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THE BASICS OF CARING FOR YOUR BUNNY

This excerpt from the free guide Caring for Your Bunny is dedicated to Jesus and to my precious angel bunnies.

DIET

Bunnies need fresh water and a daily combination of sun-dried timothy hay (not hay blocks), timothy pellets & fresh vegetables to maintain a healthy diet. Timothy hay must always be available in unlimited quantities. The fiber in the hay is essential for intestinal motility and helping push fur balls through the bunny's system. Timothy hay is the only hay with the proper nutritional and fiber content for adult house bunnies. Alfalfa hay & pellets have too much calcium which can lead to kidney stones in adult bunnies, however, young bunnies up to 6 months old should be given unlimited alfalfa hay & alfalfa pellets rather than timothy. Oxbow brand food is a high quality choice. Bunnies should be fed and water changed twice a day – dawn & dusk – when they are most active.

Pellets should be strictly limited after the age of 8 months when bunnies will tend to start rapidly gaining weight. Feed them 1/8-1/4 cup daily for every 4 pounds of bunny. Pellets should be made of timothy hay and have 22% or higher in fiber, 2.5% or lower in fat, 14% or less in protein, and 1% or less in calcium. Mineral and salt blocks are not recommended when a well-rounded diet is provided, and can actually cause harm. Bunnies drink a large amount of water, so providing a heavy ceramic water crock is better than a bottle.

Three different types of vegetables should be given to your bunny each day – at least 4 cups (when chopped). Most breeders do not feed rabbits vegetables because they believe it causes diarrhea, but this is a myth. All research studies show that fresh greens are essential in keeping intestinal contents hydrated & improving intestinal motility. Introduce vegetables at the age of about 2 months *very gradually*, one at a time, to prevent intestinal upset. Good vegetables to give include: carrot tops, brussels sprouts, cauliflower, broccoli, and dark green leaf lettuce. Avoid iceberg lettuce (no nutrition), spinach/kale/parsley/beet greens/basil (harmful oxalates), celery (strings can choke them & get stuck in molars), peas, corn (can't digest) and cabbage (causes gas). Wash but don't peel them.

A small amount of fruit can be given occasionally as a treat: 1-2 tablespoons per 5 pounds of body weight. Try apples, melon, papaya, pear & watermelon, but avoid bananas (sugary), grapes (sugary & purple skins can be toxic), most berries (harmful oxalates), nuts/seeds (unable to digest), pet treats, sugar, beans, grains/bread or fatty foods. Oxalates are cumulatively toxic, and sugary fruit, pet treats & grains contribute to a potentially fatal toxic overgrowth of bacteria in the intestine. Feces stuck to her behind is a sign of this. Remove all sugars and carbs and feed lots of hay & leafy greens.

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HOUSING

Bunnies need to live indoors. They are sensitive and intelligent creatures that need daily social interaction. Rabbits kept in hutches are bored and isolated. Indoor rabbits can live 7-10 years compared with 1 year for an outdoor rabbit. Because they can only cool themselves via their ears, heat over 85 degrees is very dangerous, as are temperatures below 40 degrees. Outdoor rabbits face the danger of heat, parasites (worms, fleas, ticks), fur/ear mites, maggot infestation, mosquitoes and predators (who find ingenious ways get into hutches). In addition, the dehydration resulting from frozen water in the winter can be fatal after 24 hours.

Bunnies are joyous and love to run and play. Keeping a bunny caged is cruel, however, you should only leave a bunny unsupervised when all harmful objects, such as electrical cords, are out of reach because they chew everything. Bunnies should be kept in the least humid area of the house (not basements – bunnies are prone to respiratory infections in humid areas) with temperatures from 60-70 degrees. Bunnies need a protected enclosed area where they feel safe, like their burrows would be in the wild.

The bunny's home should be a very spacious cage with a solid floor and a side door (not a top opening) which is left open inside a bunny-proofed room or inside a big pet-fenced-in area around the cage so she can exercise. Bunnies need at least 4 hours of exercise daily to stay healthy. Never purchase a cage with mesh wire flooring (where droppings fall through) which can cause sore and infected paws and respiratory problems for the bunny. Give the bunny bedding blankets made of fleece only (no strings to get caught in the throat), and cover the outside of the cage most exposed to light & heat, since their eyes are sensitive and excessive heat can be deadly. Consider buying a fun indoor bunny house instead of a cage & other supplies: www.rabbit.org/links/mail-order-resources.html.

Bunnies are easily litter trained. Simply place a plastic cat litter box in the corner of the bunny's room, place her in it every 10 minutes, and praise her/give her a treat when she uses it. Place the box where she naturally likes to go. Place her droppings and urine-soaked cloth in the box so she gets the idea. Clean urine from rugs with a pet cleaner to remove odors so she does not continue to use that spot. Place some hay in the box for her to chew because bunnies often eliminate while they eat. Place hard plastic carpet protector sheets underneath & around the litter box and food bowls for easy clean ups when accidents occur.

Organic or paper pulp (e.g., Care Fresh) are the best litters to use for bunnies. Never use cat litter because of its toxicity and propensity to clump inside the bunny's digestive/respiratory tract, and avoid cedar/pine shavings as they emit gases which cause liver damage. Scoop out the dirty litter every day and clean the box once a week with a 50-50 mixture of water and vinegar. The bunny will still leave droppings around the floor here and there to mark her territory and sometimes around her food bowls, but she should always urinate in her litter box. Bunnies must eat certain droppings (soft grape-like clusters called cecotropes made in the bunny's cecum) for nutritional reasons - do not prevent this or the bunny will suffer from a vitamin/nutrient deficiency and become ill. Bunnies usually eat these as they are coming out, but if you see them, don't mistake these for diarrhea.

BEHAVIOR

The foremost behavioral issue with bunnies is chewing. They must chew on hard objects to wear down their teeth, which continuously grow throughout their life – up to 4.5 inches per year. Luckily, chewing diminishes with age, and spaying /neutering will make the bunny less aggressive with biting & chewing. If spayed/neutered, aggressive chewing often indicates that the bunny is either bored or needs exercise. Run her around the house, play with her more, and give her things to play with and do. The best way to prevent furniture chewing is to provide plenty of things the bunny can chew, like a raw wooden pine block and an untreated straw or wicker basket filled with timothy hay. Prevent carpet digging/chewing by providing things she can dig into like a woven grass matting (Pier1). Be very careful not to let them ingest carpet fibers, which can quickly lead to a fatal intestinal blockage. Also block access to house plants as many of them are toxic. Animal Poison Control: 800-548-2423 or 900-680-0000.

Train them not to chew by spending time every day acting only on the behavior that needs to change. Clap your hands and firmly say no, or squirt her gently with water, then hand the bunny something she CAN chew and praise her when she chews it. Bunnies do not react well to any form of punishment (yelling, nose tapping). This trains them to fear you. Only use positive reinforcement when she does something well - praise her, pet her and give her a treat. No matter how well the bunny may be trained, always remove or cover electrical cords with spiral cable wrap, since they pose too great a threat. To prevent damage, cover exposed wooden furniture legs with fleece, cover baseboards with long untreated pine boards or plexiglas, and block areas where they may not go with pet or child fencing. In addition to chew toys, provide other fun toys to play with like tunnels, a big cardboard box with holes to run through & plastic baby keys.

MEDICAL ISSUES

HANDLING: In order to prevent serious spinal injuries, you must always support the bunny's hind legs when you pick her up. Never let her legs dangle or you risk the bunny kicking out and breaking her back. Keep her close to your body so she feels secure. If she is struggling to get down, bend down to the ground before you let her go so she does not fall and get hurt. Wear clothes that cover your arms and chest so you do not get scratched if she does struggle.

CHOOSING A VET: It is imperative that you take your bunny to an **Exotic Pet Veterinarian**. Standard vets often say they can treat rabbits, but do not have the specialized training needed. In Louisville, I recommend Dr. Joe Deck at 721-9383, Dr. Theresa Gregory at 241-4117, Dr. Missy Jewel at 384-0551, Dr. Pam Williams at 499-6535, and Dr. Sam Vaughn at 245-7863. Find rabbit vets listed by state on: www.rabbit.org/vets/vets.html. Get annual check-ups. Good vets know any of the oral penicillin antibiotics can be fatal.

SPAY / NEUTERING: Female bunnies MUST be spayed. If left unspayed, they have an 85% chance of contracting uterine cancer within 3 years, a leading cause of death. Spay her around 6 months of age. Male bunnies should be neutered around 5 months of age to prevent aggressive behavior (biting/ spraying urine). (Most bites are meant as nips to get your attention or tell you they don't like something, and are not meant to hurt you. A quick high shriek will let them know it hurts you. Remember, do not punish!)

NAIL TRIMMING: Use human toenail clippers (side to side, not top to bottom) followed by a nail file to trim & smooth your bunny's nails. Set the bunny on a table or on your lap, hold her body down slightly and grasp a paw. It helps do this with 2 people so one can hold and the other clip. Your vet can demonstrate this. Avoid the blood vessel that runs up from the base of the nail. It is more visible when looking from the side. If the bunny bleeds, apply Kwik Stop (pet store) or corn starch & apply pressure with a cotton ball, or run the nail over a bar of soap to seal the wound.

TEETH TRIMMING: Teeth may need to be trimmed by your vet if one set of incisors overgrows the other or if teeth have abnormal angles. The bottom incisors should sit just under the top incisors and rest against the 2 peg teeth found just behind the top incisors. They should wear down at a flat angle straight across. Molars in the back of the mouth, which are not visible, often overgrow and develop sharp angles that cut into the bunny's cheek. Signs of this can be drool and eating less. Get annual check-ups at the vet.

FUR BALLS: Bunnies shed every 3 months: one heavy shedding followed by one light shedding. Bunnies should be combed daily to prevent the ingestion of fur which leads to fur balls. Prevention also includes making sure she has plenty of water, timothy hay and big moist leafy greens to help with intestinal motility, and lots of exercise. Bunnies must pass fur balls. They cannot vomit them up like cats do, so monitoring the bunny for symptoms is vital. The first sign of a fur ball is that droppings will become fewer, smaller & sometimes strung together. Late-stage signs are a decrease in appetite, straining to push things through, and a lack of activity. If you start to see any of these symptoms, take her to the vet immediately because the fur ball can block food from entering the intestines and become life threatening very quickly. Regular check-ups should be made so the vet can palpitate the abdomen for signs of blockage and/or GI stasis.

GIVING AWAY: If for some reason you are unable to keep your bunny, never set them free in the wild; they will die of starvation, exposure or predation. Be very selective who you give them to as some people use them as food for snakes, to train dogs to kill, or eat them. Ask vets & pet stores for help. List them on www.petfinder.com. Look for rabbit rescue organizations on www.rabbit.org/links/sections/groups.html. Rescues closest to Louisville are HRS Indiana www.indianahrs.org & Exotic Animal Rescue at 317-809-2153 or www.earps.org.

Other excellent bunny care resources include: www.rabbit.org & www.bhrabbitrescue.org/Docs/RabbitCare.pdf

Food is donated to animal shelters each time you visit www.theanimalrescuesite.com.

*To receive a **free** full-length version of Caring for Your Bunny, or for questions about bunnies, send a request to Susan at susancook3@gmail.com or call 502-241-9025.*

For more information about your bunny, please contact Dr. Gregory at Crestwood Animal Hospital in Crestwood, Kentucky - 502-241-4117.