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Rabbit Care

INTRODUCTION

Rabbits make friendly, quiet, and gentle house pets. They come in a variety of breeds and colors with an average life span of 7-10 years.

HOUSING

Cage – A minimum of 2x3 feet of floor space is recommended for small breed rabbits and 3x4 feet for large breed rabbits. A solid cage bottom is recommended. If the cage has a wire bottom, at least half of it should be covered with a solid surface to help prevent pressure sores from forming on the feet. Keep the cage in a cool, well ventilated area.

Litter box – Rabbits can be litter trained. Pick a litter box with sides low enough so that your rabbit can get in and out easily. Pelleted litter, pulp paper products (Yesterday's news or Carefresh), or shredded paper can be used in these boxes. Do not use cat litter or wood shavings such as pine or cedar as these can cause eye, skin, and respiratory disease. When training, confine your rabbit to a small area, either in a cage or a blocked-off section of a room. Put some dropping into the litter box to help encourage defecation in that area.

Hide areas – Rabbits need an area to feel safe and secure. Some rabbits are happy with a box full of hay while others need an enclosed space to hide in.

Temperature – Rabbits prefer cooler temperatures and their optimal temperature range is between 60-70°F. If air conditioning is not available, freeze a plastic bottle filled with water and leave it in the cage to help them cool off.

Cagemates – Rabbits are often housed separately. If you wish to pair them with another rabbit, they must be carefully paired off. Un-bonded rabbits may fight and injure each other.

Cleaning – Waste and dirty/wet bedding should be removed daily and the enclosure should be cleaned weekly. Hot soapy water or dilute bleach (1:30 mixture of bleach:water solution) can be used. Make sure everything is thoroughly rinsed before putting your rabbit back in its environment.

DIET

Hay – Grass hay is important and should always be available to your rabbits. Timothy hay is most commonly used, but if your rabbit is picky, you can offer orchard grass, oat hay, or meadow grass. Alfalfa hay should NOT be offered to rabbits over 6 months of age.

Pellets – Young rabbits can have free choice alfalfa pellets until 8 months of age. After 8 months, switch to a timothy hay based pellet and offer daily in small amounts. Overfeeding can lead to obesity, heart disease, liver disease, kidney disease, and diarrhea.

Daily Pellet Feeding Guideline

2-4 lbs – 1/8-1/4 cup

5-7lbs – 1/4-1/2 cup

8-10lb – 1/2-3/4 cup

10-15lb – 3/4-1 cup

Fresh Greens – Offer 1-3 cups of greens daily. Examples include: arugula, escarole, watercress, clover, radicchio, endive, and herbs (dill, mint, cilantro, etc). Dark green vegetables (dandelion greens, mustard greens, kale,

broccoli, collard greens, and parsley) should be given in moderation as they can predispose to the development of bladder stones. Lettuces are not recommended as they have very poor nutritional value. Cruciferous vegetables (broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, and Brussels sprouts) should be fed in very small amounts or even avoided as they can cause gas.

Fruit – Fruit should be given occasionally at 1 tablespoon per 5lb body weight. Examples include apples, blackberries, blueberries, carrots, cherries, bell peppers, kiwi, mango, melon, papaya, peach, pear, and raspberries. Dried fruit should be used in very small amounts.

Water – Rabbits should have access to fresh water at all times. They can be trained to drink from a bottle or provide water in a spill-proof bowl. Check water bottles often as they can malfunction and stop working.

Cleaning – Water bottles and dishes should be cleaned daily or every other day with hot soapy water, a dilute bleach solution (1:30 bleach to water ratio), or in a dishwasher.

HANDLING

Never pick your rabbit up by their ears. The most common way is to scoop under their chest and place your other hand under the back legs. Remember to always support the hindquarters when you pick up your rabbit to prevent serious spinal injuries. If children are handling the rabbit, have them sit on the floor and hold it in their laps. Only allow them to handle the pet with adult supervision.

SOCIALIZATION AND PLAY

Play – Rabbits should be allowed play time outside of their cages daily. This will give them a chance to interact with family members. Exercise is also important for rabbits to help avoid a variety of problems from obesity, poor bone density and muscle tone to behavioral issues. A dog pen can be used to allow your rabbit room to play. The pen can even be moved outside to allow your rabbit access to grassy areas.

Chew – Items such as cardboard, unvarnished baskets, wooden bird toys, paper towel rolls, and safe wood can be given to rabbits to encourage chewing.

Toys – Rabbits like things that make noise such as keys on a plastic unbreakable key holder, empty plastic or metal cans, hard plastic baby toys and jar lids. You can hide treats in toys to make a toy more fun and to encourage foraging behavior. They also like air-filled balls that they can push around.

Safety – Do not leave your rabbit outside unsupervised as there are predators in the outdoors. If you are planning to allow your rabbit to roam the house, you must bunny proof it by blocking escape routes, covering furniture, keeping them away from electrical cords, and removing access to toxic material.

HEALTH CARE

We recommend a complete physical exam and fecal by an exotic animal veterinarian for all newly acquired pet rabbits. Thereafter, we recommend exams every 6 months and yearly fecal exams.

Spaying – We recommend spaying all female rabbits as 80% of unspayed rabbits will develop some form of cancer related to their reproductive tracts. The risk is reduced considerably with spaying, especially when done early (between 4-6 months of age)

Neutering – We recommend neutering of male rabbits to decrease aggression and territorial behaviors such as urine spraying.

Hairball Prevention – Rabbits should be brushed often, especially during times of heavy shedding, to help reduce fur ingestion. A hairball preventative supplement (ie Laxatone) may be used if this is a recurring problem.

Nail trim – Long nails are prone to getting caught and breaking. Rabbits should have their nails trimmed routinely.

Cecotropes – These soft mucus-covered nighttime feces are consumed by your rabbit and are an important source of vitamins and nutrition. Rabbits that are arthritic or overweight often cannot reach their rear ends to eat cecotropes and can result in matting/fecal pasting on their fur.

COMMON MEDICAL PROBLEMS

GI Stasis – A decreased appetite or anorexia in combination with reduced or no feces is an emergency for your rabbit. There are many causes of GI stasis and if it is not corrected in a timely fashion, it can lead to death. Please contact your veterinarian as soon as you notice signs.

Dental Disease – Rabbits have constantly growing teeth. In some rabbits, their cheek teeth do not meet up properly and can result in abnormal growth of the teeth that can lead to ulcers, infection, abscess, and GI stasis. Signs include drooling, dropping food, being picky, and weight loss. Dental disease is very common and often requires lifelong teeth trims.

Heat Stress – Rabbits are very sensitive to temperatures over 85°F and may overheat. Signs include increased respiratory rate or effort, lethargy, drooling, and nasal discharge. If you suspect heat stress, please contact your veterinarian immediately.