

Basic Rabbit Care!

How to care for your new fuzzy friend.



By: Jennifer Ellious, Owner of Wooly Needle Rabbitry

Rabbits are a good intermediate pet. They need more care than a goldfish, but less care than a dog or cat. They need food, water, grooming, toys, and attention. Their life span ranges from 6-12 years old, with the average life span being 9 years old. There are many different breeds of rabbits, ranging from the little 2 ½ lb Netherland Dwarf to the huge 20+ lb Giant breed rabbits. So the cute little baby bunny you just bought may grow to a very large size. Rabbits are different than dogs and cats, they are prey animals. To get an idea of how your rabbit thinks, do some research on horses. Both horses and rabbits are prey animals and they think very similar. Some rabbits can be very affectionate and can be trained. Some rabbit owners have “house rabbits”, rabbits that are trained to use a litter box and are allowed to run free in their house. Rabbits can be shown, and can also do agility! There are several different kinds of shows. They can be shown through 4-H, at your county fairs, and they also have national shows you can show in!

You're probably wondering what to do with your new rabbit(s), so I wrote this booklet to help new owners out. There are several different sections of this booklet to help you out, so please read on!

Basic information:

Scientific name: Oryctolagus cuniculus	Number of Breeds: At least 305 (as of 2017) in 70 countries.	Life Span: 6-12 years. Oldest rabbit was 18 years. Average life span is 9 years.
Size range: 2 1/2lbs-20+lbs. (depending on breed)	Uses of rabbits: Meat, show, pets, lab animals, fur, wool.	Rabbits have been domesticated since the 5th century.
Terms: Buck= male rabbit, Doe= female rabbit, Kit= young rabbit, usually from birth to weaning, Junior (Jr.)= rabbit under 6 months old, Senior (Sr.)= rabbit 6 months old or older.		

Choosing a rabbit-

It can be hard to choose a rabbit, there are so many to choose from. The best place to get a rabbit is from a responsible breeder. The breeder will know the rabbits lines and attitude very well and will be able to help you find the kind of attitude you want. Rescues often do not know the history of the rabbit. Think about the breeds you like, the care they need, and the attitude you want. Do you want a calm rabbit that will just chill in front of the TV with you? Or a hyper rabbit that will run and binky around the house? Do you want a large rabbit or a small one? Do you want one that requires a lot of grooming or very little? Do you want a certain color? Does can be good pets, but many tend to get aggressive once they hit puberty (6+ months). Bucks are usually calmer, but more likely to spray. I do not recommend getting your rabbit spayed or neutered. Anesthesia is hard on a rabbit, and a good amount do not survive surgery. Plus, it doesn't always calm your rabbit down, it may still spray or bite even after being sterilized. I would recommend only getting your rabbit fixed if you are going to try bonding it to another, or have pet rabbits of the opposite sex, so you don't have an accidental litter (rabbits can breed in seconds!).

Rabbits are not herd animals, so it is best to just get one or house each rabbit in a separate cage. Bonding rabbits can be done, but it is hard. Never leave two intact males together, they will fight, sometimes to the death. I would recommend getting both rabbits you want to bond sterilized. This way they don't have all of the hormones and should be calmer. The best pairings are two does or a doe and a buck (get at least one of these fixed! Does can have over 100 kits in a year, they can rebreed every two months, immediately after giving birth, even when they have 4 week old kits, and can get pregnant with two litters at the same time! Kits can start breeding at as early as 8 weeks, and will breed with any available male, no matter the relation. Bucks will constantly try breeding the doe, and she will attack him when she doesn't want to breed). If you cannot afford to get two rabbits fixed, but still want to have a bonded pair of rabbits, try two does. Give them a very big run, at least 4' x 2' for dwarf does. Give them places

to hide so they can get away from each other. To start bonding, first keep them in their own separate cages for at least a week, and keep the run in a neutral spot, you don't want any rabbit's scent in there. Then, put them in the run together and watch them closely. If they are attacking each other, separate them again. Give them at least 1-2 weeks before putting them together again. Be prepared to have to house them separate if they do not get along together. Another trick I have been told but never tried, put them in a carrier together and take them for a car ride. Something about the stress of the trip helps does to bond. Make sure you have someone ready to grab them if they still try to attack each other.

Housing-

Rabbits require different size housing depending on their size.

They can range from 2 ½ lb to over 20lb. Here are minimum cage sizes for adult rabbits (rabbits over 6 months old).

Adapted from the American Rabbit Breeders Association's cage size article.

Under 4lbs = 1.5 sq. ft, 14 in high.

4 lb - 8lb = 3 sq ft, 14 in high.

8lb - 11lb = 4 sq ft, 14 in high.

Over 11lb = 5 sq ft, 14 in high.

These dimensions are for adult rabbits, if you are buying a Jr. (under 6 months old) rabbit do some research on their adult weight. Running breeds (Tan, English Spot, Checkered Giant, Belgian Hare, Rhinelander, ect...) will need larger cages or at least weekly time to run.

We use mixture of 1' x 2', 16" x 24", 18" x 24" and 2' x 2' (for does with litters) all wire cages for our dwarf breeds, 2' x 2' and 2' x 3' all wire cages for our Californians and Angoras, and 2' x 3' and 2' x 4' all wire cages for nursing Californian and Angora does.

Many pet owners recommend free roaming your rabbit. I personally don't recommend doing it, as rabbits are very destructive and will eat anything. If you decide to free roam your rabbit, make sure to cover all carpeting, walls, and anything else it can get to. If you can't free roam your rabbit, don't feel bad. Just keep them in a good cage and give them some supervised free roam time.

Rabbits can be kept in a variety of cages, including all wire, hutches, and plastic bottomed cages. I will list each kind, and the pros and cons of each one below.



All Wire Cages (Note: The cage in the photo was painted yellow using Rustoleum paint. Rustoleum is safe for animal cages and helps to keep the cages from rusting.)

Pros: Cage needs very little maintenance. Can be stacked for multiple rabbits. Rabbits are not sitting in bedding, so the rabbits stay cleaner. Wool breeds need to have wire floor cages.

Cons: If cages are kept outdoors, must be kept in a secure location, and must have a shelter over the cage. If cages in kept indoors, must have

urine guards and dropping pans. If cages are stacked, must have trays between each cage. Rex and Mini Rex may have issues with the wire (You can buy plastic floor mats, that go over the wire to keep their feet off of the wire). Cages can be made at home, but it can be pricey to get the wire.



Hutches (solid wood floors or wire floors)

Pros: Droppings fall through, requiring less maintenance (Wire floors). Homemade ones, and some store bought ones are usually sturdy enough to stay outside. Already have a roof and a nest box area for the rabbit to get shelter. Can be made at home.

Cons: Wood absorbs urine, and after a while the hutch will smell like ammonia. Rabbits will also chew on the wood. If the hutch has a run underneath, wire will have to be added to the bottom of the run, otherwise the rabbit could dig out. Most store bought ones are not far enough off of the ground, most have very poor locks, and are usually not very sturdy. Store bought ones are also very expensive.



Plastic Bottomed Cages (This cage has a guinea pig in it, but a rabbit can also be housed in this)

Pros: Can be kept in the house. Do not need urine guards. Usually sturdy.
Cons: Must have bedding or a litter box. Requires daily or every other day cleaning. Works best with a litter box. Rabbits may chew on the plastic. Cage cannot be kept outside. Cages can be expensive, and cannot be made at home.

You can easily litter train a rabbit, however you need to have safe litter for the rabbit. A litter box is usually a small corner tray or a cat litter box, but can be anything in between. It needs to be something that will not absorb urine, it needs to be sturdy so it can't easily be knocked over, and it needs to be easy to clean. The best litter is wood shavings (no cedar), pelleted horse bedding, and paper bedding. Never use cat litter! If the rabbit eats the cat litter it could expand in the rabbits stomach/intestines and kill the rabbit. If you have a wool breed, you may need to buy a litter pan cover, so that the bedding will not stick to them. Watch your rabbit in its cage.

Rabbits will usually pick one corner as their bathroom. Put the pan in this corner. Your rabbit should start to use the pan, you may need to put shavings in the whole cage until the rabbit learns how to use the pan.

Rabbits can be kept outdoors, but selecting the location of the hutch or cage is very important. The location must be out of direct sunlight, out of the wind, and must get some shade. The hutch needs to be at least two feet (2') off of the ground. Rabbits are very hardy, they can handle below freezing temperatures as long as they are out of the wind. Dwarf breeds and kits under 2lbs may need a nest box. You can buy or make one. Wooden nest boxes are best for the winter. Put a few inches of wood shavings (No cedar or sawdust) on the bottom of the box. Then add straw and/or hay into the box, usually 1-2 big handfuls will do. The rabbit will go into the box to stay warm. Clean the box weekly, or sooner if your rabbit uses the box as a litter box. Hot weather is more dangerous to rabbits than cold weather, rabbits can overheat very easily. During the warmer months make sure your rabbit has fresh water and shade. If you have an Angora, you can pluck or clip its coat for the summer. Do not pluck or clip a Lionhead. It will take very long for their coat to grow back, and their wool usually doesn't cause them to overheat. To help keep your rabbits cool, you can freeze a plastic water bottle and stick it in the cage, mist them with cool water, place a fan towards their cage (but not blowing directly on them), ect. Never put a tarp over the hutch/cage in hot weather.

Transitioning Feed-

Most breeders include a small amount of transition feed with the rabbit. You have to transition a young (under 12 week old) rabbit off of its old feed to new feed gradually. Otherwise they can get bloat or diarrhea! To transition feed, you have to first figure out the new brand of feed you are going to feed. Then, you feed the rabbits normal serving and mix in a little bit of the new feed. Each day mix in a bit more of the new feed until your rabbit is eating only the new feed. You should also give your rabbit a lot of hay and you can give your rabbit small amounts of fruits and veggies (Never give a

rabbit under 3 months old fruits and veggies, they can get bloat and die from it). Many of the treats sold in pet stores are very unhealthy for rabbits. It is best not to feed them to your rabbits.

Choosing Feed:

Rabbits cannot be fed a diet of only fruit and veggies, too much will kill them. Rabbits need a pelleted feed. It must have at least 16%- 18% protein (16% is fine for non breeding pet rabbits). Fat must be between 1%-3% (You can supplement this with BOSS). Fiber should be at least 17%, higher is better. Check bags of feed before you buy them. Some of the best brands include Kent, ROWE, Pen Pals, and Heinhold. Purina Show and Manna Pro are also good, but be careful and check the feed, as there have been several issues with the feed before that have caused breeders to lose rabbits. Never feed corn, it has been known to cause stomach issues, including diarrhea, and will cause your rabbits to get fat. If your rabbits are thin you can feed supplements. Black oil sunflower seeds (BOSS) is a commonly used supplement, put 1 tbsp a day on top of their feed. Oats (do not feed quick oats) are very good for pregnant/nursing does. A commonly used supplement mix is 1 part BOSS, 1 part Calf Manna (made for calves, it has extra protein), and 2 parts oats. Mix up a big batch and give your rabbits 1 tbsp a day on top of their pellets.

Hay: Rabbits don't need extra hay, their pellets already have enough in them, but they like to play with it and snack on it. Wool breeds can get wool block (they groom themselves like a cat, and ingest the wool. Sometimes it will get stuck in their stomach/intestine), so it is a good idea to feed them loose hay. They need grass or timothy hay, alfalfa is too rich for them, and can cause health problems later on.

Water-

Rabbits need to always have access to clean, fresh drinking water (or at least ice in the winter). We water our rabbits 2-3 times in the winter, and

make sure they always have water in the summer. There are a few different methods for watering. These are the most common: You can use a water bowl or a water bottle. Bowls need to be refilled more often, as rabbits can and will tip them over, plus some rabbits seem to think bowls make a nice litter box. Bowls are best for the winter as if they freeze, they won't break. There are a few different methods for winter watering with bowls: Get 2 bowls and leave one inside, then fill the other one and take it out to the rabbit. Once the one with water is frozen, bring it inside and let it defrost. Then take the other one out to the rabbit. The plastic coop cups you buy from rabbitry supply stores are great for winter. You can easily pop the ice out. You can also carry a bucket of warm water and dip the bowls into the water and then dump the ice out into an empty bucket. Bowls are also very easy to clean and disinfect. Ball bearing water bottles are water bottles with a little marble in the nozzle. These hold more water than a bowl, but if they freeze, they will break. The nozzle also freezes faster than the rest of the bottle. They are good for the warm months. They can be harder to clean, you will need a bottle brush.

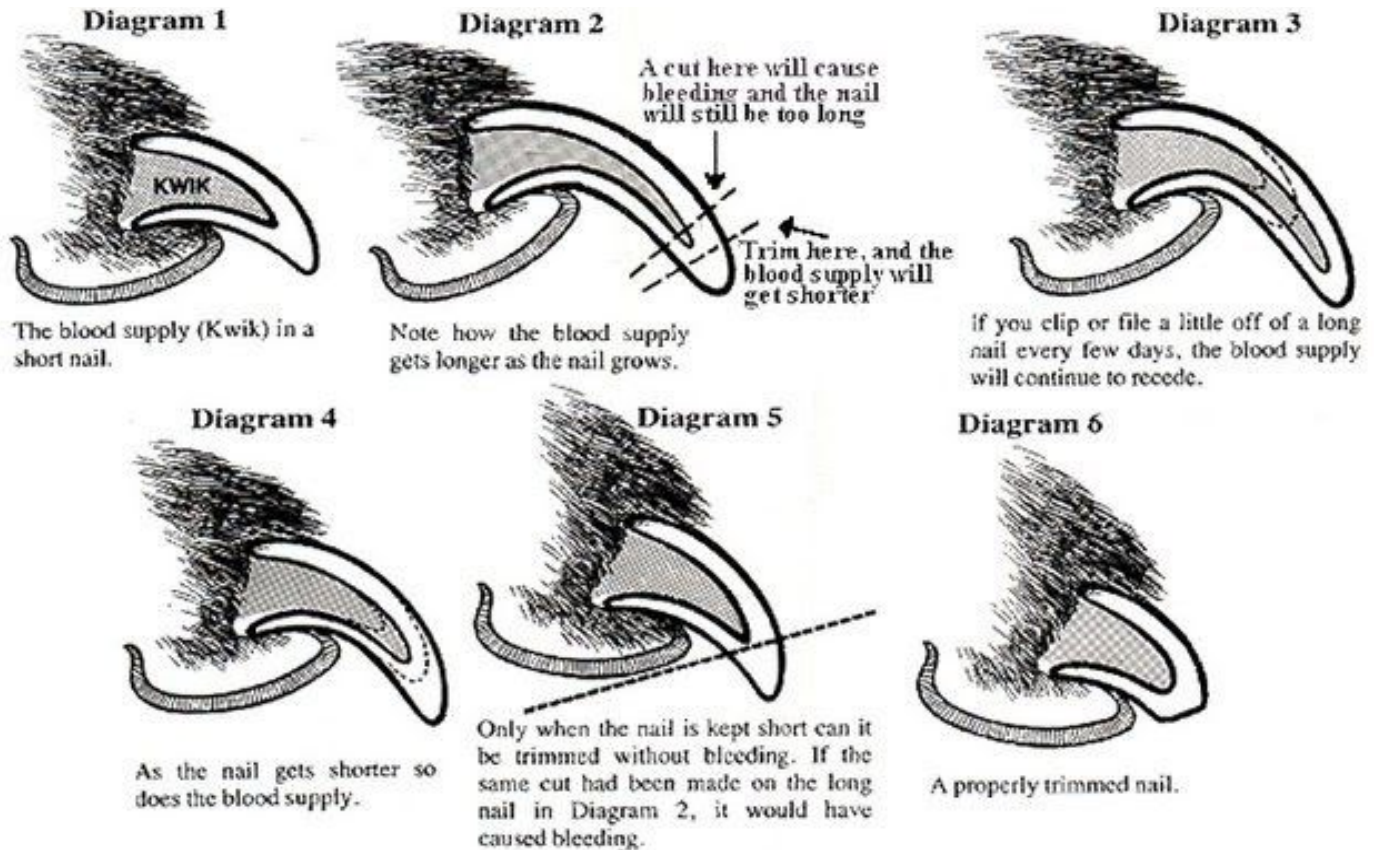
Care-

Most rabbits don't need much brushing, but all rabbits need brushing when they are molting (about every 3-4 months). Try not to brush too often, as brushing too often can damage the coat. If you have normal furred breed (Harlequin, Satin, Holland Lop, ect) use a soft bristle brush. You can also wet your hands with water and slide them over the coat. If you have a rex furred rabbit (Rex, Mini Rex, Velveteen Lop, mixes) do not brush them. Use a wet hand. For a wool breed, there are two different kinds of coats, molting and non molting. Non molting coats just keep growing and must be clipped every few months. Molting coats shed and are replaced with a new coat about every 3-4 months. Most English and Giant Angoras are non molting lines. Not all rabbits of these breeds are non molting however, ask your breeder if they are. Angora coats require grooming with a blower. A dog grooming blower or a shop-vac on reverse works well as blower. Coats must be clipped (or plucked, with a molting line) every few months.

You can use scissors or clippers. Do not clip the ears, these tassels do not grow back well. Non molters in full coat and show animals require at least weekly grooming with the blower. Do not use brushes or combs, they will ruin the coat. Pets can be brushed out, but will tangle more if brushed. Molting lines will shed on their own about every 3-4 months. Breeds include French Angoras, Satin Angoras, and the Dwarf wool breeds. These breeds usually can be plucked (deshed) or clipped. Plucking is just pulling the dead wool from the coat. It does not hurt the rabbit when done properly. To pluck your rabbit, gently, but firmly grab the tips of the coat and gently pull. If your rabbit is molting, the wool will come right out. Do this to the entire coat. Groom these rabbits weekly using a blower. For grooming the rest of the wool breeds (Lionheads, American Fuzzy Lop, and Jersey Woolly), each is a bit different. Use a wide tooth dog comb and dog flea comb on non showing animals. For showing animals, use a blower.

You may need to clip a mat out of your rabbit's coat. The best way to do that is to stick a comb between the rabbits skin and the mat. This will require two people. Then take a small pair of scissors, and while someone else is holding the rabbit, cut the mat out of the coat, keeping the comb between the scissors and the rabbit's skin. Don't bathe your rabbit unless it has stuff caked to it's rear, and even then only get its bottom wet. Baths are very stressful for rabbits. If your rabbit has a stain on it, take some baking soda and mix it with water until it has the consistency of a paste. Put it on the stains and let it dry. Then comb it out. Rabbits do need their nails trimmed. You can use normal human nail trimmers, but cat nail trimmers work best, as they can get around the nail. First, check the color of your rabbit's nails. If they are light pink, you should be able to see a darker section on the nail. That is the kwik. Be very careful to not hit that, or the nail will bleed and it will hurt your rabbit. If your rabbit has dark colored nails and you cannot see the kwik, just trim the tips off. Nail trimming usually requires two people. One person needs to hold the rabbit on its back. The other person will be trimming the nails. If your rabbit has very

fluffy feet, you can put cheese cloth or an ofla over the nails to push the fur back so the nails are visible.



Handling-

Rabbits have a scruff, just like a cat. The scruff is loose skin on top of the rabbits shoulder blades. **Never** carry a rabbit by its scruff alone and never carry a rabbit by its ears. Rabbits are very fragile, and can break their own backs if carried by the scruff. Always support your rabbits weight with your other arm. The best way to get a rabbit out of its cage is called scooping. Put your hands under the rabbit and lift it toward you. If your rabbit is being nasty and trying to bite or otherwise being difficult, you can grab its scruff and slide your hand under it and lift it that way. Always make sure you are supporting the rabbit's weight with your other arm, not the scruff. Rabbits need to be flipped over to trim nails and groom the belly wool (on wool

breeds). You may have heard of flipping a rabbit being a bad thing that “trances” them. This is a myth. Flipping a rabbit is fine if done properly. Start by having the rabbit face you. If you are right handed, place your right hand on the rabbits ears and put your hand over the shoulders. Run your left hand over your rabbits back until you hit the hindquarter. Scoop the shoulders and using your right hand, flip the rabbit. Once your rabbit is calmly lying on its back, you can start trimming nails or grooming. Practice often to get your rabbit used to being held.

Toys-

Rabbits like to play too! Plastic cat balls with bell in it, a cardboard box, childrens wooden alphabet blocks, plastic practice baseballs, cardboard, old phone books, and branches (Birch and apple are some of the best) all make good toys. You can use all kinds of things for toys, just make sure there are no sharp edges or things that you rabbit can get cut on. Make sure anything you give them is NOT small enough to swallow. If they start eating the toy, make sure to take it away. Also, if using wood, make sure the wood is safe for rabbits, some types of wood are toxic to them.

Illnesses-

If rabbits get sick, they can die very quickly. If your rabbit starts acting strange (ex. not eating or drinking, lethargic, difficulty breathing) call your veterinarian. If you cannot find a veterinarian that will take a rabbit, contact an experienced rabbit breeder, they may be able to help you.

Breeding-

If you are considering breeding your rabbits, please research before you begin breeding. If your rabbit was bought as a pet from a breeder, please do not use it for breeding. Rabbit sold as pets from breeders are usually sold as pets to keep them out of the breeding population. They might have some genetic faults that will be passed on to kits. Breeding is not for the

faint of heart. Please research and think long and hard before you start breeding.

Rabbit Shows and other fun things to do-

There are several other things you can do with your rabbit including: showing, rabbit hopping, and trick training. Rabbit shows are a lot of fun! You can do them through 4-H. There are also huge national shows you can show at. Go to www.arba.net to learn more about the national shows. Rabbit hopping is a newer event. It is basically agility for rabbits! You can show in rabbit hopping through 4-H, certain fairs do have it. You can also teach your rabbit tricks.

I hope this booklet helped you! If you have any questions, please contact me at woolyneedlerabbitry@gmail.com, or go to www.facebook.com/WoolyNeedleRabbitry/. If you have a Facebook account, there are many rabbit breeder/owner groups you can join to get any help you may need.