

RABBIT CARE & BEHAVIOR INFORMATION

Prepared by the Columbus House Rabbit Society©

www.rabbit.org

www.columbusrabbit.org



Top 10 Things to Know about Your New Rabbit

1. Rabbits need a balanced diet of **unlimited grass hay** (timothy, orchard, oat, brome), **limited pellets**, and **fresh greens**. (pp. 2-3)
2. **Do not feed your rabbit seeds, nuts, corn**, or “deluxe” pellets that contain seeds, nuts, or corn. (p. 2)
3. **Limit** starchy or sugary treats, including fresh fruit and carrots. (p. 3)
4. **Do not use pine or cedar bedding; do not use pine, cedar, clay or “clumping” litter.** Do use paper-based litter (e.g., Yesterday’s News or CareFresh), newspaper, or wood-stove pellets in your bunny’s litter box. (p. 5)
5. **If your rabbit stops eating, or if his poops are smaller or fewer, take immediate action.** Rabbits who do not poop or eat in 24 hours are in danger of dying. (pp. 12-13)
6. **Do not use Frontline** flea and tick treatment on your rabbit; it can be **fatal**.
7. Do not pick your rabbit up by the scruff of the neck or by the ears. Be sure to support her hind quarters.
8. If you already have a rabbit, introduce your new rabbit to her cautiously and gradually, and only after both are spayed/neutered. (pp. 14-17)
9. An **exercise pen** provides a **larger and more pleasant** space for your rabbit than a cage, and it’s so **much easier to clean**. (p. 4)
10. Be sure to take your bunny to an **experienced rabbit veterinarian**. Many vets who are wonderful with cats and dogs know very little about rabbits. (p. 9)

DIET

A balanced diet for an adult rabbit consists of

- Unlimited grass hay (timothy, orchard, brome, oat)
- Limited pellets (about 1/4 cup per 5 lbs rabbit)
- Fresh greens (at least 1 cup per 5 lbs rabbit)



HAY

Hay the most important part of your rabbit's diet. It is an essential source of fiber, which is critical for keeping your bunny's delicate GI tract moving. Chewing hay also helps keep your rabbit's teeth in shape to prevent serious dental problems. To avoid a mess, put the hay in your bunny's litterbox; change daily.

*****A healthy adult rabbit should not eat alfalfa hay, which is very high in protein, calcium, and calories and may lead to health problems.*****

PELLETS

Choose a plain pellet that has at least 18-20% fiber and no more than 16% protein. Timothy-based pellets are the best choice for an adult rabbit. Alfalfa pellets are higher in calories, and feeding them can lead to weight problems. If you do feed your bunny alfalfa-based pellets, monitor her weight carefully and adjust her rations accordingly.

*****Do not feed your rabbit "deluxe" or "gourmet" pellets containing dried fruits, nuts, seeds, or corn. These ingredients, high in fat and starch, can cause a variety of health problems, including potentially fatal intestinal blockages.*****

FRESH GREENS

Here are some greens that agree with many rabbits:

Carrot tops
Chard
Cilantro
Collards
Dandelion greens
Endive
Escarole
Kale (**caution—may cause gas**)

Mustard greens
Parsley
Romaine, red,/or
green leaf
lettuce
(**no iceberg**)
Spinach
Turnip greens



For something a little special, top the greens with a sprig of fresh herbs—basil, lemon balm, thyme, dill, fennel top, mint (**but no chives**).

TREATS

Avoid commercial treats. A baby carrot or a small slice of fresh fruit (apple, banana, pineapple, or strawberry, for example) will provide a healthy and delicious treat for your rabbit. **Because they are high in calories, feed treats sparingly—no more than 1-2 tablespoons daily.**

DIET FOR YOUNG RABBITS

7 weeks – 9 months

- Unlimited alfalfa pellets (*plain pellets, no seeds, nuts, corn, etc.*) to four months; **after four months**, limit pellets to ensure that your rabbit eats enough hay.
- Unlimited timothy hay (you can put this in your bunny's litterbox, for neatness)
- **At 10 weeks** start introducing a few leafy greens in very small amounts (e.g., dandelion greens, romaine or green leaf lettuce, parsley, endive, mustard greens)

9 months – 1 year

Start to switch the bunny over to an adult diet by

- limiting pellets to ¼-½ cup per 6 lbs. ideal body weight
- switching from alfalfa to timothy pellets
- increasing daily greens gradually

NOTE: fruit and carrots may be given as a treat, but no more than 1 oz. to 2 oz. per 6 lbs. body weight.

OBTAINING HIGH-QUALITY PELLETS & HAY

Oxbow and American Pet Diner produce high-quality timothy pellets, as well as hay and high-quality treats. Check the store locators on their websites to find a supplier near you:

<http://oxbowhay.com/>

<http://www.americanpetdiner.com/>

Columbus House Rabbit Society's Bunny General carries Oxbow products. For information see www.columbusrabbit.org. To arrange a pick-up call (614) 470-0093 or email bunnygeneral@columbusrabbit.org.



For more information about diet, see <http://www.rabbit.org/faq/sections/diet.html>

HOUSING

Many people allow their rabbits free run of a room or a portion of their homes. At least initially, however, it's good for your bunny to have a home base. The cages sold in pet stores are generally too small for the basic needs of an adult rabbit. An exercise pen provides a far more attractive option. It's

- Easy to clean
- Easy to move
- Easy to adapt to different living spaces
- Large enough for your bunny to hop around and play
- About the same price as a decent cage

If you do opt for a cage, it should have *at least* enough space for your bunny to stand up on her hind legs without bumping her ears and to stretch out in both directions. The floor area should be *at least* six times the size of the adult rabbit. The floor should be solid—wire bottoms are bad for a rabbit's feet. Visit the dog section of pet supply stores for large solid-floor cages suitable for rabbits.



Your bunny's housing should have plenty of room for the following essentials:

- A litterbox
- A cardboard "hidey box" for privacy
- Food and water bowls
- Toys

NOTE: Don't buy the bedding that's marketed for rabbits and other small animals; it's not only messy but, since it's essentially the same as litter, it may keep your bunny from developing good litterbox habits by creating confusion about which soft fluffy stuff is to be slept on and which is to be peed on. A towel, synthetic sheep skin, or a cat bed will provide a comfy place to rest, though even these may have to be limited until the rabbit is fully litterbox trained.



Exercise pens are available at Petsmart and Columbus House Rabbit Society's Bunny General (www.columbusrabbit.org); they can also be ordered online from various places.

For more information about housing, see <http://www.rabbit.org/faq/sections/housing.html>.

LITTERBOX TRAINING

Start with a standard-sized cat litterbox:

- Fill with about ½ to 1 inch of litter (use paper based litters, such as CareFresh or Yesterday's News; wood-stove pellets; or several sheets of plain newspaper—**never use pine or cedar litter/bedding or clay or clumping cat litter**)
- Top with hay (bunnies will typically eliminate in one corner of the box and munch the clean hay), adding a second handful at night.
- Change the hay and the litter daily.



Most spayed or neutered bunnies will catch on quickly (if your rabbit has just been spayed or neutered, it may take a little more time for the hormones to die down).

TIPS:

Until your bunny is using her litterbox regularly, confine her to a fairly small area—ideally an exercise pen or a small room like a bathroom.

If your bunny picks her own spot to eliminate, move the litterbox to that spot. Bunnies are notoriously stubborn about where they want to go!

When she goes outside the litterbox, give her a hint by soaking up a little of her urine on a tissue or paper towel and putting it in her litterbox.

Don't hesitate to use multiple litterboxes, especially as you allow your bunny more freedom to roam. You can easily cut back once she's thoroughly trained.

Never yell at your rabbit or punish her for having “accidents”—it won't help and may be counterproductive (your bunny may think you're crazy or frightening). Positive reinforcement is the trick: praise her for spending time in her litterbox, and make her *want* to spend time there by keeping the box clean and providing plenty of tasty, fresh hay.

Keep plain white vinegar on hand to clean up accidents—it works wonders on stains and odors!



WARNING: Pine and cedar litters have been linked to skin, liver, and respiratory problems. The dust from clay and clumping litters can cause respiratory problems; if ingested, it can cause deadly intestinal blockages.

For more tips on litterbox training, see <http://www.rabbit.org/faq/sections/litter.html>

MAKING YOUR HOME SAFE FOR (AND FROM) YOUR RABBIT

Because rabbits love to dig and chew, it's essential to "bunny-proof" the areas of your home your rabbit will have access to. Here are some methods to guard against the most common forms of rabbit mischief.



The most important step in bunny-proofing is covering electrical cords. You should do this even if your rabbit shows no interest in cords. Sooner or later, she will chomp a wire, and you don't want to risk a house fire or an electrocuted rabbit.

Your rabbit will be less interested if the cords look too thick to snip. Threading them through hard milky-white plastic tubing, available in the plumbing section of most hardware stores, will protect both your house and your bunny. Do not use clear tubing; she will chew through it!



2x4s along the perimeters of your room can protect your carpeting and baseboards from diggers.



Indulge the rabbit who's dying to get behind your couch with a tunnel made from a cardboard concrete form.



Wallpaper corner protectors will prevent your rabbit from gnawing doorframes and other edges.

Many people have found Ivory soap or bitter apple spray effective deterrents for rabbits who like to chew furniture.

Note: Rabbits often turn to carpets and furniture out of sheer boredom. Providing chewable toys or a place to dig can help. Read on for entertainment ideas.

For more tips on bunny-proofing, see

<http://www.sandiegorabbits.org/behavior/bunnyproofing.html>

RECREATION

Rabbits are full of energy and need plenty of space to run and play. If you house your rabbit in a pen or a cage, be sure to allow her time out every day for recreation. Your bunny will be so much happier—and you’ll enjoy her so much more. Bunnies are amazing athletes. They may race around a room doing “Bunny-500s,” turn 180-degrees in mid-air, or kick up their heels in little bunny dances known as “binkies.”

Most rabbits don’t like to be picked up or carried and prefer to have their people get down on the floor to play or snuggle. Most love to have their noses or jowls rubbed and will tooth-purr with delight.

A bored bunny can get into all kinds of mischief. Ward off trouble with a judicious selection of toys. Different bunnies have different play styles—some like to toss and fling things; others like to chew and dig. As you get to know your bunny, you’ll discover her preferences.



Cardboard “Cottontail Cottages” are a great favorite with many bunnies, who enjoy exploring the different levels and peeking out the windows. The diggers and chewers can have endless fun tearing out the floors and making new windows!



Hard plastic baby toys make terrific bunny toys. Toss a set of plastic keys toward your bunny and see what she does! Or build a tower of stackable plastic baby cups for your bunny to knock over and fling around.

Willow balls or baskets and twigs from untreated apple trees provide great entertainment for chewers, as do empty toilet-paper or paper-towel rolls filled with hay.

House rabbits do not need to go outside for recreation, and it’s generally not a good idea to take them out. Bunnies taken outside have choked on leashes and burrowed under pens; they’re vulnerable to fleas, mites, parasites, and pesticides. If you do take them out, make sure they’re in a confined space, protected from predators—and always strictly supervised. Consult a veterinarian before applying any flea and tick treatment, and never use Frontline.



BUNNY QUIRKS

Blind Spot: Because a rabbit's eyes are positioned on the sides of her head, she has a small blind spot directly in front of her. So if you see her sniffing around for a morsel that's right in front of her nose, it's perfectly normal and doesn't mean she's going blind. For the same reason, you may startle her if you reach straight in to pat her, as you would a dog or a cat; it's better to reach in from her side or over her head.

Thumping: Bunnies usually thump to convey anxiety or displeasure. They may thump to get your attention—or to protest the kind of attention they've been getting (as in, "Go away: I don't *want* to be picked up!" or "Shame on you for trimming my nails!").



“Dead-Bunny Flop”: Your bunny may suddenly flop down on her side, perhaps rolling over a little onto her back. This is a sign of sheer relaxation. (See photo left)

Binky: When a rabbit can't contain her happiness, she may do a binky, kicking up her heels and shaking her body in mid-air.

Tooth-Purring: Bunnies often show contentment by gently grinding their teeth. Loud grinding indicates pain.

Nipping: Bunnies may nip, especially when they're just getting to know you, without meaning any harm. An effective discouragement is to let out a short, high-pitched yelp every time you're nipped. Your bunny should take that to mean, "Hey, knock it off—that *hurts!*" Bunnies also commonly nip to say, "I want down!" or "Get out of my way!"

Chinning: Rabbits often lay claim to objects and people by rubbing their chins against them, thus marking them with a scent undetectable to people.

Territory marking: Rabbits often claim space as their own by leaving "territorial poops." Such marking is very common in rabbits that have not been spayed or neutered.

Pulling hair: Pregnant rabbits pull hair from their chests and legs to make nests for their kits. Unspayed females (or even spayed females living in the vicinity of unneutered males) sometimes undergo pseudo-pregnancies in which they display this behavior.



She's eating her poop??? If you see your bunny reach down to her anal area and come up munching, she's just retrieved a **cecotrope**. Cecotropes are nutritious pellets created from indigestible fiber in the part of the rabbit's intestine known as the **cecum**. Unlike the hard, round *fecal* pellets you find in your bunny's litterbox, *cecal* pellets look like tiny, gooey, clusters of grapes. Because rabbits normally eat them as soon as they are processed, you'll rarely see them. Finding more than an occasional cecotrope may indicate a health problem—obesity, a diet too high in protein or starch and/or too low in fiber, or the onset of a serious illness.

CHOOSING A VETERINARIAN FOR YOUR RABBIT

Unlike cats and dogs, rabbits do not get annual vaccines; they nonetheless need annual check-ups to make sure they're healthy and to nip potentially serious problems in the bud. One of the most important things you can do to ensure that your rabbit lives a long and healthy life is to find a veterinarian experienced with rabbits. Many veterinarians who are wonderful with cats and dogs know very little about rabbits.

Listed below are veterinarians used by Columbus House Rabbit Society fosterers and members. If you use any of these vets, be sure to interview them yourself, because the House Rabbit Society cannot guarantee your satisfaction.



HRS foster volunteers in Columbus go to the veterinarians listed below:

Dr. Barbara Oglesbee
Dr. Melissa Ferry
MedVet Hilliard
(formerly Capital Veterinary Emergency Center)
Avian and Exotic Service
5230 Renner Road
Columbus, OH 43228
614-870-0480

Dr. Susan Borders
Dr. Nicholas Jew
Dr. Elizabeth Logan
Dr. Steve Horvath
Norton Road Vet Hospital
1111 Norton Road
Galloway, OH 43119
614 870-7008

****MedVet Hilliard is open 24/7 for exotics emergencies****

Veterinarians recommended by HRS members:

Dr. Christine Kabalan
Dr. Thomas Klein
East Hilliard Veterinary Services
3993 Brown Park Drive
Hilliard OH 43026
614 876-7762

Dr. Andrew Queler
Healthy Pets of Westgate
3588 W. Broad Street
Columbus, OH 43228
614 279-2421

Dr. Dawn Keith
Healthy Pets of Lewis Center
8025 Orange Center Drive
Lewis Center, OH 43035
740-549-4100

Dr. Hal (Chip) Taylor III
Healthy Pets of Wedgewood
4041 Attucks Drive
Powell, OH 43065
614-932-1000

Dr. Mary Kay Schwab *
Animal Care Hospital of Reynoldsburg
7775 E. Main Street
Reynoldsburg, OH 43068
614 864-0465

***Spays and neuters and very general care only**

Dr. Jane Flores**
Dr. Steve Horvath
Elemental Veterinary Center
1250 N. High Street
Columbus, OH 43201
614 824-4036

****Acupuncture and basic care**

For advice on how to choose a rabbit veterinarian, see www.rabbit.org/faq/sections/vet.html

For a listing of rabbit-experienced vets outside Columbus, see www.rabbit.org/vets/index.html

HEALTH MATTERS

LIFE EXPECTANCY

A well-cared-for house rabbit can live to be 10-12 years old, or even older; the average life span is 7-10 years. Contrast this with the average life expectancy of about two years for an outdoors rabbit. You can help ensure that your bunny lives a long and happy life by providing a good diet, plenty of exercise, love and vigilance, and regular care from a rabbit-experienced veterinarian.



SPAY/NEUTER

Spaying or neutering your rabbit is very important:

- An unspayed female has about an 80% chance of contracting some form of reproductive cancer by the age of five.
- Raging hormones may make an unspayed or unneutered rabbit aggressive, destructive, and very hard to litterbox train.
- Unspayed and unneutered rabbits should not be bonded.

MEDICAL EMERGENCIES

Because they are prey animals, rabbits instinctively hide their illnesses, so their caretakers must be especially alert to subtle signs of illness.

Loss of appetite or **smaller and/or fewer poops** may indicate **ileus**, a potentially serious problem. See the article starting on p. 12 for what to do if you suspect ileus.

Signs of a medical emergency include:

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

If you observe any of these symptoms, don't waste valuable time—call your veterinarian immediately.



OTHER MEDICAL CONCERNS & GROOMING

Teeth: A rabbit's teeth never stop growing. Some rabbits' teeth become overgrown, a condition known as malocclusion, and need to be trimmed. Rabbits' molars can have painful points that cause them to stop eating. Drooling and loss of appetite can be indicators of tooth problems. Take your rabbit to a vet immediately if she shows signs of tooth problems, and make sure she has a good oral check-up at least once a year.



Ears: Whenever you trim your bunny's toenails, be sure to check her ears for dirt, wax buildup, redness, or any sign of infection. Other indicators of ear problems include scratching the ears and shaking the head. Contact your vet if you see any of those signs. At least once a year, your vet should examine your rabbit's ears with an otoscope; lops may require more frequent exams because they can have more of a tendency for ear infections.

Shedding: Rabbits shed their fur four times a year in a process that can take anywhere from a couple days to a few weeks to complete. Long-haired rabbits, in particular, are prone to hair-balls—just as cats are. But because bunnies, unlike cats, cannot vomit, the hair they swallow when they groom themselves can cause a potentially-fatal intestinal blockage. To prevent this problem, groom your rabbit regularly during heavy molts and make sure that she is getting plenty of exercise and eating lots of hay.

Nails: Trim your rabbit's nails every 6-8 weeks, or nip off the end of the nails once a month. Use cat/dog nail trimmers and be careful not to cut the quick (the vein running through the rabbit's nail). If the quick isn't visible, get a better view by shining a flashlight under the nails.

Red Urine: The color of a healthy rabbit's urine ranges from clear through a spectrum of yellows, oranges and reds. Much of this variation is due to diet. So long as your bunny is not an unspayed female and there are no other indications of trouble (straining in the litterbox, for instance), don't be alarmed by red urine.

Flea and Tick Treatments: Consult your veterinarian before using any flea and tick treatment to ensure that you are applying a formula and dosage safe for rabbits. Never use Frontline on your rabbit; it can cause death.



Huh, Rabbits Can Get Gas?!

By Karalee Curry

I answer the ringing phone and the person on the other end starts telling me their rabbit is not eating, won't come out from under the chair, and this has been going on for a few hours. "Thumper was perfectly fine this morning. She ate all of her pellets and was munching on her hay in the litter box when I left for work. I came home and found her like this. What do I do?"

As an educator for HRS, I receive at least 50 to 60 similar calls each year. Typically, the cause is ileus, a slowdown in the processing of food by the intestinal tract, otherwise known as GI stasis. While ileus is a common occurrence in rabbits, veterinarians often misdiagnose it as a "hairball," which is a much less common problem when rabbits are fed the proper diet. I have heard many sad stories about what vets who are unfamiliar with rabbits have done, or NOT done, to try to get the rabbit better. Unfortunately, several rabbits have not survived. For this reason, it is very important that you recognize the early symptoms of ileus.

There are several important steps you can take **before** your rabbit gets sick.

Have an established relationship with a rabbit-knowledgeable vet. When your rabbit has an illness, whether GI stasis or something else, it is imperative that you have a good vet to take your bun to.

Familiarize yourself with your rabbit's normal behavior – this will make it much easier to recognize when your rabbit is "off." What does "off" mean? It could be that your rabbit won't eat or drink; is laying in a strange position, or moving around a lot, trying to get comfortable; is hiding under the bed or somewhere private and won't come out; is laying in the litter box, which is not common for YOUR rabbit.

Over the years, I have become pretty good at telling when a rabbit has gas or stasis. They usually lay funny, sometimes with their sides

sticking out in a weird way. Some press their bellies to the floor. Some sit hunched, and their eyes may or may not be bulging. They are unable to get comfortable and they keep shifting their positions. They usually won't eat or drink. I have had a couple of rabbits whimper. Keeping an eye on your rabbit's behavior makes it much easier to recognize a problem early.

Also keep in mind that when a rabbit is getting sick with something else, it can affect GI motility as well. If the ileus has been gradually coming on for a while, you may see smaller poops as well as fewer poops. This is why it is imperative to know what your rabbit is pooping each day, otherwise known as the "poop scoop". I look in all my rabbits' litterboxes each day as I dump them to see if the poops are their normal size and there is the usual amount of poop.

Another possible early sign of ileus: Your rabbit does not finish eating their normal amount of pelleted food or quits eating pellets completely. You should know how much your rabbit normally eats and drinks each day. The sooner you notice a change, the sooner you can take action.

Okay, you think something's going on. Now what?

The first thing you should do is determine whether the rabbit has any stomach sounds. A rabbit's digestive tract should make a little noise at all times that you can hear. It will sound almost like water swishing through, or a gurgling. You should familiarize yourself with the normal sounds your rabbit's stomach makes when they are healthy and fine so you can more easily recognize a problem.

I have found that the easiest way to do this is to lay a towel on a table and place the rabbit on it. I then lay my ear on one side of the body, close to the stomach. You may need to listen for a while.

If you don't hear any sounds, try the other side. Most likely you will not hear any gut sounds. On the other hand, you may also hear a lot of gut sounds, which can mean that the ileus is causing gas. In some cases, you can hear a rabbit's stomach gurgling from across the room. Not all cases of ileus involve gas but many do.

The treatment is the same whether the rabbit has gas or not, and you need to start the treatment immediately. The medication you are going to administer is simethicone, which is an over-the-counter drug used for children and adults. Common brand names are Phazyme and Gas-X. Don't worry that you might be doing something that could make things worse. Simethicone won't cause any harm **if given in proper dosages**, and usually is very effective. You will be mixing the simethicone with water, which will help hydrate the stomach and intestines.

Okay, here's my cheat sheet version of what to do. Keep this list handy. A sick rabbit can be very scary and you don't want to forget anything. **This sheet does not take the place of taking your rabbit to the vet. It is written with the intention of helping your rabbit while you are waiting to go to the vet. If your bun has gas or GI stasis, this treatment may help get your rabbit back to normal and you may not have to go the vet.**

1) Listen for gut sounds: no sounds probably means ileus, loud sounds can mean lots of gas.
2) Crush up one mint-favored, 125 mg simethicone tablet and mix it with about 2 1/2 cc's of water. Suck the mixture into a syringe, place the syringe in the corner of the mouth, and carefully squeeze the plunger. If the rabbit struggles, you may have to wrap the rabbit in a towel (the famous bunny burrito).

3) Gently massage the stomach for several minutes, or as long as the rabbit will let you.
4) Warm the rabbit up if they feel cool to the touch. A rabbit's ears help to regulate body temperature, so the ears may be cool or cold to the touch. As the ileus continues, the rabbit may become cool to the touch all over. If this happens, put a heating pad on low with a towel on top of it. Place the rabbit on the towel and

monitor the temperature closely. From time to time, lift the rabbit up so they don't get too warm. It usually doesn't take long to warm them up – maybe 10 to 15 minutes. This often helps get the gut moving since the blood can be redirected to the gut rather than having to help with body temperature.

5) If the rabbit is no better in 45 minutes, repeat the simethicone.

6) Offer the rabbit food, such as greens, hay, or fruit.

7) Gently encourage the rabbit to move around. This can help to work out the gas and get the GI tract moving.

8) If the rabbit is no better in another 45 minutes, provide more oral hydration. Use either water or pedialyte. I try to get at least 10 to 15 cc's into the bun, if possible. Continue the stomach massages, keep offering food, and encourage the rabbit to move around.

9) If the rabbit is still not better after you have been at this for **a couple** hours, you should take the rabbit to your vet.

If you catch the problem early, often times you can get the rabbit's GI tract moving again within a couple of hours.

Some rabbits have a tendency to develop ileus. If yours does, you might want to talk to your vet about whether you should learn how to administer sub-q fluids at home, as well as pain medications, when necessary, if the GI stasis persists.

Some of you might say, "But my rabbit has done this and has gotten over it by herself," or some similar scenario. Yes, sometimes the rabbit does recover on her own. But many don't. Do you want to take that risk?

For more information on the subject, go to: <http://www.bio.miami.edu/hare/ileus.html>.

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INTRODUCING RABBITS TO EACH OTHER

Rabbits are naturally sociable animals, who generally are happiest when they have a fellow rabbit to cuddle and play with. But introducing rabbits can be very tricky, and establishing a firm friendship between them (the process known as **bonding**) can take weeks, or even months. While some rabbits fall in love at first sight and become a pair within a matter of days, bondings typically take several weeks, and you should be prepared to spend hours chaperoning bunny dates.



PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS:

Only try to bond rabbits who are spayed or neutered. Wait at least two weeks after the spaying/neutering surgery before introducing the rabbits to ensure that the incision has healed and that hormones have had a chance to die down.

Male-female bonds are usually the easiest to establish; male-male bonds the hardest. Because females are generally more territorial than males, it's usually easier to bring a female home to a male than the other way around.

If you have adopted a second rabbit, do not put the newly adopted rabbit right into the resident rabbit's home territory. Fighting is likely, and it can result in serious—perhaps life-threatening—injuries.

THE BONDING PROCESS:

The key principle of bonding is that the introduction and get-acquainted process take place in “neutral territory,” that is, a space that's not familiar to either rabbit.

Bonding strategies vary, but most experts recommend that your rabbits live side-by-side in separate cages or pens for a couple weeks before you let them meet in a common space.

Inducing a little stress before bringing rabbits together makes them less likely to fight. For this reason, many experts recommend preceding the first several bunny dates with **car rides**. Put your bunnies in their separate carriers and drive around with them for 10-20 minutes. Or put the bunnies in the back seat of the car with a litterbox full of fresh hay; by the end of the car ride, the bunnies will be huddled together in the litterbox. The theory is that this artificially induced togetherness will make the bunnies realize that snuggling is really pleasant and they will be more ready to snuggle when they're *not* stressed.

When you've returned from your car ride, put the bunnies in a neutral space. This space should not be so big that the bunnies can completely ignore each other and it should not have places to hide. Make sure that you are in the space with them so that you can intervene immediately at the first sign of aggression. Wear gloves or have a towel ready to stop any serious fighting. Put **two** hay-filled litterboxes in the space, along with some toys, and perhaps spread some hay and

veggies on the floor. (The photo on the right shows a typical bonding setup; pens are being used to create a restricted space.)

Allow the bunnies to sniff, but not circle, each other (circling quickly leads to fighting). For at least the first few dates, don't allow them to chase or to mount each other and, except for the car rides, don't let them get in a litterbox together. If the rabbits start to fight, separate them immediately.



Ideally, you'll arrange daily supervised dates for your rabbits. Start with meetings of at least 20 minutes (unless there's fighting) and increase the rabbits' time together as they grow more comfortable with each other. When you're confident that they won't hurt each other, you can leave them alone in their space—but stay within earshot to begin with, because your bunnies may act differently when you're not hovering over them. If the relationship seems to be going well, you can start leaving the rabbits alone unsupervised for longer periods of time, eventually letting them spend the night together in the neutral space.

SIGNS OF PROGRESS:

- If the bunnies seem comfortable being in the same space—even if they're not *interacting* (that is, if they're grooming themselves, eating, playing, or stretched out)—it's a sign of genuine progress.
- Eventually, one or both of the rabbits will “present” him/herself to the other for grooming.
- Grooming, snuggling, and sharing a litterbox are signs of a successful friendship.



Do make sure that the relationship is firm before moving the rabbits into non-neutral territory.

For more on the bonding process and many helpful tips, see <http://www.rabbit.org/faq/sections/introductions.html>.



STEPS TOWARD BUNNY LOVE

The bonding of Zoe, a three-year-old mini rex, with Alfie, a five-year-old Himalayan dwarf, illustrates some of the phases bunnies go through as they become friends.



“We’re in this together”

The stress of a car ride often makes rabbits who might otherwise fight turn to each other for comfort, and it makes fighting less likely once the buns are taken out of the car and put together for their first dates in neutral territory.

Ideally, bunnies forced together in this way will find that they *like* to cuddle and will be more ready to do it voluntarily during their dates.



“Okay, we could hang out!”

When your rabbits start acting normally in neutral territory—eating, grooming themselves, stretching, lounging—it’s a sign of progress, even if they aren’t *interacting*.

Giving your rabbits something pleasant to do during their date—a big plate of greens to munch, for example, will help make them enjoy being together.

“Won’t you groom me?”



When one rabbit approaches another with head bowed, a posture known as presenting, as Zoe is doing in the photo on the left, s/he is



asking to be groomed. In the picture on the right, Zoe and Alfie obviously want to be friends. The question is who’s going to break down and start the grooming ritual?

“That’s more like it!”

When one bunny grooms the other, the relationship has taken a major step forward. The only problem is that sometimes one bunny does all the grooming! The other bun will naturally want a turn, and frustration can lead to nips and bites. You can help move your buns through this impasse by dabbing something tasty on the top of their heads—a splash of plain apple juice, for example, or pureed banana.



Harmony



With her legs kicked out behind her, Zoe is perfectly comfortable with her buddy.

RESOURCES

BOOKS:

Marinell Harriman, *House Rabbit Handbook: How to Live with an Urban Rabbit* (4th edition) (Best guide to life with a house rabbit; marvelous photographs.)

Kathy Smith, *Rabbit Health in the 21st Century: A Guide for Bunny Parents* (2nd edition) (Major health issues are covered in terms easily accessible to the layperson.)

INTERNET:

The House Rabbit Society website (www.rabbit.org) is an invaluable repository of information on all facets of rabbit care and behavior.

LOCAL SUPPLIERS:

Columbus House Rabbit Society's Bunny General carries exercise pens; Oxbow hays and pellets; Cottontail Cottages; Busy Bunny willow balls, bowls, tunnels, tents; CareFresh litter and litterboxes; grooming supplies; and much more. See www.columbusrabbit.org for details. For pick-up call 614 470-0093 or email bunnygeneral@columbusrabbit.org.

Petsmart carries exercise pens; Yesterday's News and CareFresh litters.

Meijer carries Yesterday's News and CareFresh litters.

Many Lowe's and Home Depot, Sutherlands, and Tractor Supply Company (TSC) stores carry wood-stove pellets in the winter, and some TSCs stock them all year.

Home Depot, Lowe's, Anderson's, and probably most hardware stores carry plastic tubing for wires.

HOUSE RABBIT SOCIETY, COLUMBUS CHAPTER:

www.columbusrabbit.org

For rabbit care and behavior questions, email help@columbusrabbit.org or call 614 470-0093.

