure your configuration is escape-proof.

#### Free-Roam / Rabbit-Proofed Room

Giving your rabbit a fully rabbit-proofed room or large area of the home to roam freely is the best possible housing option. It allows them to express natural behaviors, get adequate exercise, and live a more enriched life. Rabbit-proofing means covering or hiding all electrical cords (rabbits chew cords and can be electrocuted), blocking access to baseboards and furniture legs they can chew, covering any flooring that is too slippery, and making sure there are no gaps they can squeeze into and get stuck.

### What to Avoid

Wire-bottomed cages: Wire floors cause sore hocks, a painful and difficult-to-treat condition where the skin on the bottom of the feet breaks down from constant pressure on wire. Always use solid flooring.

Small pet store hutches: Most are far too small and poorly ventilated for a rabbit to live in full time.

Outdoor-only housing: Rabbits are highly sensitive to heat and can die of heatstroke in temperatures above 85 degrees F. They are also vulnerable to predator stress even when physically safe. Indoor housing is strongly preferred.

Multi-story cages with ramps: Rabbits can injure their backs and legs jumping between levels. If you use levels, keep the drop minimal and ensure ramps are very gentle and have full traction.

## **Flooring**

Slippery floors like hardwood or tile can cause muscle strain and spinal injuries in rabbits over time. If your rabbit lives on a slippery surface, provide rugs, yoga mats, interlocking foam tiles, or carpet squares for traction. Avoid carpet with long loops that toes can get caught in.

## **Temperature**

Rabbits are comfortable in temperatures between 60 and 72 degrees F. They handle cool temperatures better than heat. Anything above 80 degrees F is dangerous, and above 85 degrees F can be fatal. Always keep rabbits in air-conditioned spaces during warm months and away from direct sunlight and drafts.

## Bedding and Litter Setup

Rabbits can be reliably litter trained, which makes cleanup much easier and helps keep their living space clean and healthy. Setting up the litter box correctly from the start makes the training process much smoother.

### Litter Box Setup

Use a large, open litter box with high sides, at least a few inches deep. Corner-shaped litter boxes designed for small animals often work well. Fill the box with a rabbit-safe litter material and top it with a generous layer of timothy hay. Rabbits eat while they use the litter box, so having hay right there encourages them to use it consistently. Place the litter box in a corner of the enclosure since rabbits naturally prefer to use corners.

### Safe Litter Options

#### Safe Choices

- Paper-based litters (Yesterday's News, Carefresh unscented)
- Compressed wood pellets made from kiln-dried pine or aspen
- Hemp bedding
- Hay alone (not ideal but acceptable)

#### Never Use These

- Clay or clumping cat litter (can cause fatal blockages if ingested)
- Cedar shavings (toxic to rabbits)
- Raw pine shavings (contains harmful phenols)
- Scented litters of any kind
- Corn cob litter (molds quickly, causes impaction)

### Litter Training Tips

- Place the litter box where your rabbit already tends to use the bathroom.
- If they go outside the box, pick up the droppings and place them in the box to reinforce the location.
- Spayed and neutered rabbits are significantly easier to litter train. Intact rabbits may spray or scatter droppings to mark territory.
- Never punish accidents. Just redirect and reinforce the correct location.
- Clean the litter box every 1 to 2 days. Rabbits will avoid a dirty box and go elsewhere.

## Diet and Nutrition

Rabbit nutrition is one of the most misunderstood areas of rabbit care, and poor diet is the leading cause of most preventable health problems in pet rabbits. The good news is that a correct rabbit diet is simple once you understand what actually matters.

### Hay: The Foundation of Everything

Unlimited timothy hay should make up at least 80 percent of your rabbit's diet. This is the single most important thing you can do for their health. Hay provides the fiber that keeps the digestive system moving, wears down constantly growing teeth, and prevents life-threatening conditions like GI stasis and dental disease. Hay should be available at all times, fresh, and replaced daily.

Timothy hay is the standard recommendation for adult rabbits. Orchard grass, oat hay, and meadow hay are all excellent options as well. Variety is great. Avoid alfalfa hay for adult rabbits because it is too high in calcium and protein and can lead to bladder sludge and kidney issues over time. Alfalfa is appropriate only for young rabbits under 6 months old who need the extra calories for growth.

### Fresh Leafy Greens

Fresh leafy greens should be offered daily, roughly 1 to 2 packed cups per 5 pounds of body weight per day. Variety is important since different greens provide different nutrients. Introduce new greens slowly, one at a time, to avoid digestive upset.

#### Safe Greens

- Romaine lettuce
- Green and red leaf lettuce
- Arugula
- Cilantro
- Parsley
- Basil and other fresh herbs
- Bok choy
- Kale (small amounts only, high in oxalates)
- Dill, mint, oregano

#### Avoid These

- Iceberg lettuce (no nutritional value, causes diarrhea)
- Spinach (high oxalates, small amounts only)
- Cabbage and broccoli (causes gas)
- Rhubarb (toxic)
- Onions, garlic, leeks (toxic)
- Potatoes or starchy vegetables
- Corn (too starchy)
- Beans or legumes

### Pellets

Plain, high-fiber timothy hay-based pellets can be offered in small amounts: about 1/4 cup per 5 pounds of body weight per day for adults. Pellets are a supplement to hay and greens, not the main course. Many experienced rabbit owners reduce pellets significantly or eliminate them entirely for healthy adult rabbits with good appetites for hay.

Choose plain pellets with no added seeds, dried fruit, colored pieces, or nuts. Those additions are marketed toward the human buyer but are genuinely harmful to rabbits. High sugar content causes GI upset, obesity, and encourages selective eating where the rabbit picks out the fun pieces and ignores the nutritious ones.

## **Treats**

Treats should be small and infrequent. Small pieces of fresh fruit (strawberry, blueberry, apple without seeds, pear, watermelon without rind) can be given occasionally as a high-value reward. Keep portions tiny, a blueberry-sized amount is plenty. Commercial rabbit treats sold in pet stores are almost always loaded with sugar and should be avoided.

### **Fresh Water**

Fresh water must be available at all times. A heavy ceramic crock or a sipper bottle both work. Many rabbits prefer to drink from a bowl since it is more natural. Clean and refill daily.

## Spay and Neuter: Why It Matters

All rabbits adopted from Boggy's Buddies are spayed or neutered before going home, and this is one of the most important things we do for the animals in our care.

### Health Benefits

Unspayed female rabbits (does) have an extremely high risk of developing uterine cancer, with some studies estimating that up to 80 percent of intact females will develop reproductive cancer by age 5. Spaying eliminates this risk entirely. For males (bucks), neutering prevents testicular cancer and dramatically reduces aggression and territorial behaviors like mounting and spraying.

### Behavioral Benefits

Fixed rabbits are calmer, more affectionate, easier to litter train, and less likely to spray or display aggressive territorial behaviors. The difference in personality between an intact rabbit and a fixed one is often significant.

### Never House Intact Rabbits Together

An intact male and female rabbit will breed rapidly and prolifically. Even a single unintended litter is a serious welfare concern. Never house intact rabbits of opposite sexes together, even briefly.

## Enrichment and Exercise

Rabbits are highly intelligent animals with a strong need for both physical exercise and mental stimulation. A bored rabbit will find its own entertainment, usually by chewing your furniture, digging up your carpet, or developing behavioral problems.

### In-Space Enrichment

- Cardboard boxes with cut-out doors and windows
- Paper bags and newspaper for digging and shredding
- Dig boxes filled with shredded paper or compressed hay
- Tunnels and willow arches to run through
- Untreated wicker or seagrass mats for chewing
- Toss toys like baby keys or stacking cups
- Treat puzzles and foraging toys

### Interactive Enrichment

- Daily free-roam time outside the enclosure (minimum 3 to 4 hours)
- Supervised exploration of new areas
- Gentle handling and bonding sessions on the floor
- Training sessions using positive reinforcement (yes, rabbits can learn tricks)
- Companionship from a bonded rabbit friend

### Bonded Pairs

Rabbits are naturally social animals and often thrive with a same-species companion. Two bonded rabbits who live together are generally happier and more active than single rabbits. Bonding two rabbits is a process that requires careful introduction in neutral territory and patience. Ask us about bonding support if you are interested in adopting a pair.

## Handling and Interaction

Rabbits are not naturally comfortable being picked up. As prey animals, being lifted off the ground triggers their flight response and feels like being grabbed by a predator. This does not mean your rabbit does not like you. It means they communicate affection differently than a dog or cat does.

Signs your rabbit trusts and likes you: they flop down near you (the dramatic full-body flop is one of the highest compliments a rabbit can give), they approach you voluntarily, they groom you, they run excited circles around your feet (called binkying and zooming), and they nudge you for attention.

### Safe Handling

When picking up a rabbit is necessary, always support their full body weight with both hands. Never hold a rabbit by the ears or scruff. A rabbit that kicks while being held can break its own spine. If your rabbit is struggling, bring them down to ground level immediately rather than trying to hold on. Children should always interact with rabbits on the floor rather than holding them.

### **Signs of Stress in Rabbits**

A stressed rabbit may thump their back feet, growl, lunge, flatten against the floor with ears back, or attempt to scratch and bite. Thumping is also used as a warning signal. These are clear communication signals that your rabbit needs space. Respect them and back off.

## Common Health Issues

Rabbits hide illness well because showing weakness in the wild is dangerous. By the time a rabbit looks obviously sick, the situation is often already serious. Know your rabbit's baseline well so you can catch changes early.

### GI Stasis

Gastrointestinal stasis is the most common life-threatening emergency in rabbits. The digestive system slows or stops completely, and without treatment it is fatal within 24 to 48 hours. Signs include not eating, not producing droppings, a hunched posture, grinding teeth, and a bloated or hard belly. This is always an emergency. Get to a vet immediately.

### Dental Disease (Malocclusion)

Rabbits' teeth grow continuously throughout their lives. Without enough hay and chewing material to wear them down evenly, teeth can become overgrown, misaligned, or develop painful spurs. Signs include drooling, dropping food, weight loss, and reluctance to eat. Regular hay consumption is the best prevention.

### Uterine Cancer

Unspayed females have a very high lifetime risk of uterine cancer. This is why spaying is so important. Signs include bloody urine, behavioral changes, and lethargy. All rabbits adopted from Boggy's Buddies are already spayed, which eliminates this risk.

### Ear Mites

Signs include head shaking, scratching at the ears, and dark crusty debris inside the ear canal. Requires veterinary diagnosis and treatment. Never attempt to clean out ear mite debris at home, as it can be painful and cause injury.

### Respiratory Infections (Snuffles)

Caused most commonly by Pasteurella bacteria. Signs include nasal discharge, sneezing, watery eyes, and labored breathing. Can become chronic. Requires veterinary treatment and often ongoing management.

### Sore Hocks (Pododermatitis)

A painful skin condition on the bottom of the feet caused by prolonged contact with wire flooring, wet bedding, or unsanitary conditions. Signs include redness, hair loss, and open sores on the feet. Prevention is the best approach: solid flooring, clean bedding, and a healthy weight.

### Head Tilt (E. cuniculi)

Caused by a common parasitic infection called Encephalitozoon cuniculi. Signs include sudden head tilt, rolling, loss of balance, and rapid eye movement. Treatable with medication, but recovery varies. Vet care is urgent.

## **Bloat**

True gas bloat is different from GI stasis and is immediately life-threatening. The stomach fills with gas and cannot release it. Signs include a distended, drum-tight belly, extreme pain, and rapid deterioration. Emergency vet care is required.

## **Heatstroke**

Rabbits cannot sweat and overheat very quickly. Signs include labored breathing, wet nose, lethargy, drooling, and lying on their side. Temperatures above 85 degrees F are dangerous. This is a medical emergency. Move them to a cool area and contact a vet immediately.

## Things Every New Rabbit Owner Should Know

### **Rabbits live 8 to 12 years.**

This is a decade-long commitment. Please think carefully about where your life might be in 10 years before bringing a rabbit home. They are not a short-term pet.

### **Not eating is always an emergency.**

A rabbit that has not eaten or produced droppings for 12 or more hours needs to see a vet. Do not wait to see if they improve. GI stasis moves fast.

### **Find an exotic vet before you need one.**

Most general practice vets do not have significant experience with rabbits. Find a rabbit-savvy exotic vet in your area now, before there is a crisis.

### **The floor is their space.**

Rabbits feel safe on the ground. Spend time sitting on the floor with your rabbit rather than picking them up. You will build trust much faster this way, and your rabbit will come to you on their own terms.

### **Binkying is pure joy.**

A binky is when a rabbit leaps into the air and twists their body mid-jump. It means your rabbit is happy. If you see a binky, you are doing something right.

### **Rabbit-proofing is not optional.**

Rabbits chew. They will chew baseboards, carpet edges, furniture legs, and especially electrical cords. A rabbit chewing a live cord can be electrocuted. Cover or hide all cords before your rabbit ever comes home.

### **Hay is more important than any supplement or treat.**

If your rabbit is eating hay well, you are already winning. Hay keeps their gut moving and their teeth worn down. No supplement can replace it.

### **Rabbits are crepuscular, not nocturnal.**

They are most active in the early morning and evening. Do not be alarmed if your rabbit is quiet and resting during the middle of the day.

## **Poop tells you everything.**

Learn what your rabbit's normal droppings look like. Healthy droppings are round, firm, and uniform. Cecotropes are soft, cluster-shaped, and are eaten directly from the bottom by the rabbit (this is normal and important). Mushy droppings, tiny droppings, or no droppings are all signs to watch for and act on.

### **Questions? We're Here!**

Boggy's Buddies is always happy to answer questions, connect you with resources, and support you throughout your rabbit ownership journey. Reach us at [boggysbuddies@gmail.com](mailto:boggysbuddies@gmail.com) or find us on Facebook and Instagram.