

Choosing a Rabbit as a Pet

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Rabbits can make excellent house pets. They are generally clean and often can be housetrained to use a litter box. They are interesting, docile, interact well with people, and can become quite affectionate. But before acquiring a pet rabbit, there are some things you should consider.

Rabbits can be difficult to handle: Rabbits often resist being picked up, and if not handled correctly, they can become afraid and kick, bite, or scratch. They can also injure themselves trying to escape. This is one of the reasons rabbits may not make ideal pets for small children, who like to hug or cuddle their pet.

Rabbits can be destructive: Rabbits are natural chewers, and they do not know the difference between chewing on appropriate items or inappropriate ones such as electrical cords, furniture, and books. You will need to "rabbit proof" whatever areas in your house your rabbit is allowed access to. You will need to provide your rabbit with suitable chewing toys and constructive ways to burn off energy.

Unneutered rabbits will usually display territorial marking: Male and female rabbits who are house pets should be neutered. This will decrease the risk of territorial marking and [neutered rabbits](#) tend to be easier to litter train. Neutering also decreases aggression and the tendency to chew. Most rabbits are neutered between the ages of 3½ and 6 months. And of course, if neutered, you will not have to worry about them "breeding like rabbits."

Rabbits are herbivores: Most pet owners are familiar with dogs and cats, who eat food out of a can or bag. Rabbits will need hay and fresh pellets which may not be as readily available. They should also be fed fresh vegetables daily.



Rabbits have certain health concerns you should be aware of: House rabbits will need regular veterinary health exams, just like other pets. Overgrown teeth, foot problems, digestive problems, and respiratory diseases are the most common disease conditions, and are more common in rabbits who are not housed correctly or given the proper diet. Before acquiring a rabbit, identify a knowledgeable veterinarian in your area who may also be helpful in providing you a good source for healthy rabbits.

House rabbits are not a good "first pet" for children: In addition to being difficult to handle, rabbits may take more time to feel comfortable around people and bond with them. This can require patience, and may be difficult for small children to understand. Although rabbits play, they are less likely to interact with people and toys, unlike dogs and cats who enjoy games of fetch and pouncing on toys manipulated by people. A rabbit will need to be cared for by an adult who can provide the proper diet and sanitation. Rabbits can make excellent and interesting pets for older, quieter children.

House rabbits require exercise: They should not be kept isolated in a small cage, but be allowed to daily move about in an exercise run or rabbit-proofed room.

Rabbits require a time commitment: They will need daily attention to their diet, fresh water, and clean cages. To prevent obesity, most adult rabbits should be fed twice a day, and not have pellets always available. They need daily attention such as grooming, affection, and mental stimulation. They are social, and do not do well in isolation. Like dogs and cats, well-cared for rabbits can live into their teens.

Rabbits come in various sizes, breeds, and have individual personalities: As with other pets, rabbits develop their own personalities. Personality is greatly influenced by their early socialization with people, and much less so by their breed or size. If you are interested in showing rabbits, then it is important to research and determine which breed most appeals to you.

There are start-up and continual costs of keeping a rabbit: Potential rabbit owners may only consider the cost of the rabbit and cage, and not realize there will be regular annual costs as well as food, bedding, veterinary care, grooming, and flea prevention items, and an unending supply of chew toys. You will need to have:

- Cage
- "Nest" box where the rabbit can sleep
- Fenced outdoor play area, indoor exercise run, and/or items to rabbit-proof your house
- Litter box and litter
- Cleaning supplies such as litter scoop, disinfectant, small vacuum cleaner or broom
- Food dishes (ceramic) and water dishes/bottles
- Bedding (aspen chips, paper, straw)



- Small sturdy carrier (for traveling and trips to the veterinarian)
- Chew toys
- Grooming items
- Flea preventives, if needed
- Food items: fresh pellets, hay, fresh vegetables
- Books, magazines, reliable web sites, and other information resources

House rabbits should be acquired through a reputable source: Rabbits are usually acquired through breeders, pet shops, and rescue agencies or shelters.

Private or hobbyist breeders: If you are looking for a specific breed of rabbit, breeders will be the best source. You may be able to see the parents and/or siblings from previous litters. Rabbits from smaller breeders have usually been handled when they were young, which is critical for good socialization. And, breeders can be excellent sources of information, as well as providers of quality rabbits.

Rescue organizations and shelters: Shelter staff are usually willing to counsel new owners and take back rabbits that do not work out in the new home. An advantage of shelter rabbits is that they are usually older and have already been neutered, litter-trained, and have gone through the more difficult adolescent stage. They have also been observed by knowledgeable staff for signs of behavior or health problems. If acquiring a rabbit from a shelter or rescue organization, you may need to complete an application, and possibly an interview and home visit to assure you will provide a good home to a rabbit who lost a home.

Pet shops: Pet stores are convenient, may have several different breeds, and also carry many of the supplies you will need. The quality of care, knowledge of the staff, and information on the specific rabbit you would like to purchase can vary considerably from pet shop to pet shop. Be sure to get the answers to the questions listed below.

- Is the rabbit kept in a clean cage with fresh water and a good diet?
- Is the rabbit housed with many others? If so, it could be exposed to more diseases and be under more stress. Male and female rabbits should be housed separately.
- Is the rabbit eating, or does it appear to have difficulty, which could indicate dental or other oral problems?
- Is the rabbit easily startled when approached?
- Is the rabbit alert and of optimal weight, with clear eyes, clean ears, and a well-kept coat? Or does it show any signs of illness such as sneezing, nasal discharge, lumps or bumps, lethargy, soiled areas around the tail, or patchy hair loss? Never buy a rabbit showing signs of illness, and have your rabbit checked by a knowledgeable veterinarian within 1-2 days of purchase.
- Does the seller have references you can contact?
- If the seller is a breeder, can you see the parents of the rabbit you would like to purchase? If at a pet shop, can the staff give you the origin of the rabbit?
- Are the sellers/staff knowledgeable?

Properly cared-for rabbits make excellent, long-lived pets. By giving appropriate consideration to the issues before you acquire your rabbit, you will enjoy your rabbit for many years to come.