



Helpful Rabbit Handouts for Foster Caregivers



Understanding rabbit behaviour

YOUR RABBIT'S BODY LANGUAGE CAN HELP YOU TO UNDERSTAND HOW THEY ARE FEELING

A happy rabbit

These rabbits are relaxed and happy.

Rabbits 1-3 show ears close together, facing slightly backwards and pointing outwards. Eyes may be partially closed.

1



Rabbit is lying down, with a relaxed body posture and legs tucked under the body.

2



Rabbit is lying down, with front paws pointing forward and rear legs stuck out sideways. Body is relaxed and extended.

3



Rabbit is lying down with a fully extended, relaxed body. Back legs are stretched out behind the body and the front paws are pointing forward.

4



Rabbit jumps into the air with all four paws off the ground and twists in mid-air before landing.

A worried rabbit

These rabbits are telling you that they are uncomfortable and don't want you near them.

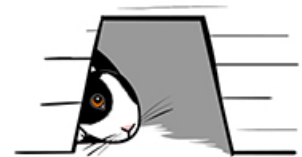
1

Rabbit is in a crouched position, muscles are tense, head held flat to the ground, ears wide apart and flattened against the back, pupils dilated.



2

Rabbits who are worried or anxious may hide.



An angry or very unhappy rabbit

These rabbits are not happy and want you to stay away or go away.

1



Rabbit turns and moves away flicking the back feet. Ears may be held against the back.

2

Rabbit is sitting up on back legs with front paws raised displaying boxing behaviour. Ears pointed upwards and facing outwards, rabbit may be growling.



3

Rabbit is standing tense, with back legs thumping on the ground. Tail raised, ears pointing upwards and slightly turned outwards, facial muscles are tense and pupils dilated.



4

Rabbit is standing tense with body down and weight towards the back, head tilted upwards, mouth open and teeth visible. Ears held back and lowered, tail raised, pupils dilated.



Behaviour: When Your Rabbit is Unwell

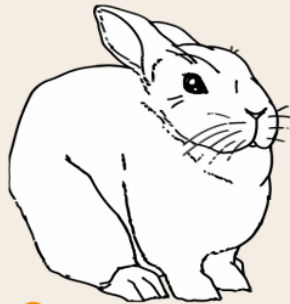
By Tamsin Stone

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● Changes to Grooming

Soiled or dirty fur, dirty ears, excessive scratching, chewing fur, wet fur around eyes, chin or bottom.



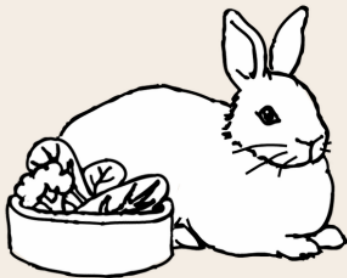
● Changes to Activity

Less active than normal, slower to greet you, aggressive, spending less time playing, exploring or interacting.



● Changes to Movement

Limping, stumbling, dragging back legs, uncoordinated, tilting to one side or reluctant to move.

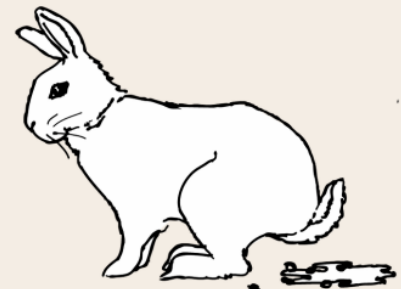


● Changes to Eating Habits

A change in food preferences, only eating favourite foods, eating less, dropping food or chewing oddly.

● Not eating at all is an emergency.

Rabbit's instincts are to hide signs of illness; they often show little outward sign of being unwell until they are very sick. The first hint of potential illness are subtle changes in your rabbit's behaviour and routine that make you feel "something's not quite right". If you notice a change you are worried about, call your vet to set up an appointment.



● Changes to Toilet Habits

Losing litter training, increased weeing, small or odd shaped droppings.

● Diarrhoea or producing no droppings are emergencies.

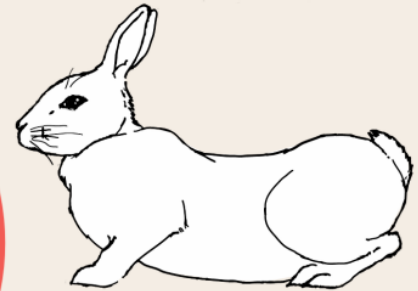


● Signs of Pain

Sitting huddled/hunched up, eyes tense or semi closed, reluctant to move, and may grind their teeth.

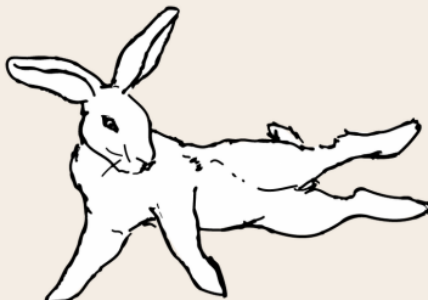
Some health issues should be treated as an emergency and you'll need to call your vet (day or night!) and go straight there:

Unresponsive
Difficulty Breathing
Not eating/pooping
Diarrhoea (Liquid/watery poop)
Flystrike
Trauma
Bleeding
Seizure



● Stomach Pressing (Pain)

Pressing the stomach to the floor, being restless and unable to find a comfortable position to sit or lie in.



● Seizure

Rapid twitching, kicking or shaking. May stagger or appear disorientated, but not necessarily fall over.



● Unresponsive

Laying on side limp, floppy, cold. Some rabbits sleep in this position but will act normally when disturbed.



● Difficulty Breathing

Mouth breathing (rabbits usually breath through their nose), laboured breathing, wheezing or blue lips,



Fostering Rabbits

The Animal Welfare League of Alexandria receives many unwanted rabbits. Rabbits are often sent into foster homes because of overpopulation at the Shelter. Young, sick, injured and under socialized rabbits also need foster homes. Rabbits received at AWLA that are under 4 weeks of age must be fostered until they are old enough for adoption (at 4 weeks of age) or have been altered. Rabbits are intelligent, social, and affectionate indoor companion animals. When allowed, they form intense pair bonds. Rabbits can get along fine with other small mammals, indoor cats and well-mannered dogs. Rabbits may be fostered singly or in bonded pairs.

- *Facilities Needed* -AWLA will provide rabbit cages, if available. Rabbits enjoy getting out of their cages for exploration and exercise. A room that has been "bunny-proofed" will be safest.
- *Rabbits are grazing animals*- It is natural for them to chew on inappropriate items such as furniture, rugs, drapes and electrical cords. Rabbits can jump, so make sure there is no access to desktops and shelves. They can even pull up carpeting.
- *General Facts* -Rabbits are lagomorphs. The male is called a buck; the female is called a doe. A rabbit's normal life span is 5 to 8 years. A rabbit's normal weight depends on the breed of rabbit. Normal body temperature is 99.1-102.9 F. Rabbits can't pant; they regulate their body temperature through their ears.
- *Temperament* -Rabbits are kid-friendly animals, but don't usually like to be picked up and held. They prefer doing their socializing on the ground. The large breeds tend to be gentler-natured. Most rabbits are very curious by nature. However, these creatures are "prey" animals, and, as such, may be frightened by loud noise and rapid, abrupt movements. A rabbit's warning "leave me alone" signs are thumping, ears pointing forward, and lunging. Rabbits are also very territorial of their cages. Therefore, it is best to always approach a rabbit from the side.
- *Rabbits mate for life*, and they choose their mates. If you are fostering more than one rabbit, it may be possible to pair them in a single cage. Rabbits should be spayed or neutered before being placed in a cage with another rabbit.

Rabbit Housing

- *Indoor Housing* -Foster rabbits should be housed indoors. Rabbits prefer to live on the ground and feel threatened and vulnerable in tall hutches. A dog kennel or any cage without a wire bottom is a good rabbit kennel.
- *The kennel* should be large enough for the rabbit to stretch out and still have room for food, water, and a litter pan. The optimal indoor temperature range is 40-70 degrees.
- *Exercise Areas* -It is a good idea to section off a room or a part of a room and place a plastic tablecloth or tarp on the floor for an exercise area. Cardboard boxes can be used for both chewing and hiding entertainment. Phone books are fun for rabbits to shred into pieces. Rabbits also like bells and toys that they can pick up and throw, like shower curtain rings and

canning rings. Make sure all toys are too large for the rabbit to swallow, and contain no soft plastic or treated wood.

Basic Diet for a Healthy Rabbit

- **Hay** -Hay is the most important part of the rabbit's diet. It keeps the digestive flora healthy and helps hairballs pass. Give alfalfa hay to young rabbits, or if a rabbit is thin or so active that extra calories are needed to maintain weight. Give grass hay if the adult rabbit is overweight, tends to gain weight on alfalfa, or is inactive. Grass hay includes timothy, oat, wheat, brome, or orchard.
- **Fresh Water** –Water should be offered in a ceramic or stainless steel rabbit-proof bowl or hanging drinking bottle (no plastic dishes). If hanging drinking bottles are used, the bottle should be hung outside the cage if possible, because rabbits will chew the plastic bottle and its parts.
- **Vegetables and Fruit** – Mixed vegetables can be given daily
- **Fresh fruit** is fine in small amounts, but too much sugar is bad for the digestive system. Appropriate fruits are bananas, berries, apples and pears.
- **Rabbit Pellets** -Pellets should make up the smallest part of the diet. Rabbit pellets are very high in calories. Overfeeding pellets can cause obesity and digestive problems. However, juvenile rabbits less than 6 months old should always have access to pellets, unless they are overweight.

Reduce the quantity by 1/2 if the rabbit is overweight; increase by 1/2 if the rabbit is underweight or fails to maintain its weight on a smaller quantity. Check with the Foster Department if you are unsure of a foster rabbit's breed or what its normal weight should be.

Quantities to Feed an Adult Rabbit

Weight	Vegetables	Rabbit Pellets
3-4 pounds	¾ cup	2 Teaspoons
4-5 pounds	1 cup	1 Tablespoon
5-6 pounds	1-1/4 cups	1-1/2 Tablespoons
7-8 pounds	1-3/4 cups	2 Tablespoons
9-11 pounds	2 cups	2-1/2 Tablespoons
12-14 pounds	2-1/4 cups	3 Tablespoons

Vegetables

Rabbits younger than 8 weeks of age should not be given any vegetables. Once the rabbit is 8 weeks old, introduce a single vegetable from the first list below. Give a small amount of this vegetable, (approximately a ½ inch cube), in addition to the rabbit's usual diet, for 3 days. If there are no problems, a 2nd vegetable may be introduced. Follow this routine when introducing all appropriate vegetables into the diet.

In some cases, an adult rabbit may not be able to tolerate vegetables. If you know nothing of a rabbit's background, it is best to give only a single piece of a vegetable to see if it can be tolerated. If there are no digestive upsets after 24 hours, proceed as for young rabbits.

A general intolerance of vegetables or other foods may be a symptom of medical problems. Contact the Foster Department if a foster rabbit seems to have this problem.

Vegetables usually tolerated

Alfalfa (fresh), Kale, Arugula, Mint, Basil,
Mustard Greens, Beet Greens, Parsley, Bok
Choy, Snow Peas, Carrots & tops, Pea plant (all),
Celery-Cut into pieces no longer than 1",
Peppermint leaves, Cilantro, Radicchio, Clover,

Radish tops, Collard Greens, Raspberry Leaves,
Dandelion greens & flowers, Romaine, red,
green, leafy lettuce, Escarole, Spinach, Green
Peppers, Swiss Chard, Turnips & tops

***** Don't give vegetables high in oxalates to rabbits with urinary-tract sludge problems. If a rabbit is healthy, oxalates should not cause a problem. *******

Do not feed these vegetables to rabbits

Broccoli (has Vit. A)-May cause gas/bloating.

Cauliflower-May Cause gas/bloating.

Beets-High in Starch, can cause serious digestive upsets.

Radishes-May cause gas/bloating.

Green Beans-May cause gas/bloating.

Cabbage/Brussels Sprouts-Destroys thiamin;
May cause gas/bloating.

Raw Lima, kidney, soy beans-Toxic!

Onions- Toxic!

Raw, protein-rich beans -Can cause GI stasis.

Cooked, protein-rich beans-Can cause GI overgrowth.

Whole seeds, nuts grains, dried corn, dried peas*-Can cause impaction, high in starches.

Iceberg Lettuce-No nutritional value.

Whole-kernel corn of any kind (fresh, frozen, canned) Husks around kernels- can cause impaction; high in starches

Sweet peas (any kind)-High in starches.

Sweet Potatoes, Cassava, Bamboo Shoots, Maize, Millet, Bracken Fern, Tea Leaves, Coffee plants-Rich in compounds that destroy nutrients.

White or red potatoes, including peels-High in starches.

Dried Beans-Contain lectins that are toxic to rabbits, may also cause bloating.

Rhubarb leaves-Toxic!

***Grains can be given in tiny amounts as treats. Give no more than ½ teaspoon per pound of rabbit. Grain items like whole-grain crackers and whole-grain cereals (no sugar), can be given as a treat.**

Litter box Training

Rabbits will drop their pills (fecal matter) and urinate in corners. They can't really be "trained" to a certain bathroom area – they will show you where they want to go given that they use their pills to mark territory.

- **Types of Litter** - Never use clay cat litter. Rabbits ingest a special type of their nighttime fecal matter, called cecotropes or caecotrophs, which aid in digestion. Clay litter can cause severe digestive problems if ingested.
- **Do not** use nutshells or wood shavings. They contain oils that are toxic if ingested.

Types of appropriate rabbit litter filler are:

- Pelleted paper or other organic products, such as recycled paper pellets or pelleted grass products.
- Corncob litter – very absorbent and long lasting.
- Hay (any kind) – will need frequent changing.
- Newspaper – will need daily or more frequent changing.

Restraint and Handling

Improper handling may result in a struggling bunny and a scratched human. The rabbit can also injure itself – possibly a dislocated or fractured spine. Rabbits should never be lifted or restrained by their ears. Scruffing (lifting the rabbit by the skin folds on the back of the neck only without supporting the hind legs), makes them feel unprotected. A rabbit is easily "hypnotized" by cradling it on its back in your arms or across your lap, tipping the head backwards until it is "out". If the hind feet seem to be vibrating, touching the feet will stop it. This holding method is useful to check the rabbit's perineum, feet and cheeks.

For short distance carries, the "bundling" position works well. Grasp the neck skin (scruff) in one hand, with the rear quarters supported with the other hand. The back of the rabbit rests against the handler's stomach area. The animal may also be wrapped in a towel to prevent kicking and scratching. To carry a

rabbit, its head should be tucked into the handler's arm. The handler's forearms are used to provide support, both along the back and beneath the rabbit. Always hold a rabbit's hind legs while supporting the stomach. These methods should be practiced regularly with foster rabbits so they become accustomed to being handled in this manner.

Grooming Rabbits

Fur and skin care start from the inside. Proper nutrition, exercise and medical supervision ensure a healthy rabbit with a full, glossy coat and supple skin. A dry, lackluster coat or excessive shedding indicates that the rabbit is not receiving proper attention or might be ill.

A rabbit's fur should be brushed and combed 1-2 times a week. Longhaired breeds may need daily care. Steel combs, like dog flea combs, work best; cat brushes can be too abrasive.

Rabbits require frequent nail trims – every 4 to 6 weeks. Trimming a rabbit's nails is much the same as trimming a dog's nails. Please consult the Foster program manager for regular nail trimming by the animal care staff.

Ears- check foster rabbit's ears at least once a month, juveniles more often. Carefully clean out wax deposits with a cloth. NEVER PROBE DEEPLY INTO THE EAR. You may permanently injure the canal or other delicate inner ear parts. Be alert to possible infection if the inner part of the ear is inflamed or has a foul odor. Also notice if the rabbit persistently shakes its head, rubs it against the floor, holds it tilted to one side or scratches at its ears.

Eyes - Keep foster rabbit's eyes clean of any discharge. Wipe the eyes with soft cloth, cotton or a tissue paper moistened in mild saline solution. Work from the eye corner outward, never across the eye, as this will spread any possible infection.

Common Medical Problems

- **Hairball blockage** – Rabbits cannot regurgitate (vomit) hairballs the way cats do. A possible symptom of hairball blockage is an absence of stool movements. This problem may be treated with a laxative (mineral oil), or the rabbit may need surgery.
- **If a rabbit has not passed fecal material in over 24 hours**, please contact the Foster program manager immediately.
- **Abscess** – An infection that usually results from a bite or puncture wound. Abscesses are treatable, and usually require antibiotics.

Warning: Amoxicillin and drugs similar to it are fatal to rabbits!

Fostering Ill Rabbits

Shelter rabbits are frequently exposed to diseases that are contagious to other animals. These illnesses can affect rabbits of all ages. The immune system of the infected rabbit may be compromised because of any of these illnesses. While fostering ill rabbits, an animal foster parent will likely be asked to administer daily medication, provide a special diet, and ensure that the rabbit receives regular checkups at the Animal Welfare League of Alexandria.

- **Facilities Needed** -An easy to clean area is recommended. The area should be completely isolated from your own companion animals, such as a spare bathroom, bedroom, den, or heated basement.
- **Food** -The Shelter will provide special diets and pellets.
- Ensure rabbits attend checkup appointments.
- Medicate as directed by veterinarians.
- Observe for signs of improvement or deterioration.
- Contact the Foster program manager immediately if problems arise.





Rabbit Exercise and Toys

What types of toys should I get my bunny?

Although you can buy toys in a pet store for your new rabbit, you can also use things you already have around the house. Try using toilet paper tubes and put treats on the inside. This makes for quite a fun toy! You can also use untreated wicker or willow baskets. Bunnies love to chew on these! All in all your rabbit needs toys to satisfy his natural urges to dig and chew. Some other safe chew toys are cardboard boxes, the yellow pages, bird toys, baby teething rings, and commercially made chew sticks. Another fun activity to provide for your rabbit is a digging box. Fill a cardboard box halfway with soil or shredded paper for your bunny to dig in!

Exercise

It is also important to give your rabbit plenty of exercise time out of his cage. Find a safe place, either indoors or outdoors, for your bunny to run around. It is suggested that your rabbit spends several hours every day out of his cage. If the play area is outside make sure that you are always supervising and that the area is enclosed in some way.