

Ask A Vet: The Basics of Bunny Care

Sunday, April 27, 2014

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

I had a pet rabbit that lived outside when I was a child. I would like to have a house rabbit now that I have a place of my own. Can you give me some basic information on keeping a rabbit in the house?

Dear Reader,

Congratulations on your own space. A rabbit can be a wonderful and exciting companion provided you give them appropriate care and interaction. Housing and bedding are a big part of keeping a rabbit happy. Giving your bunny a space that is her "nest" will allow her to feel safe and secure. A solid floor or slatted plastic floor for this area is best. Give her a litter box in the corner she has chosen as her bathroom. If you stock the "nest" with baby toys, a cotton towel or synthetic sheepskin rug for bedding, and a piece of bunny safe wood (untreated fresh pine) attached to the inside and your rabbit will enjoy spending time in her enclosure, even when she is given freedom. Your bunny needs 8 to 10 square feet of enclosure space and 24 square feet (or more) of exercise space that she has access to for 5 hours or more a day, ideally around dawn and dusk.

Feeding the proper diet is the best way to keep your rabbit healthy. A diet high in fiber and roughage helps keep her teeth from overgrowing, allows her GI tract to function properly and reduces incidences of obesity, hairballs, bladder stones, and endotoxemia. Rabbits should be fed a diet of quality grass hay, oat hay, fresh vegetables, good quality pellets and water. Apple tree twigs can also be offered as a source of roughage. A young rabbit may have alfalfa pellets, but for adult rabbits, timothy pellets are preferred. Hay should be available 24 hours a day, with fresh hay offered several times daily. A variety of dark leafy veggies and root vegetables should be offered. Always introduce new veggies in small amounts to prevent stomach upset. Daily rations for an adult rabbit should be unlimited hay, $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of pellets and a minimum of 2 cups vegetables for every 6 pounds of body weight. Fruit may be offered as a treat in small amounts – no more than 2 tablespoons per 6 pounds daily.

It is also important to spay or neuter your rabbit at 4 to 6 months of age. Sexually intact rabbits that are not used for breeding can become frustrated and develop destructive or aggressive behaviors. Altered rabbits are generally calmer and more loving, easier to litter box train and more reliably trained than intact rabbits. Altering also allows you to add another rabbit to the family safely. Intact rabbits generally do not play well with other rabbits of either sex due to aggressive behaviors triggered by hormones. A great place to find more information on housing, care, training and behaviors of rabbits is the House Rabbit Society at www.rabbit.org.

-Dr. Teresa Alessandri