



Tips for you and your rabbit

Rabbit-Proof your house

Rabbit Proofing one's home involves three things:

- 1) Preventing destruction of your property
- 2) Protecting your companion rabbit(s) from harm
- 3) Providing safe and fun chewing alternatives for your rabbit

Preventing rabbits from chewing on electrical cords is of utmost importance, since rabbits can be badly burned or electrocuted. The consequences of biting into an electric wire are too severe to risk relying on training alone. Instead, you must take action to move the cords safely out of reach. Some ways of doing this are:

- Plastic tubing (similar to that used in fish tanks, or with "swamp coolers") from a hardware or aquarium store can be slit lengthwise with a blade and the wire can be tucked safely inside. A harder, black, pre-slit type of tubing is also available.
- Decorative gold and wood-grained wire-concealers that stick to the base of walls come in strips, corners, etc., so they can follow the shape of the wall. This is a more costly and time consuming method than the clear plastic tubing above, but is more permanent, and rabbit proof, as well.
- Of course, wires can be run under or behind furniture or carpets in order to hide them.

Most houseplants are toxic.

Putting them on high furniture may not keep a rabbit away. Hang them from the ceiling if you have an active bunny, but watch for falling leaves! If you are unsure which plants may be toxic, the House Rabbit Handbook (Droller Press) has a complete list of poisonous plants (indoors and outdoors), as do two back issues of House Rabbit Journal.

If a rabbit insists on chewing baseboards, edges of chairs, etc., a board can be put over the places of temptation, making them inaccessible while also providing an acceptable chewing surface. This method should be combined with training your rabbit not to chew on these items.

Rabbits can't resist digging at the end of "tunnels" (any place that furniture forms a narrow path to a wall). Lay a piece of wood or hard plastic at the end of the tunnel, holding it down with the furniture on either side to protect the carpet. You can also place a tub full of hay, shredded newspaper, or a phone book, here as well for bunny to dig in. Upholstered furniture and beds that are several inches off the ground are wonderful places for rabbits to hide underneath. However, some will burrow up into the soft underside and make a nest. A flat cardboard box or frame of 2x4s, smaller than the area of the future base, will keep the rabbit out, and won't be seen from human level.

Rabbits chew to exercise their minds, not just their teeth. Provide lots of entertaining alternatives for your bun to chew on. If she enjoys chewing a hole into the back of the

couch, give her a closed cardboard box filled with paper or straw, with a small hole in it to start, and let her finish the job. Be imaginative!

Q: How big of a cage should I have for my rabbit?

A: You should get a roomy cage, about six times the size of adult rabbit. A front opening door is preferable for rabbit to come in and out on their own although top opening cages are also fine in that they allow humans to reach in and out. A cage with both top and front opening doors is ideal. And, the door must be large enough for a litter box.

Rabbits were not designed to live on wire floors--they're hard on their feet (which have no pads on the, like cats or dogs). If you must use a cage with a wire floor, you need to provide your rabbit with a resting board or rug for her to sit on, otherwise she will spend all of her time in her litterbox. You can find cages with slatted plastic floors, which are more comfortable, or you can use a solid floor. As long as your rabbit has a litterbox in the corner that he chooses as his bathroom, there shouldn't be much of a mess to clean up.

Bigger is better! A cage should be at least 4 times the size of your bunny--more if he is confined for a large amount of the day. You can build your rabbit a two-store "condo" with the floors connected by a ramp--they love this!

An untrained rabbit probably should be kept in a cage while you're not home to supervise and at night when you sleep. Rabbits are crepuscular, which means that generally they sleep during the day and during the night but are ready to play at dawn and at twilight. Be sure to let them out during the evening when you are home, and if possible, in the morning while you get ready for work.

A cage should be seen as the rabbit's "nest." A special place where he can feel safe and secure. Make the nest enjoyable and she will enjoy being there, even when the cage door is open! Keep it stocked with baby toys, a synthetic sheepskin rug, a piece of wood attached to the inside (like a baseboard), and when you put him to bed at night, a nice veggie or fruit snack.

Remember, your cage should have the following:

- A resting board to cover part of cage floor (piece of cardboard, wood, or carpet) for rabbit's comfort. Slatted floors are more comfortable than wire floors.
- A litter box fastened inside cage to reinforce litter box training.
- A heavy pellet bowl or clip-on feeder.
- A water bottle or crock.

Q: How do you litter train a rabbit?

A: By nature, rabbits choose one or a few places (usually corners) to deposit their urine and most of their pills. Urine-training involves little more than putting a litter box where the rabbit chooses to go. Pill training requires only that you give them a place they know will not be invaded by others. Here are some suggestions to help you to train your rabbit to use the litter box:

- Age. Older rabbits are easier to train than younger rabbits, especially babies. A rabbit's attention span and knack for learning increases as they grow 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. When rabbits reach the age of 4-6 months, their hormones become active and they usually begin marking their territory. By spaying or neutering your rabbit, he will be more likely to use his litter box (as well as be much healthier and happier).
- Types of litter. House Rabbit Society recommends organic litters, made from alfalfa, oat, citrus or paper. (Some brands to look for: Care Fresh, CitraFresh, Cat Works, Cat Country, Critter Country) Stay away from litters made from softwoods, like pine or cedar shavings or chips, as these products are thought to cause liver damage in rabbits who use them. Another approach is to place a handful of hay in each box, or to simply use hay as litter. Obviously, you need to change the hay fairly frequently (daily), since your rabbit will be eating it.
- Cleaning and Disposal. Clean litter boxes often, to encourage your rabbit to use them. Use white vinegar to rinse boxes out- -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. To dispose of organic litters, they can be used as mulch, or can be composted. Rabbit pills can be directly applied to plants as fertilizer.
- The cage. Use a cage large enough to contain a small litter box (along with bunny's food and water bowls, toys, etc.) and still allow enough room for the rabbit to stretch out. Place the box in the corner of the cage that he goes in. With a litter box in the cage, when the rabbit is confined to his cage when you're not home, cage time is learning time.
- Pills vs. Urine. All rabbits will drop pills around their cages to mark it as their own. This is not failure to be litter-trained. It is very important for your rabbit to identify the cage as her property so that when she leaves the cage for the bigger world of your house, she will distinguish the family's area from her own and avoid marking it. To encourage this, make the rabbit the king of his cage. 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 things to him that he doesn't like while he's in the cage.
- The running space. Even if your goal is to let your rabbit 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 her more space. But do so gradually! If you overwhelm her with too much freedom before she's ready, she will forget where her box is and will lose her good habits.
- The method. Start with a box in the cage, and one or more boxes in the rabbit's running space. If she urinates in a corner of the cage not containing the box, move the box to that corner until she gets it right. Don't be concerned if your bunny curls up in his litter box--this is natural. Once she's using the box in the cage, open her door and allow her into her running space. Watch her go in and out on her own. If she heads to a corner where there's no box, or lifts up her tail in the characteristic fashion, cry "No" in a single, sharp burst of sound. Gently herd her back to her cage and her litter box, or into one of the boxes in her room. Be careful, however. You don't want to make the cage or the litter box seem like punishment. A handful of hay in the box makes it a more welcoming place. After she first uses the box, praise her and give her her favorite treat. Once she uses the box in her room a couple of times, you're well on your way, as her habits will be on their way to forming. As she gets better trained in

her first room, you can increase her 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 her. Remember, as she becomes more confident and uses fewer boxes, you can start to remove some of her early.

- Training boxes- How many litter boxes? The more, the merrier, especially if your rabbit is a bit of a slow learner, or is especially obstinate about where she wants her box(es) to go. As her habits improve, you can decrease the number of litter boxes.
- Special problems. Some rabbits love to kick their 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. A second problem is that rabbits often back up so far in the litter box that the urine goes over the edge. Again, a covered litter box can solve this problem. Another solution would be to get a dishpan or other type of tub with much higher sides. Still another solution would be to get a "urine guard" to place around the back of the cage, to keep the litter from spraying outside of the cage.
- Consistency. Get your rabbit 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 rabbit 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 bunny!

Running Space:

There are two kinds of running space for a house rabbit: Indoors and Outdoors. Your rabbit needs exercise and the running space provides that. For indoors, you should start small and gradually increase the animal's freedom. Bunny-proof your electric cords. Place a second litter box outside the cage, but let the rabbit have access to cage (leave door open with water and food inside). Clean the smaller litter box once a day and clean the cage tray and floor covering once a week or as needed. For outdoors a fenced patio, porch or wire playpen (with floor) is recommended, but for daytime use only.

Socializing:

Demonstrate to the rabbit that you are the source of petting, treats, freedom, and anything else the rabbit likes. Pet the rabbit on the broad area on top of her nose. Try short sessions several times a day. Don't chase the rabbit unless necessary. Don't punish her. Distract or remove rabbit from chewing or digging destructively. Give her something she CAN play with. Rabbits readily develop habits "good or bad" and can be influenced by humans.

Health:

Spay your female bunny at age 6 months, males at 4 months. Regularly check eyes, nose, ears, teeth, weight, appetite, and droppings. Notice any behavior change. Avoid stress, heat and sudden temperature changes. Find an experienced rabbit vet (like North Idaho Animal Hospital) BEFORE a problem develops. Groom regularly.

Diet

- Rabbit pellets (observe amount eaten daily)
- Fresh water
- Fresh vegetables and fruit. Introduce gradually and in small quantities.
- Hay (for fiber and nutritional value): alfalfa, grass, clover, oat
- Straw (no calories for fiber and chewing entertainment)
- Wood for chewing and recreation
- Petromalt or Laxatone (to prevent hairballs) once or twice a week after the 7th month and depending on coat- once a day during molt
- Acidophilus (promotes "good" intestinal bacteria)
- Papaya enzymestmultiple enzymes (especially Prozyrne for prevention of fur-block and enteritis)

Q: Why do rabbits chew things other than food?

A: Chewing is a normal, natural, necessary- and highly enjoyable- activity for rabbits. Here is an outline of some considerations to help you understand the why of chewing, as well as the how of preventing destruction of your favorite wicker furniture.

- Psychological factors
 - Sex. Females often have a stronger urge to burrow than males, although this is not the only reason rabbits chew. The hormone/age factors below also apply to males. Both males and females can and should be spayed or neutered as soon as they are sexually mature (3 1/2 to 6 mos. old).
 - Hormone/age. Is she spayed? If young (under 2 yrs.) & unspayed, spay her. If young & spayed, her chewing will lessen with time. If mature (over 2 yrs.) & unspayed, spay her but get a checkup first. If mature & spayed, her behavior isn't governed by hormones.
 - Personality. Chewers are often intelligent, outgoing, affectionate individuals who like to be in charge and get lots of attention. Does she chew to get attention? Would a companion alleviate boredom? Anything that would entertain her/make her happier might lessen her chewing.
- Environmental factors
 - Diversions: keep trying to find something harmless she enjoys doing. What kind of "burrow" (such as a cardboard box stuffed with hay), can you provide for her?
 - Protecting the environment: Enclosed are pages from the House Rabbit Handbook for ideas. A box or wire basket can go over a group of wires. Browse a large hardware store for products to use for bunny-proofing.
 - Confinement (to a cage or room). This simply buys you time, while you bunny-proof, get her spayed, or wait for her to mature. Discipline (clapping hands, saying "no") has a small role in stopping chewing behavior. Most people report that it's easy to make their bunnies understand them, but difficult to make them stop the behavior through the use of discipline only, especially if the bunnies are left alone for periods of time. Since swallowing indigestibles such as carpet presents a health hazard to your bunny, follow up excessive chewing incidents with a petroleum laxative such as Petromalt or Laxatone (sold at pet-supply stores).

*Remember: A spayed rabbit will chew less and less as she matures. It may be just a matter of riding out a high energy stage of your bunny's life.

Q) What's the best way to hold and handle my rabbit?

- A) If rabbit struggles violently, either restrain the rabbit against your body OR squat down and release the rabbit (fighting may injure her). Prevent rabbit jumping from heights.

Provide your rabbit some toys. Toys are great for providing:

- Mental STEMulation. Without challenging activities to occupy your rabbit when you're not home, your rabbit, 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.
- Physical exercise. Your rabbit needs safe activities to keep her body in shape as well as her mind. She needs things to climb on, crawl under, hop on and around, dig into, and chew on. Without outlets for these physical needs, your rabbit may become fat or depressed, or may create jumping, chewing, or crawling diversions with your furniture.
- Bunny proofing for your home. As is clear from the above descriptions, toys are not just for your rabbit, they also keep your house safe. By providing your rabbit with a selection of toys chosen to meet her age, sex, reproductive status and temperament, you have fulfilled most of the requirements of bunny-proofing your home.

Some good toys to start with:

- Paper bags and cardboard boxes for crawling inside, scratching and chewing.
- Cardboard roll from paper towels or toilet paper
- Unteated wicker baskets or boxes full of: shredded paper, junk mail, magazines, straw, or other organic materials for digging
- Yellow pages for shredding
- Cat toys: Batta balls and other cat toys that roll of can be tossed.
- Parrot toys that can be tossed, or hung from the top of the cage and chewed or hit
- Baby toys: hard plastic (not teething) toys like rattles and keys. things that can be tossed
- Children's or birds' mobiles for hitting
- Lazy cat lodge (cardboard box with ramps and windows) to climb in and chew on. Also, kitty condos, tubes, tunnels, and trees
- Nudge and roll toys like large rubber balls, empty Quaker Oar boxes and small tins
- "Busy Bunny" toys:
 - Rainbow slinkies
 - Toys with ramps and lookouts for climbing and viewing the world
 - Dried out pine cones
 - Jungle gym type toys from Toys R Us
 - A (straw) whisk broom
 - 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)

*Rabbits, like dogs and cats, benefit from an annual examination by your North Idaho Animal Hospital veterinarian.

From Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine