



## *Tompkins County SPCA*

### **The Pet Lover's Guide to Your New Rabbit**

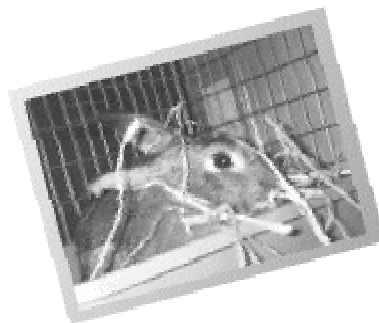
*Thank you for adopting your new rabbit from the Tompkins County SPCA. Not only have you helped save a life, but you are about to embark on one of the most rewarding personal experiences – sharing your life with a rabbit!*

*Congratulations!*

Rabbits are some of the friendliest, most curious—and some would say, the goofiest—pets around! They play, explore, frolic, and have a great sense of humor. Even watching them eat a piece of carrot can be a delightful experience. Rabbits are very social and can be as affectionate as a cat or dog. They bond with their owners, and love toys and games. These days, many people housetrain their rabbits and keep them indoors—a simple step that can greatly enhance your relationship with your bunny. Once you've outfitted yourself with some basic supplies and a little helpful advice, you'll see how rewarding it can be to live with one of these wonderful animals.

#### **WHAT YOU'LL NEED**

- Cage. This will be your rabbit's "home base," even though she should also have full roam of a room or the house. If your rabbit will be confined there, the cage should be large enough for your rabbit to hop around in, stretch out fully, and stand up. Rabbits also love the multi-level "ferret cages" found in pet shops.
- Food dish. Make sure it is heavy enough so bunny can't tip it over.
- Water bottle or bowl. Make sure it is heavy enough so it can't tip over.
- Toys.
- Brush.
- Nail clippers (cat size).
- A litter box (the bigger, the better!).
- Timothy Hay.
- Rabbit food/pellets.



## CARE & FEEDING

### Home, Sweet Home

Most people find it is easier to bond with a rabbit in a way that's fulfilling to both pet and owner when the animal is kept indoors. Rabbits are intelligent, social creatures who need mental stimulation and affection, and indoor rabbits tend to live longer than those who live outside. For these reason, the Tompkins County SPCA recommends that rabbits be kept as "house" pets.

If you want to keep your rabbit outdoors, find time every day to play with and pet your rabbit. Bring your rabbit inside for a few hours for some daily exercise. If you can't bring your rabbit in the house, your rabbit should have an escape-proof, predator-proof outdoor area or "run," where she can stretch her legs for several hours each day. Be sure you are ready to commit to play with your outdoor rabbit rain or shine, and to brave those cold winter days to fill his food dish and make sure his water supply doesn't freeze over.

### Keeping Your Bunny Mentally Healthy

There are three easy steps to keeping your bunny well socialized and happy: let her run around the house, spend time with her, and give her things to play with. Toys are a must. Rabbits are intelligent, and need the stimulation of toys. If you provide good toys, your rabbit will be less likely to exercise his natural tendencies, like digging and chewing, on your furniture. But the good news is you don't need to run out and buy bunny toys (although they do come cheap!) Bunnies enjoy playing with many things you probably already have sitting around the house! Popular favorites include cardboard paper towel rolls or toilet paper rolls for chewing; tunnels made out of cardboard boxes/tubes for exploring; and stuffed animals for cuddling. Some rabbits even like playing with balls, especially wire cat balls. Plastic baby toys are also popular, especially plastic baby keys—but if your bunny is a super chewer, these are not a good idea.

In addition, rabbits are social creatures who should not be allowed to languish in a cage. In many ways, they are like cats—they are curious creatures who like to roam, sit on laps, play with toys, and sometimes keep to themselves too. One important thing to keep in mind, if you allow your rabbit to roam freely, is to "rabbit-proof" your house first. Rabbits like to chew electrical cords and cable. If it is possible, put these items out of reach (and remember, rabbits have an uncanny ability to get into spots you never thought they could reach!). Otherwise, to protect your bunny, put the cords in plastic tubing from a hardware store. Computer and electronics stores also have special protective tubing for electrical cords.

Some houseplants are toxic to rabbits, so make sure they are out of reach. You may need to be creative in order to block off all the things your rabbit will be tempted to nibble. It is best to start your rabbit in a smaller area, such as one room of the house, and then gradually increase her running-space after you bunny-proof the premises.

Your rabbit should spend a minimum of a few hours outside her cage every day. Even if your rabbit spends 100% of his or her time running freely around the house, he or she should have a cage, a carpet square, or someplace to call his or her own.

### Holding Your Rabbit

It is common for people to think that their rabbits will enjoy being cuddled and carried around. Some rabbits do love to be held, and others will tolerate it. But many rabbits do not. In the wild, rabbits are prey animals. It is possible that, to a rabbit, being picked up and held in your arms feels a lot like being caught by a predator. As your rabbit begins to trust you more, he or she might begin to enjoy being held—but then again, he might not. Don't take it personally, nor is this a sign that your bunny is not "sweet." Many rabbits are simply more comfortable receiving your affection while sitting beside you, *with all four feet on the floor.*



If your bunny does like being held, always make sure you support his back feet as rabbits can very easily get injured. And remember, whether in your arms or laying next to you, most bunnies like to be petted on their head, ears, and cheeks.

### Feeding Your Rabbit

Your rabbit's diet should consist of four things each and every day: fresh water, fresh timothy hay, fresh vegetables, and rabbit food or pellets.

Water and timothy hay must be available 24 hours a day. Some rabbit experts believe that hay is even more important for rabbits than water! In terms of digestion, your rabbit has more in common with a horse than with a dog or cat. Hay keeps the rabbit's digestive tract moving, and timothy hay is low in calories and high in fiber.

Your rabbit needs several cups of fresh vegetables a day. Some popular favorites are carrots, carrot tops, parsley, romaine lettuce (not iceberg lettuce), and organic dandelion greens (no pesticides as rabbits are very sensitive). *Remember that your rabbit's digestive system is delicate. Any changes to your rabbit's diet must be done very slowly. Always introduce new foods a little bit at a time.*

When choosing a pelleted food for your rabbit, there are a few things to keep in mind. Your rabbit's food should not have anything colorful in it! Plain, dark-green pellets are the best. The brightly colored, freeze-dried vegetables found in many commercial rabbit foods are "junk food," and can even be harmful if they get caught in your rabbit's throat. Pick a rabbit food that has a fiber content of at least 18%.

### Keeping Your Rabbit Healthy

Rabbits need medical care, just like other companion animals. And when rabbits get sick, a delay in seeking veterinary care could be fatal. Common health problems center around the digestive system, and intestinal blockages, commonly called "furballs."

Rabbits, for example, are not able physically to cough up hairballs, meaning food and hair can back up. If not treated promptly, the ball can build up into a blockage that is often deadly. If your rabbit stops eating for 12 hours or more, or his droppings decrease in size, get him to a veterinarian. You can keep your rabbit's digestive tract healthy with regular grooming, lots of exercise, as well as fresh hay and vegetables daily.

In fact, you should take your rabbit to a veterinarian if you notice any of the following symptoms:

- Diarrhea with listlessness
- Sudden loss of appetite with bloat and abdominal gurgling
- Loss of appetite with labored breathing
- Loss of appetite with runny nose
- Loss of appetite for over 12 hours
- Head tilt
- Incontinence (urine-soaked rear legs)
- Abscesses, lumps, or swellings anywhere
- Any sudden behavior changes

### Rabbit Grooming

All rabbits shed, but some shed more than others. Grooming is important. Brush your rabbit often, especially during periods of heavier shedding, or "molts," which occur seasonally. Certain long-haired breeds of rabbits, such as the angora, require frequent brushing and coat-maintenance.

It is also necessary to trim your rabbit's nails every month or two. Use a cat nail-trimmer, and make sure you don't cut into the vein at the base of the nail. If your rabbit has dark-colored nails, you can see the vein if you hold up a flashlight to the nail.

### Spaying/Neutering Your Bunny

Spayed and neutered rabbits are happier, healthier and friendlier pets. A neutered bunny is less likely to have litterbox problems, nip or scratch. Make sure your veterinarian is experienced with rabbits.

## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

### "Can I train my bunny to use her litterbox?"

Yes, and it is easier than you might think. The first thing to keep in mind is that litter-training your rabbit is a bit different than litter-training your cat. Rabbits

like to eat while they are going to the bathroom. If you can get your rabbit to think of the litterbox as a great place to find tasty morsels and a generous supply of hay, you'll have a litter-trained rabbit in no time!

Here's how to set up a rabbit litterbox: Buy a large-sized cat litterpan. Line the bottom of the pan with newspaper. On top of the newspaper, spread a layer of shredded up newspaper, or paper-based bedding like CareFresh. On top of everything, spread a generous layer of Timothy hay. Do not worry that your rabbit will eat dirty hay – they tend to use one corner of the box for eliminating, and the opposite corner for munching. Make the litterbox as inviting as possible for your rabbit. If your rabbit goes for a certain kind of fruit, try placing a few pieces in the litterbox as an enticement and reward. Some people even place their rabbit's food dish right in the litterbox! The trick is to get your bunny in the habit of eliminating in the litterbox. The habit will develop quickly.

Most cat litters are not safe to use with rabbits—in fact, clumping cat litters can be dangerous to use with bunnies. The safest choices are torn-up newspaper and/or paper-based animal bedding. Never use wood-shavings, like cedar or pine, with your rabbit. Recent studies suggest that the fumes from wood-shavings can cause problems with your bunny's breathing and liver function.



Some rabbits littertrain right away. Others may take up to a few months to get it right. Be patient with your bunny. It is OK to scoot your bunny into the litterbox if you catch him in the act of making a mess on the floor, but never scold your rabbit for making a mistake. The litterbox should be a place where your rabbit feels safe and cozy. Never do anything to your rabbit that he doesn't like while he is in the litterbox. Make the box as enticing as possible, and your rabbit will virtually train himself!

#### "Are treats OK for my bunny?"

Treats are alright for your bunny, but only certain treats and only in moderation. Any changes to your bunny's diet must be done slowly. The best treat is fruit. Most rabbits go wild for raisins, banana, and apple. Don't give your rabbit more than 2 tablespoons of fruit per day, as it is fattening for them. Stay away from the rabbit treats that are sold in a pet store, as they are generally not good for your pet. Many of them contain things your rabbit's system is not used to digesting, such as nuts, corn, and milk products.

#### "My bunny is eating his poop. Is something wrong?"

Your rabbit is actually not eating feces. The rabbit's gut produces two different kinds of droppings. One of the droppings is a special kind, called "cecotropes." These droppings contain nutrients that your rabbit did not digest the first time around. Never prevent your rabbit from eating the cecotrope—they are vital for his health.

“What kinds of things can I do with my bunny”

Aside from petting, snuggling, and just spending time together, bunnies love to play games. Some bunnies like to knock over stacks of blocks or empty paper towel rolls standing up on their sides every time you put them up. Your rabbit might enjoy “exploring.” It’s fun to set up an elaborate maze of tunnels and tubes through your living room, and sit back and watch as your bunny’s curiosity takes over! Rabbits are very creative, and you will both have lots of fun discovering new games together.

“Why does my rabbit like to rub her chin on everything?”

Your rabbit is marking her territory! Don’t worry; this kind of marking will not damage the furniture. This habit is appropriately called “chinning.” Rabbits have scent glands in their chins. The scent they produce is undetectable to humans, so allow your rabbit to chin freely. Don’t be surprised if your rabbit chins your nose, your eyeglasses, or your shoes—you’re his favorite piece of “property”!

“Do rabbits get lonely for other rabbits?”

Most rabbits crave the company of at least one other rabbit. When the time is right for you, you might consider adopting a lifelong rabbit “friend” for your bunny. Both rabbits must be spayed or neutered before any introductions take place—otherwise, hormones can get in the way and they end up fighting more than playing. It is easiest to introduce a male and a female (both must be spayed/neutered!). It is a little harder to introduce two females. It is even harder, but certainly possible, to introduce two males.

**Rabbit Common Sense**

Rabbits are not cats with long ears or dogs with fuzzy tails. Like dogs and cats, they are cute and cuddly, need socialization and look to us to care for them. But they have their own unique wants and needs. One of the things you will likely experience as a rabbit owner is confusion. There is not a lot of information out there about pet rabbits. Even some veterinarians have little experience dealing with pet bunnies! Fortunately, there are organizations dedicated to bunny lovers. Try: [www.rabbit.org](http://www.rabbit.org). Or, become a bunny expert yourself by reading “The House Rabbit Handbook: How to Live with an Urban Rabbit,” by Marinell Harriman.