

Shelter Training for Rabbits

Intake:

- When possible obtain the following information on the rabbit:
 - Age
 - Sex
 - Is the rabbit altered? If yes, when and which vet clinic?
 - How long has the rabbit been with the current owner?
 - Reason for surrender
 - If multiple rabbits, are they bonded?
 - Bonded rabbits should be kept together, separating can cause depression
 - Where was the rabbit adopted/purchased?
- If at all possible train staff to sex rabbits at intake. Rabbits are often sexed incorrectly.
- If rabbits are in pairs or groups ensure they are divided by sex; when in doubt separate if not altered.

Intake Exam and Handling:

- Always have a secure hold on the rabbit to avoid injury. Rabbits' hind legs are very strong and they can injure their backs by kicking or struggling with improper handling. To avoid injury to the rabbit and shelter staff, always support the rabbit's hind legs and spine and hold the rabbit close to your body. Do not scruff the rabbit. Wrapping a rabbit in a towel can make handling easier.
- Rabbits don't see well in front of their face. Avoid holding out a hand towards the rabbit's nose for them to investigate like you would for a dog or cat because they can be easily startled by this. Reach for the rabbit from above or from the side so they can see you approach.
- Cover the rabbit's eyes gently if the rabbit becomes upset.
- Full baths are rarely needed and are stressful for rabbits. Brushing, nail trims, and checking for any fleas or mites should be done. Rabbits found outdoors during warmer months often have ticks, fleas, cuterebra, ear mites and/or fur mites.
- Rabbits can be treated with Revolution for ear mites. Advantage II can be used for fleas. Most flea/tick treatments are toxic for rabbits. Consult a vet before treating. Do not remove crusty ear mite debris; this is very painful for the rabbit and can lead to infection. The crust will fall off after the first Revolution treatment.
- Many rabbits will either be shy or appear aggressive due to the noise and stress of a shelter environment. The best behavioral evaluations occur over time or through a foster program.

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Housing:

- There are many options for housing, depending on available resources and space. The most accessible housing options are shelter kennels used for cats and dog kennel style crates. Rabbits should either be housed in a separate small animal area, or in the cat area if a separate space is not available. Traditional style rabbit cages are often donated, but can be difficult to store when not in use.
 - Do not use wire bottom cages or cover wire
 - Midwest rabbit cage link
 - Any other traditional cage links
- General setup guidelines for rabbit enclosures:
 - Provide a litter box with rabbit-safe litter even if the rabbit is not currently litter trained. Newspaper can be used to line the cage floor.
 - Never use pine or cedar shavings, clay cat litters, cob litters or wheat litters
 - Do use paper based litters (Oxbow, Carefresh, etc.)
 - Rectangular cat litter boxes work well for rabbits
 - Hay should be provided in the litter box
 - Provide a water bowl, in addition to a water bottle. Metal bowls that attach to the enclosure work best. Heavy ceramic crocks also work, if available.
 - Provide hay and pellets as the rabbit's primary food.
 - Avoid pellets with seeds or colorful pieces since these encourage selective eating and are unhealthy.
 - When possible provide fresh vegetables (see attached list)
 - Cover the floor of the kennel with a towel or blanket to give the rabbit some traction on hard surfaces, protection for their feet, and something to dig in. If the rabbit appears to be eating the floor covering, it should be taken away to prevent the rabbit from ingesting fibers. If towels or blankets are not available, layer several sheets of newspaper in the enclosure.
 - Provide a hiding box or a shelf if space permits. A basic cardboard box with two hole cut outs will work, as long as any plastic tape is removed so the rabbit can't ingest it.

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Enrichment Options:

- Rabbit safe toys:
 - Cardboard tubes from paper or toilet paper rolls are an easy option. Cut the tubes into twists for a quick “spring” toy, or stuff hay into the tube for another “toss and pull” toy. Remove all excess paper before giving it to the bunny.
 - Packing paper crinkled up into a ball for the rabbit to toss and chew. Paper lunch bags or grocery store bags without handles also work well.
 - Untreated wooden or hay toys designed for small animals, if available.
 - Plastic balls designed for cats can be used as toss toys in supervised play time, but plastic and fabric toys should not be left in the kennel to prevent the rabbit from ingesting pieces if chewed.
 - Toys should be kept with the rabbit and not shared to prevent disease spread. Used toys should either go home with the rabbit or be discarded.
- Hide treats or pellets around the kennel to encourage foraging behavior.
- Give rabbits supervised time to exercise and socialize with staff or volunteers in a bunny proofed office area, a spare room such as a cat meet-and-greet room, or using an exercise pen. Exercise pens should be tall to discourage rabbit escapes! Minimum height 36” is suggested. Provide a tunnel or hiding spot in the play area in case they are shy.

If you are interested in specific advice for housing and rabbit care in your shelter, please contact Triangle Rabbits. We are happy to review your setup and offer suggestions based on your shelter’s available space and resources.

If your shelter adopts out rabbits:

- Present rabbits as indoor companion animals, rather than a barnyard or backyard “pets” or livestock.
- Visibility: Place rabbits where they will be seen by potential adopters, and/or post flyers and pictures of available rabbits. Rabbits should have names and individual kennel cards. Name rabbits the same as you do for dogs and cats to help them be seen as companion animals (ex: avoid naming rabbits generic names like “Ears” or “Thumper”).
- Posting information about house rabbits within the shelter can educate potential adopters about rabbit care and behavior and increase the chance of a successful adoption for both rabbit and human.
- Provide an adoption packet with rabbit care information.

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FURTHER RESOURCES:

Triangle Rabbits - <https://www.trianglerabbits.org/>

House Rabbit Society - <https://www.rabbit.org>

My House Rabbit - <https://myhouserabbit.com/>

101 Rabbits - <https://www.youtube.com/c/101rabbits>

How Cast Videos with Amy Sedaris & Mary Cotter -
<https://rabbit.org/hrs-howcast-videos/>