



# Understanding the Basics of Rabbit Care

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Many people like rabbits, especially when they are babies, and think they are a wonderful gift. When it comes to rabbits, it is important to remember that they are small animal livestock and they are a commitment. This fact sheet is designed to give anyone interested in owning and raising rabbits an overview of the basics of rabbit care and the resources needed to get started.

The basic areas you need to research before purchasing a rabbit are:

- What purpose are you wishing to use your rabbit for?
- Where do you live?
- What is a good source for creditable information?
- What type of housing do you need for your rabbit?
- What do you need for proper health and handling for your rabbit?
- What do you need to provide proper nutrition to your rabbit?

## Purpose of Your Rabbit

A rabbit can be used, depending on the breed, for five different purposes: pet, show, breeding, pelt (which is also known as their fur or in some cases their wool), and meat/market. According to the American Rabbit Breeders Association (ARBA), there are 49 recognized breeds of rabbits. All of them can be used for show, breeding, and

pelt. Depending on what you want the pelt for, there are some breeds that are better than others.

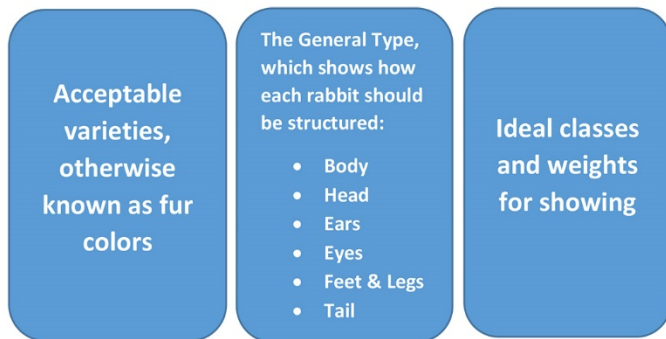
Technically, all 49 breeds can be used for pets as well, but due to the size of some of the rabbits, there are some breeds that would make better pets. For example; the Flemish Giant, which is the largest breed of rabbit, weighing 13 pounds or more once fully grown, would be a difficult rabbit to hold and handle just due to its sheer size. Therefore, it may not make the best pet rabbit, especially if the rabbit is meant to be for a child.

If you are interested in raising market rabbits, according to ARBA (American Rabbit Breeders Association, Inc. 2016), you need to have a commercial breed that fits into one of the following categories:

Single Fryer	Roasters	Stewers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3 ½ - 5 ½ pounds</li> <li>• no older than 10 weeks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 ½ - 9 pounds</li> <li>• no older than 5 months</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• over 8 pounds</li> <li>• 6 months or older</li> </ul>

Determining which breed of rabbit you should start with can be a difficult process. Once you have determined the main purpose for your rabbit, then you can start researching the different breeds to determine which one will best fit your needs.

If you are interested in having a rabbit for more than just a pet, it is essential to purchase the Standard of Perfection (American Rabbit Breeders Association, Inc. 2016). This book lists the following for all 49 breeds:



It is vital that you understand all of the requirements for all that you will do with your rabbit. Do not let the process overwhelm you. There are plenty of resources and experts to help you along the way.

## Where You Live

Depending on where you live, you may not even be able to own and raise a rabbit. If you live in town, you need to check with city ordinances to see if they allow people to raise small animal livestock in their back yards. If so, how many and what are the criteria and regulations. The criteria and regulations will be different for each species so you will want to check specifically for rabbits. If you want a large rabbit husbandry operation, will your property be safe from zoning for years to come?

It is to your benefit to do your research first. It would be disappointing to take the time, effort, and energy to purchase your rabbits and all of their equipment, then later find out you are not able to raise rabbits in your location. Good thorough research is the key to help you determine if you want to start raising rabbits and to help make the process go smoother if you decide to take this journey.

## Source of Information

Informing yourself on the basics of rabbit care is the first step to educating yourself about raising rabbits. There are many resources available these days but one of the quickest and most accurate resources is ARBA. They manage a website that provides large amounts of information with links that will take you

to the newest and latest information, which allows you to be current and up to date at all times. Their site is <http://www.arba.net/>.

ARBA has various chartered states along with local clubs that can be found across the country. In addition, they also have Specialty Rabbit Clubs with officials that promote the different breeds. All of these are designed to provide tips and extra help to the rabbit industry at all times (American Rabbit Breeders Association, Inc., 2011). Other great sources of information are publications from:

- The Department of Agriculture
- Land grant and state agriculture colleges
- Large feed companies

There are a few books that have been published on rabbits; however; it is very important to make sure that the book is up to date before using information found in it. There are two books that are continually being revised and updated and they are:

- Raising Better Rabbits & Cavies
- Standard of Perfection

These books are both published by the American Rabbit Breeders Association, Inc.

## Housing

When planning your rabbitry (housing facilities), you must evaluate the following: ventilation, temperature, humidity, lighting, cage size, materials, and protection (Dick, Mangione, Phares, & West, 2016).

### Ventilation

Ventilation is the process in which the air is able to flow throughout your structure. If adequate ventilation is not provided, then you run a higher risk of exposing your rabbits to common respiratory problems such as pneumonia and “snuffles.” The only way to keep these problems from spreading to the rest of your colony or herd is to have a proper ventilation system. Your ventilation system can be Mother Nature herself or a manmade system.

### Temperature & Humidity

Rabbits can be housed anywhere from a cage in a utility room, to a cage under a tree, to a climate controlled rabbitry. Wherever they are housed, you must be sure that they are not exposed to high temperatures or high humidity for long time periods. If this happens, a rabbit will become weak

and collapse. During the summer, there are ways to help keep your rabbits cool if they are not in a climate-controlled structure. You can take plastic bottles, fill them with water and freeze them. During the hot parts of the day, place a frozen bottle in your rabbit's cage. They will lay against it and use the bottle to help keep them cool. A rabbit's ears are their air conditioning system. You can also place a wet rag in their cage for them to lay on. However, a wet rag will not last as long as a frozen water bottle. Even though rabbits cannot handle hot weather, they can withstand very cold weather as long as they don't get wet. If they do get wet, they can get sick.

### Lighting

Rabbits must also be exposed to the right amount of light. Sufficient lighting helps to prime a rabbit's coat and is also needed for proper breeding. If a doe (female rabbit) is not exposed to 16 hours of light each day, her receptiveness to be bred decreases. In addition, you need sufficient lighting so that you can be sure to see your way around the rabbitry.

### Cage Size

The size of cage you will need will depend on the breed of rabbit you have and its size (American Rabbit Breeders Association, Inc., 2011).

Mature Weight	Cage Size
Rabbit less than 6 pounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•18 inches deep</li> <li>•24 inches wide</li> <li>•12 inches high</li> </ul>
Rabbit 6 to 10 pounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•24 inches deep</li> <li>•24-36 inches wide</li> <li>•18 inches high</li> </ul>
Giant Rabbit 11 pounds or more	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•24 inches deep</li> <li>•36-48 inches wide</li> <li>•18 inches high</li> </ul>

### Materials and Protection

Your rabbit's size will also determine what type of material your cage needs to be made out of. Giant rabbits need to have a solid floor so they do not get "sore hocks," which is an infection of the rabbit's footpads. Due to their large bodies' constantly placing pressure on their small feet, if they are on a wire floor their feet will continuously have "sore hocks." Smaller breeds, on the other hand, can be on a wire floor that measures ½ x 1 inch. The half-inch side is the one that needs to be against the rabbit's feet as it will cause less irritation. The advantage to a wire flooring is that it is self-

cleaning, provides better sanitation, and is typically easier to maintain. Whether your rabbit will be indoors or outdoors will also determine which materials are needed for their cage. Outdoor cages are usually a combination of plywood or pressed board, galvanized welded wire, and a roof to provide protection; whereas indoor cages are typically made out of the galvanized welded wire. One thing to keep in mind is that a rabbit's teeth will grow the duration of their life, which causes them to gnaw. A rabbit will gnaw on any portion of the cage that is made out of wood. Therefore, you will be making more repairs to your cage over the course of time.

### Proper Health and Handling

In terms of vaccinations and health, rabbits are usually a low-maintenance animal. There are no recommended vaccinations and very few medications that can be used on rabbits. In general, most veterinarians have limited experience treating rabbits; therefore, it is important for you to become familiar with your rabbits normal behavior and to know the signs of common diseases (Dick, Mangione, Phares, & West, 2016). The book, Raising Better Rabbits & Cavies (American Rabbit Breeders Association, Inc., 2011), has an entire section dedicated to the medical management of rabbits. In addition to this book, ARBA also has a Rabbit and Cavy Health committee that can help you with your rabbit medical questions.

Due to rabbits having a light skeletal structure, it is important that they be handled properly. Otherwise, they can be easily hurt. Rabbits should start being handled once they have been weaned; this way they can start getting used to humans. Depending on the breed of rabbit, with your dominant hand you either pick it up by one ear, both ears, or no ears along with the nape of the neck. With your other hand, you will support the rabbit's rump and then lift it toward you. You always want to lift your rabbit, never pull it, because if you do you could get its toenails caught on the wire of their cage. Once your rabbit is safely out of the cage, hold it close to your body or tuck it under your arm so its eyes are covered. Rabbits are scared easily so holding them close and covering their eyes help them feel safe and protected.

## Proper Nutrition

Your rabbit needs a well-balanced diet of protein, fiber, fat, vitamins and minerals (American Rabbit Breeders Association, Inc., 2011). There are many options when it comes to selecting commercially prepared feed. To begin, it is always a good idea to read the label. When selecting feed, the protein levels should range from 14%-18%. Feed that contains 18% protein does not stay fresh as long and often times has to be special ordered. This is a guide to go by; however, doing research will enable you to make the best decision for your rabbit breed and what you want to accomplish with your rabbit(s). This is also why it is recommended you talk with other rabbit breeders that raise the same breed about their feeding program.

## Nutrition Facts

Fiber	Fat	Calcium
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•12% to 22%</li><li>•Not less than 18%</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•3% or less</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Less than 1%</li></ul>

## Other Feeds

- **Grass Hay:** is considered a roughage that is a great treat for rabbits to munch on. It helps to reduce blockages and is great for their digestive track. It is recommended to give hay pellets at night and actual hay in the morning, 12 hours later. If you only give hay pellets at night, that will be just fine.  
**NOTE:** Alfalfa hay is not recommended as feed because it is too high in protein.
- **Treats:** Rabbits can be given treats from time to time. It is not something you want to do on a regular basis. Some treat ideas are: apples, oranges, carrots, grass clippings, etc. Do not feed iceberg lettuce and cabbage because they can cause diarrhea.

## Changing Feed

Occasionally, you may find it necessary to change the feed or introduce a different type of feed into your rabbit's diet. Introduce it slowly by mixing the new feed into the old feed. It is best to start with a  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  ration mixture. Then  $\frac{1}{2}$  and  $\frac{1}{2}$ , then completely over to the new feed. Do each ration for about 3-4 days before switching to the next ration.

The whole period will be about 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  - 2 weeks. Rabbit digestive tracts are sensitive and will shut down if changes are introduced too rapidly.

## How Much to Feed Your Rabbit

Small Breeds	Medium Breeds	Large Breeds
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•2-3 ounces of pellets per day</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•3 <math>\frac{1}{2}</math> - 4 ounces of pellets per day</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•4 - 8 ounces of pellets per day</li></ul>

This is a guide for adult rabbits. Pregnant or lactating does will need to consume more. In addition, kits or baby bunnies will need more for their growing bodies.

It is important to use good quality commercial pellets and keep your feed dry and free from insects and rodents. Do not leave uneaten feed in the feeder day after day. If the rabbit does not eat it, clean it out. Do not store more feed than can be used in about a month's time. The feed may lose its nutritional value.

## How Often to Feed Your Rabbit

A regular feeding schedule is important. Rabbits are a nocturnal animal so it is better to feed them in the evenings. Try to feed your rabbit the recommended amount of feed at the same time each day. Example: 6:00 p.m. each night. Remember to check your rabbit(s) at least morning and night.

## Important Feed Reminders:

- Do not over feed your rabbit(s)
- Keep your feed dry and insect free.
- Rabbits that are free-fed tend to eat too much and become over weight.

To determine if your rabbit is eating enough, check its flesh condition. This is done by feeling the hindquarters. The ribs and backbone should not be protruding and should be well rounded. Backbones and hips, which protrude out, indicate the rabbit is too thin. Adjust feed as needed to increase weight. You can also weigh your rabbit on a scale to see if it falls within the weight limits of its breed. Check this in the Standard of Perfection book (American Rabbit Breeders Association, Inc., 2016), under your specific breed.

## Conclusion

This fact sheet has provided you, the potential rabbit owner, a brief overview of the basics of rabbit care. Be sure to do your research;

- Determine what you want to use your rabbit(s) for,
- Pick a breed that fits your needs,
- Determine if you can have rabbits where you live,
- Identify good sources to help you better understand rabbits and what they require,
- Determine where your rabbit(s) will live,
- Acquire the appropriate housing,
- Learn the common rabbit diseases,
- Learn how to properly hold a rabbit, and
- Pick a nutritional feed.

After you have done your research and have prepared yourself, now comes the time to get your rabbit(s) and to have fun.



## References

- American Rabbit Breeders Association, Inc. (2011). *Raising Better Rabbits & Cavies*. Blooming, IL.
- American Rabbit Breeders Association, Inc. (2016). *Standard of Perfection*. Bloomington, IL
- Dick, J., Mangione, D., Phares, B.P., & West, T. (2016, January). Rabbit Basics for the Beginner. Retrieved January 9, 2019, from <https://ohioline.osu.edu/factsheet/4h-31>

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