

Basic Care for Rabbits

Welcome to the world of the companion rabbit! Your rabbit is sure to delight and tease you, enchant and frustrate you over the next several years. How can you make the experience of living with a companion rabbit more enjoyable? Read on for answers to some of your questions.

Why is indoor housing preferred for rabbits?

Indoor housing is safer for your rabbits as it protects them from temperature extremes, predators, and insects. Plus, rabbits are social animals and crave attention. That need is often not met by living outdoors. Besides, rabbits are fun! The best way to appreciate their individual personalities is to have them indoors as part of the family.

While some people have companion rabbits that romp freely at all times, many maintain an enclosure of some type for their rabbits. The size of the enclosure depends on how much time your rabbit spends in it daily. At a minimum, your rabbit must be able to stretch out completely in its enclosure, even with a litter box, food dish and water bottle added. If your rabbit spends many hours a day in its enclosure, a larger one is better.

We've learned over the years that rabbits have a better, longer life if they live indoors. Rabbits that live in cages or hutches outside have a lifespan of roughly three years. Those that live indoors can live a lot longer, many for 10-12 years. A few have lived to be 14!

What is bunny proofing and why is it necessary?

It's a rabbit's nature to chew and dig. Bunny-proofing will protect your items from damage and protect your rabbit from common household dangers.



Some ways to bunny-proof your home include wrapping all electrical cords in protective plastic covers, using anti-chewing substances to protect woodwork and furniture, blocking access to potentially dangerous areas, and keeping houseplants out of reach. After bunny-proofing your home, let your rabbit out and let her show you the places you missed. Be sure to watch your rabbit carefully until you are certain the play area is safe. More bunny-proofing ideas can be found on the MCRS website.

What should I feed my rabbit? What about treats?

First, remember that rabbits are grazing herbivores. This means they need to have food available all the time, but that food should be an unlimited supply of grass hay such as timothy, orchard, oat, or brome. To ensure a variety of nutrients and make things more interesting for your rabbit, also serve a variety of dark leafy greens (up to 2 cups/5 lbs of body weight) on a daily basis.

Pellets can still be a part of a rabbit's diet, but should be restricted to about 1/8 cup per 5 lbs of body weight, as they are very calorie dense. A good rabbit pellet is high in fiber (at least 18%), low in protein (12% or less), and have a small amount of salt and fat (less than 3%). Rabbits don't need pellets with meat by-products. Rabbits also have a hard time digesting seeds, starches, and yogurts, so avoid foods with these mix-ins.

Most rabbits have an incredible sweet tooth. Although an occasional treat is fine, limit the amount to no more than a tablespoon of fresh fruit per day as excess sugars can cause problems with the rabbit digestive tract. Even healthier, keep sweet treats to a minimum and "treat" your rabbit with a special green like mint or watercress. Suggested fruits and vegetables can be found in the "Suggested Vegetables and Fruits for Rabbits" brochure, and on the MCRS website.

How do I train my rabbits to use a litter box?

As prey animals, rabbits want to keep their space clean so that predators won't smell them. If you give the rabbits too much space before they figure out what is "theirs," they may feel free to use any spot as a bathroom because they have so much room to be away from the smell.

To begin litter training, keep your rabbit contained in its enclosure or a small space (4'x 6' or so) for a few days. Observe which corner your rabbit chooses for its bathroom. Place a litter box in that corner (or several litter boxes in several corners!). We recommend a 4"-deep litter box. Place hard wood burning fuel pellets in the bottom of the box. Not many are needed, just enough to cover the bottom. Place hay on top of the wood pellets to help with training. The rabbit will want to get to the hay and will need to get into the litter box to do so.

Allow your rabbit more space only once she has proven that she understands how to use a litter box. If the rabbit misses the litter box, don't scold, simply clean up the mess with a paper towel and place the paper towel in the litter box, under the hay. With multiple rooms, or a large room (larger than 8'x10'), you may need to set out extra litter boxes to encourage good behavior.

The most common reasons for rabbits not using a litter box are:

- The rabbit is not spayed/neutered. Unaltered rabbits are much more likely to mark the edges of their territory with urine or feces.
- The rabbit is too young. Young rabbits, like young humans, simply do not have the attention span to be easily trained to use one spot as a bathroom.
- The rabbit has been given too much space too soon.

My rabbit is not sterilized. How important is that?

Regardless of gender, rabbits that are not spayed/neutered are more likely to be aggressive and territorial. Sterilization usually helps to mellow the more difficult or obnoxious behaviors without changing a rabbit's inherent personality. Also, female rabbits have a higher rate of uterine cancer than most mammals, and sterilizing them dramatically increases their lifespan.

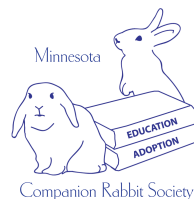
Because rabbits are considered an exotic pet, you will need to find a rabbit-savvy veterinarian to perform the surgery. A list of recommended vets can be found on the MCRS website. The cost of sterilizing a rabbit is about the same as sterilizing a cat—usually between \$100-\$300. There are organizations, such as the Minnesota Spay Neuter Assistance Program (MN SNAP) that help with low-cost spay/neuter services.

How often does my rabbit need to see a veterinarian?

Rabbits in the United States do not require vaccines but they should still see a veterinarian for annual check-ups. Although rabbits are generally healthy, they are known to have dental issues (their teeth continually grow their entire life) and gastro-intestinal issues, such as stasis. As prey animals, rabbits naturally hide any illnesses, so watching for behavioral, litter box, or dietary changes is the primary way to learn that your rabbit is not feeling well. Another thing to keep in mind: rabbits are considerably different from dogs and cats and need to see a rabbit-savvy veterinarian. Unfortunately, not all veterinarians qualify, so please take the time to find a veterinarian so you are ready for anything that may happen. A list of recommended vets can be found on the MCRS website.

I need to learn more. What are some good resources?

There are many excellent resources about companion rabbits, including *The House Rabbit Handbook*, by Marinell Harriman, and *Rabbits for Dummies*, by Audrey Pavia. The MCRS website contains a wealth of information, as well as links to other companion rabbit sites. If you prefer learning with other rabbit enthusiasts, attend a Bunny Basics class, Hoppy Hour, or sign up for Rabbit Agility. Check our website or call us to find out when and where the next event will be held.



info@mncompanionrabbit.org

mncompanionrabbit.org

651-768-9755

The Minnesota Companion Rabbit Society (MCRS) is a volunteer-based, non-profit organization whose primary goals are education and adoption. By educating the public and assisting humane organizations, MCRS works to reduce the number of unwanted rabbits and improve the lives of companion rabbits. Through adoption, MCRS helps rabbits from area shelters and animal control facilities find permanent homes.