Domestic Rabbit

Oryctolagus cuniculus
Fact Sheet

**Status:** Common

**Distribution:** They can be found on every continent except Asia and Antarctica.

**Habitat:** Humans usually provide hutches for these animals, but their wild counterparts live near sea level in areas with dry sandy soil or areas with grass or tree cover.

**Diet:** Zoo: 4 oz of hay and 2 cups of fruit and vegetables Wild: fungi, plants, roots, tree bark, fruit, snails and worms

**Length:** Varies dramatically Some breeds can reach up to 30 inches!

**Weight:** 2 to 20 pounds, in the wild 3-5 pounds is typical

**Reproduction:** Female domestic rabbits do not go through a periodic reproductive cycle; rather the release of their eggs is triggered by the mating process. Males fight to breed with females. Females reach sexual maturity at 6 months of age and can breed until around 6 years of age. After 28 to 34 days, the female gives birth to 4 to 8 young. The young are altricial, (not fully developed) blind and having very little fur. To help them keep warm, the female builds a large nest of fur, taken from her underside. She feeds them twice a day for up to 6 weeks. Their eyes open after 12 to 14 days. Fur has also grown in during this time.

**Longevity:** Up to twelve years, but 6 to 8 years is typical

**General Description:** There is a tremendous variety of colors shapes and sizes for this species of rabbit. Their wild counterparts have a gray coat with black, brown or red flecked throughout. Their underparts are lighter grey and the underside of their tail is white.

**Behavior:** In the wild, rabbits live in groups of 6 to 10 adult individuals in large winding burrow systems called warrens. They come out to forage in the evening and return to their burrows in the morning. There may be a dominant male and female pair over the group. All of the rabbits help defend their warren and territory from intruders, whether they are intruders of a different species or other rabbits.

**Did you know?** Rabbits and hares are not the same species. For one thing, hares do not dig burrows. Hares have longer gestation periods, giving birth to young that have their eyes open and can run within minutes. Hares also tend to be more solitary after reaching adulthood.

**Where can you find them?** In pet stores, zoos, and in the wild
Care and Feeding of the Domestic Rabbit

General Information

The average lifespan of the domestic rabbit is 6-8 years, but they can live as long as 15 years. Their normal body temperature is 101.5-104.0 °F. The female rabbit is called a doe and reaches sexual maturity as early as 3-4 months old in the mini and medium breeds, as late as 6-9 months old in the giant breeds. The male rabbit is called a buck and reaches sexual maturity at 5-8 months old. The young are called kits. The larger breeds tend to be quieter than the smaller breeds.

The House Rabbit Society is a national volunteer organization that offers information and newsletters to rabbit owners and fosters rabbits for adoption. In the USA, call (510) 521-4631 for more information.

Housing

Plans for rabbit hutches are available through libraries and feed stores. Assembled wire cages are also commercially available. The wire floor mesh should be no larger than 1cm x 2.5cm. Many substrates can be used under the floor to absorb urine and odors. Shredded paper is inexpensive and readily available but doesn't absorb odor well and needs to be changed frequently. Many rabbits will also chew shredded paper, which could cause an intestinal obstruction. Compressed paper pulp is now available but rather expensive. Clay litter (cat litter) is excellent for absorption but can be quite messy and dusty and will scratch hardwood floors. Organic litters such as corn cobs, straw, or rice hulls are safe but need to be changed often to prevent mold (which is toxic if ingested). Most popular are pine and cedar shavings, which are best as far as absorbency, odor control, and ease of cleaning. Recent reports suggest, however, that the fumes from cedar shavings contain phenols which may be toxic if inhaled. If you choose to use pine shavings, make sure the cage and surrounding area are well ventilated.

Rabbits are by nature cold weather animals and can be housed either indoors or outdoors. Acclimated rabbits can tolerate temperatures as low as 32 °F or lower, if there is proper shelter from wind and weather. Rabbits cannot, however, tolerate temperatures above 85 °F or high humidity. Rabbits housed outdoors should always be protected from direct sunlight, because they can easily die of heat prostration.
Nutrition

A consistent diet providing the proper level of protein (16%) and fiber (18%) is essential. Rabbits do not tolerate frequent or sudden changes in diet. Whatever you choose to feed, do so daily. Do not intermittently offer "treats."

Good quality hay should be available to your rabbit at all times. Non-legume hays such as oat hay are better than alfalfa hay due to their lower protein and calcium content. (Sam's Downtown Feed in San Jose, CA, USA, (408) 287-9090, usually has bags of oat hay.) Commercial rabbit pellets should be offered daily, but only in limited quantities in rabbits over 8 months old. They should be fresh (no more than two months old when fed) and at least 18% fiber. These are the daily amounts to give non-breeding rabbits, by body weight:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Body Weight Range</th>
<th>Hay Amount</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2-4 lbs</td>
<td>1/8 cup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-7 lbs</td>
<td>1/4 cup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-10 lbs</td>
<td>1/2 cup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15 lbs</td>
<td>3/4 cup</td>
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</tbody>
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Fresh greens are also good to offer but only if you do it every day and only in rabbits over 4 months old. Start very gradually with small amounts, adding a new item every 5-7 days. The total amount should not exceed 1 heaping cup per 5 pounds body weight. Try to feed at least 3 different types of greens daily, including grass from browsing. Following are suggested greens: Carrot tops, beet tops, dandelion greens and flowers, kale, collard greens, escarole, romaine lettuce, parsley, clover, cabbage, broccoli, carrot, green peppers, pea pods, brussels sprouts, basil, peppermint leaves, raspberry leaves, radicchio, bok choy, and spinach. Browsing on lawn grass is good both for the exercise, which aids digestion, and the fiber your rabbit will get. Be sure there are no fertilizers or pesticides, though.

Be very aware of the sugar content of foods. Rabbits crave sugar, including the sugar in fruits. Rabbits do not tolerate sugars or too much carbohydrate (complex sugars) well, leading to an overgrowth of the wrong type of bacteria in the gut. This is a very common and severe problem in rabbits, particularly young rabbits. Fruits can be given daily but no more than 1 tablespoon per 5 pounds of body weight.

Daily vitamins are not necessary if your rabbit is on a good diet, and may even be harmful.

Behavior

Rabbits like and need to chew. As a result, not all rabbits make good house pets. Some rabbits will chew on carpets, furniture, and walls. Keep electrical cords out of their reach. You can encourage them to chew on appropriate toys or offer branches of fruit trees. A constant supply of hay will also help satisfy their urge to chew.

Rabbits can be litterbox trained. Start by placing the wire-bottomed cage over the litter box, and then gradually remove the bottom of the cage so the litter can be reached directly.

Reproduction
I recommend that female rabbits be spayed at 6-8 months of age, because there is a high incidence of uterine cancer and an increased risk of mammary cancer in intact females. Male rabbits should be neutered at 6-8 months of age to decrease the tendency for aggressive behavior and territorial marking. Spayed and neutered rabbits are both healthier and more lovable pets.

If you are planning on breeding your rabbit, I recommend that does are bred when they are 1 year old and full size. Does are induced ovulators (they ovulate when bred), which makes breeding very efficient. The gestation period (length of pregnancy) is 28-32 days. Mini breeds average 4 kits in a litter, giant breeds up to 10 in a litter. While pregnant or lactating, does require a slightly higher protein level (18%) and slightly less fiber (14%), so they can have pellets free fed (but increase the amount gradually).

First time mothers are frequently very nervous. If frightened, these does may cannibalize their litters. These does should not be used again for breeding as this nervous trait may be inherited. Does do not naturally spend a lot of time with the kits. This is an adaptation from the wild, where it is important that the doe does not give away the location of the litter to predators. Does only nurse once a day and this may be the only time spent with the babies. This should be remembered when feeding orphaned rabbits. They too should be fed just once a day. The kits' eyes open at about 2 weeks of age. They can be fully weaned by 6-8 weeks of age by offering pellets and hay at 5 weeks.

From: http://www.sander.cupertino.ca.us/care.html