

# BUNNY COMPANION BOOKLET

**Thank you for adopting a companion bunny from the Jackson County Animal Shelter.**

**The Shelter staff and Friends of the Animal Shelter volunteers hope this booklet will answer many of the questions you may have.**

**Enjoy your bunnies!**



**Jackson County  
Animal Shelter**

**5595 S. Pacific Hwy 99  
Phoenix, Oregon 97535**

**[www.jacksoncounty.org/shelter](http://www.jacksoncounty.org/shelter)**

***For inquiries about animals:***

**(541) 774-6654**

***To view adoptable pets, go to*  
[www.petfinder.com](http://www.petfinder.com)**



**PO Box 1013**

**Phoenix, Oregon 97535**

**[www.fotas.org](http://www.fotas.org)**

**LIKE US: [www.facebook.com/fotas](https://www.facebook.com/fotas)**

***For opportunities to volunteer or donate:*  
(541) 774-6651 • [fotasjc@gmail.com](mailto:fotasjc@gmail.com)**

*For more specific help, FOTAS recommends that you contact an animal behavior specialist or your veterinarian.*

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## General Information

People often think rabbits are low maintenance, popping them in an outdoor hutch, feeding them, and cleaning their pen infrequently. However, this is actually very far from the truth. Rabbits are about as much work as having a cat – litter boxes should be changed at least every other day, hay replenished twice a day, pellets and fresh greens fed daily, water checked twice daily, etc. They also require love and attention, just like other domestic pets. Rabbits that are in emotional distress may express aggressive behavior toward people and other pets. They make wonderful pets, but are not an easy starter pet for small children. Since bunnies are crepuscular (most active at dawn and dusk; sleeping during the day and night), it makes them great pets for working people and those in school, as they are sleeping most of the time you are away.



Rabbits should be housed indoors (see *Housing and Activities for Your Rabbit*, below). They are at risk of heatstroke at temperatures over 80° F, and can die of fright if left outside in a hutch near predators or scary noises (fireworks, thunder).



Proper care for a rabbit can have significant time and cost implications. Rabbits hide health problems until they become an emergency situation. If the situation is not addressed quickly, the rabbit will die. Healthy rabbits are always eating and pooping. If they stop eating, this is a very bad sign – they need to be taken to an experienced rabbit vet immediately. A rabbit that won't eat fresh greens at dinner or take a treat could be dead by the morning. Most emergency medical situations can be simply avoided by ensuring a proper diet and not overfeeding fruits and treats.

## Common Bunny Behaviors

Rabbits have a wide range of personalities, just like cats and dogs; however, they communicate very differently. Rabbits are usually quiet, and sometimes make noises when content. Louder vocalization is most common when your bunny is in pain or afraid.

Rabbits stand upright on their hind legs (periscoping) to give themselves a better vantage point, and they alert other rabbits (and you) to the presence of danger by thumping their hind legs. Thumping can also be a sign of irritation about something. When rabbits “binky” (run, jump into the air, twist their bodies, and flick their feet), this is an expression of pure joy! The Language of Lagomorphs ([www.language.rabbitspeak.com](http://www.language.rabbitspeak.com)) is an excellent document to better understand your bunny's behavior.



Rabbits have an excellent sense of smell, hearing, and vision. They have nearly 360° panoramic vision. Their only blind spot is in front of their nose. They also have a clear inner eyelid that can be closed, making them appear awake while sleeping.

Rabbits are also big chewers – fond of chewing through electrical cords, baseboards, and carpet. Many people put them in a room with an exercise pen to block them from getting to the woodwork, or watch them closely when they are free-roaming through the house. Also, be sure to provide them with sticks and twigs to chew on (apple, willow, and pear twigs are great chewing options).

## Handling Your Bunny

Rabbits have extremely strong hind legs. Hold them firmly with their legs pressed into your side or held with one hand, while supporting their back so they cannot twist and kick. A swift twist and kick can break their back as they struggle to get away. Never lift your bunny by the scruff of the neck with their legs dangling free. As a prey animal, this is terrifying to your pet and also increases the chance of kicking.

Most rabbits do not enjoy being lifted off the ground and carried around. They prefer to remain on the ground and get attention there. Most enjoy a good head rub on their skull between their nose and the crown of their head. However, if you don't handle your rabbit regularly, they will become accustomed to not being picked up or touched, and it will become more difficult to do this when you need to get them into a pet carrier, etc.

**TIP:** To build trust with your bunny, lie quietly on the floor and talk to them. Allow them to smell you, crawl on you, and explore without trying to pet them. Quickly, they will become comfortable.

If they start to groom you (lick you), this is a very good sign!





## Two are Better than One



Rabbits are territorial animals that live in loosely-organized social groups. They do best in pairs and can get lonely living as singles. They can bond for life as two females, two males, or a male and female, but even if living with the same sex, rabbits should be spayed and neutered. Unaltered females usually die of uterine cancer within 3 years when they can live up to 12 years if spayed. (Also, female rabbits can birth up to 8 bunnies every 30 days if they are not spayed.) Unaltered males usually exhibit very bad habits, making them

problematic pets – and unaltered rabbits are prone to fighting. Rabbits who are introduced to each other must be spayed and neutered. Males must be at least 6 weeks post-neuter to ensure that they are not still fertile.

It is ideal to adopt rabbits in already-bonded pairs, as the bonding process can be a challenge. Sometimes, a bonded pair can go through a rough time and begin fighting. Separating them for a bit and then reintroducing/re-bonding them often resolves the problem. Some rabbits just will not get along due to personality differences – and they are vicious fighters. Rabbits can also be companions for dogs and cats – some live in the house with other animals, as they can be litter-box trained. If you have a herding or prey-driven dog, your dog and rabbit should not share the same space.

## Feeding Your Rabbit

Feed your rabbit unlimited, fresh Timothy hay and grass/oat hays – at least 2 handfuls twice a day added to one end of the litter box (bunnies like to eat while sitting in the litter box and tend to use the litter box while eating). Hay is essential for rabbit digestion and keeping things moving – a healthy rabbit is eating and pooping, as well as wearing their teeth down, since rabbit teeth grow continuously.



Daily fresh greens are ideal – approximately 2 cups for a 5-pound bunny over 3 months old. Introduce new greens in small quantities slowly to ensure there are no digestive issues. You can try romaine lettuce, cilantro, parsley, dandelion greens, and others. Never feed iceberg lettuce. A good resource for rabbit-friendly fresh greens can be accessed at: [www.mybunny.org/info/rabbit-diet-and-nutrition/vegetables-and-fruits-for-bunnies](http://www.mybunny.org/info/rabbit-diet-and-nutrition/vegetables-and-fruits-for-bunnies).

Rabbit pellets are a supplemental source of essential vitamins and minerals, not a main food source. Avoid pellets that contain corn, soy, nuts, or sweeteners. We suggest Sherwood Professional Rabbit Pellets (1/2 Tablespoon per pound) or Oxbow Organic Pellets. \*Note that baby rabbits (up to 7 months old) should be given unlimited pellets and hay. After that, pellets should be limited for adult rabbits, to encourage more hay consumption.\*

Rabbits' teeth grow continuously, and unless they file them down by eating grasses and hay, they will develop dental problems, which result in pain – and eventually the rabbit will stop eating. Dental treatments to file the teeth are available but extremely expensive, so it's best to give your rabbit unlimited access to hay and not give in to the begging for more pellets and treats as a replacement for hay. Dental and digestive issues are a very common cause of death in rabbits.

Rabbits need plenty of fresh water. The more water your rabbit drinks, the less likely he or she will have digestive issues. Allow your rabbit to drink from a ceramic crock as they will naturally drink more water this way than from a hanging water bottle – these also have a tendency to leak. Some people offer their rabbit both options.

The occasional treat, like a small piece of carrot or apple, is fine (equivalent to no more than one tablespoon per 5 pounds of bunny per day). Too much sugar will create digestive problems for your bunny, so treats must be limited. Avoiding treats is also a healthy option.



## Housing and Activities for Your Rabbit

Many of the small cages at retail stores are too small for an active bunny. Rabbits do well in large wire dog crates with an upper shelf, multi-tiered pens designed for small animals, wire exercise pens with a rug or sheet under them, and in homes created with wire closet boxes. Each home should minimally contain a litter box with plenty of hay, water bowl, toys, and a place for hiding (box or towel draped over part of the pen). The bunny should have enough space to lie down with their legs stretched out. Ideally, the pen should be at least 10 times the size of your rabbit(s). Here are links to several examples of wonderful rabbit houses:

- [www.myhouserabbit.com/rabbit-care/housing-your-pet-rabbit-indoors](http://www.myhouserabbit.com/rabbit-care/housing-your-pet-rabbit-indoors)
- [www.rabbitcondo.com](http://www.rabbitcondo.com)
- [www.breyfamily.net/bunnycage.html](http://www.breyfamily.net/bunnycage.html)
- [www.hopperhome.com/bunny\\_digs.htm](http://www.hopperhome.com/bunny_digs.htm)



- [www.ferret.com/item/ferret-nation-habitat-model-182-double-unit/650431](http://www.ferret.com/item/ferret-nation-habitat-model-182-double-unit/650431)  
(rabbits larger than 5 pounds may not be able to squeeze through the openings to each level)

Rabbits that lack stimulation may develop behavior problems and poor health. Consider adding tunnels and platforms for climbing, twigs for chewing, suitable toys for tossing or rolling around (balls for cats, paper towel or toilet paper end rolls, rubber baby keys) and places to hide in their environment. Cardboard boxes (wine cases, fruit boxes from Costco) with holes cut out on two ends are favorite hiding places for many bunnies. Variety and the occasional change of scenery are beneficial, but too much change can create stress.

Rabbits kept in a pen or cage should have regular time outside the pen to run around and get more exercise — indoors or outdoors in a supervised (preferably fenced-in) area. Digging is an innate and favorite pastime of rabbits. If you allow your bunnies to dig in your garden or yard, monitor them closely so they don't dig their way out. You can also create a wire-enclosed area by digging down 18 inches, laying out chicken wire or metal mesh, and filling the dirt back in on top. This wire mesh should also continue up the sides of your fencing, so your rabbits can't dig their way out. An overhead cover is also a good idea, as blue jays and other wild animals can come after your bunnies if they are exposed.



Rabbits should start interacting with people and other pets from an early age. Familiarity with other species and exposure to everyday sights and sounds will help them develop into friendly, confident adults and be relaxed in their environments. First introductions to other pets should be done with the larger pet on a leash, in case the meeting doesn't go as well as planned.

Rabbits cannot tolerate high temperatures. At over 80°, they are at risk of heat stroke, seizure, and death. If you don't have air conditioning, be sure to give your rabbits frozen plastic water bottles to lie against during high heat. Replace them as they thaw. Ideally, rabbits should be housed

inside, away from extreme temperatures and predators. If they spend time in an outdoor hutch during the day, they should be brought inside at night.



## Litter Box Training Tips

Use the largest litter boxes that work for your space. Large plastic Sterilite storage boxes work well. A higher edged box helps avoid accidental pee-over when your rabbit is in the litter box – and purposeful tip-over!

Heavier litter makes it less likely for your bunny to tip the box over and is less likely to be kicked out. Clean-burn wood stove pellets are inexpensive and make excellent litter. Never use cedar chips as litter – the aromatic compounds in the litter are not healthy for rabbits – and also avoid clay-based or clumping cat litters. Care Fresh and recycled paper pellet litters are fine, but more expensive.

Place the litter box in the corner you notice your rabbit naturally prefers to pee in, and put two handfuls of Timothy hay at the opposite end of the box. Rabbits poop as they eat, so feeding them in their litter box will lead to better success.

Use reward-based training, and never punish your bunny for not using the litter box. Even litter-box trained rabbits may leave occasional pellets here and there – it's a way of marking their space. For more tips on litter-box training, visit any of the sites listed at the end of this document.

## Grooming Your Bunny

Bunnies are usually meticulous groomers. Pairs often groom each other as a sign of affection and also for cleanliness. Never put your rabbit in a sink full of water. If you need to clean off an area of your rabbit, do this with a damp cloth, and dry off any excess water with a soft towel.

Periodically check your bunny's nails and trim them as needed. If you do this yourself, be sure to have a styptic pencil or powder handy, in case you cut them too short, to stop the bleeding. Many vets also offer nail trim services. Also, check your bunny's ears for excess wax buildup (which can be cleaned with a damp cotton ball), and check your rabbit's scent glands (pouches to each side of the anus) to see if they need to be cleaned. Many rabbits are meticulous groomers and rarely need scent-gland cleaning, while others aren't as fastidious. If you notice a musky, unpleasant scent to your bunny, the scent glands probably need to be cleaned. To do this, support your bunny in your lap facing up (you probably need someone



to hold their legs so he/she can't kick) and gently wipe away any build-up in the scent gland pouch with a Q-tip dampened with mineral oil.

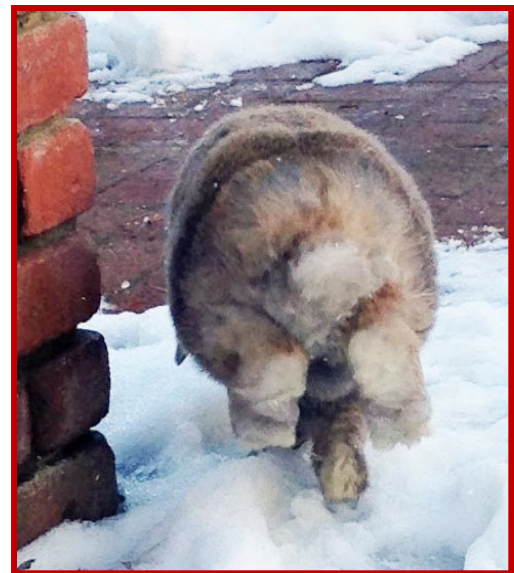
Twice a year, most bunnies go through a period of intense shedding. If you aren't combing your rabbits periodically, you definitely need to make time to comb them during this heavy shed to avoid excess hair accumulating in their stomachs during grooming. Rabbits are unable to cough up a hairball, so it must pass through. Hairballs are often the cause of GI issues and stasis (no motility in the gut), which can lead to death if not addressed quickly. If you notice hair tangled in with your bunny's droppings, give your rabbit a good combing, provide lots of moist greens and water, and watch to make sure he or she is continuing to eat, drink, and poop.

## Additional Bunny Resources

Here are a few more online rabbit resources and sources for some of the information above:

- The House Rabbit Society - [www.rabbit.org](http://www.rabbit.org)
- Zooh Corner Rabbit Rescue - [www.myrabbit.org](http://www.myrabbit.org)
- BinkieBunny - [www.binkybunny.org](http://www.binkybunny.org)
- Save A Bunny - [www.saveabunny.org](http://www.saveabunny.org)
- Red Barn Rabbit Rescue - [www.redbarnrabbitrescue.org](http://www.redbarnrabbitrescue.org)
- OneKind - [www.onekind.org/animal/rabbit/](http://www.onekind.org/animal/rabbit/)

If you have specific questions, you can also contact Friends of the Animal Shelter volunteer and rabbit lover Dana Feagin at [danafeaginart@gmail.com](mailto:danafeaginart@gmail.com) or call/text 541-292-7510.



### Local Rabbit Savvy Veterinarians

- Alder Creek Veterinary Hospital – 880 Golf View Dr., Suite 101, Medford (541) 776-3362
- Bear Creek Animal Hospital – 1955 Ashland Street, Ashland (541) 488-0120
- Best Friends Animal Hospital – 107 N Pacific Hwy, Talent (541) 535-8187
- Jacksonville Veterinary Hospital – 937 N. 5th St., Jacksonville (541) 899-1081
- Southern Oregon Veterinary Specialty Center/Emergency Veterinary Hospital – 3265 Biddle Road, Medford (541) 282-7711

If you find other local rabbit vets, please email us at [danafeaginart@gmail.com](mailto:danafeaginart@gmail.com) or [midgeraymond@gmail.com](mailto:midgeraymond@gmail.com) to update our information.