

## TOP 9 MISTAKES new rabbit owners make—and how to avoid them



*Rabbits are often thought of as easy, cheap pets, but there's just one thing: They're not easy or cheap. They are, however, highly misunderstood.*

*Each year, thousands of rabbits are abandoned by owners who didn't know what they were signing up for. But bunnies are wonderfully rewarding pets for those who do their research and are willing to commit. And once you make that commitment, you're guaranteed years of happy companionship.*

### **1. Keeping your rabbit outside**

Keeping a rabbit outdoors cuts his average life span in half. Outdoor rabbits face extremes of heat and cold, risk of illness and predators. Wherever you live, there are wild animals who want to eat your bunny — and even if they don't get inside his hutch, a rabbit can have a heart attack just from seeing a predator outside his cage.

Yes, outdoor hutches have been around for centuries, but they were designed to house meat rabbits for a few months at a time, not beloved pet rabbits for years. And while you might see a wild rabbit happily running around your backyard, pet rabbits are domesticated and have lost the ability to thrive outdoors. Would you put your dog outside in a cage just because you saw a wolf in your backyard?

Of course, the biggest reason to keep your rabbit indoors is so he can be part of your family. Rabbits are just as intelligent and emotionally aware as dogs or cats, and they need to interact with you and become part of your home. And of course, who would want to miss out on moments like this?

## **2. Buying a rabbit for your children**

Rabbits are not easy starter pets — in fact, they're probably one of the worst pets for children. Rabbits require regular and devoted care, and too many rabbits spend their lives locked up in dirty cages after their young owner becomes tired of his birthday present.

Forcing a rabbit on a child isn't fair for the child, as rabbits will bite, scratch and kick when mad, and they often hate being cuddled.

But it's even more unfair for a rabbit. Children love to pick things up and interact with their pets, but rabbits like to have all four feet on the ground. Vets often see rabbits with broken limbs and spines after being dropped or kicking out when a child tries to pick them up.

## **3. Trusting the pet store**

Walk into any pet store and you'll likely see a long row of vibrantly colored treats and interesting-looking foods for rabbits. Unfortunately, these products are often unhealthy and even dangerous. Many are too high in sugar and can cause potentially fatal intestinal stasis — others contain ingredients like seeds that rabbits aren't designed to digest.

Rabbits have a complicated diet, but the basics are simple: unlimited water and hay, a daily serving of vegetables and a small amount of plain pellets, which should be a supplement rather than the bulk of your rabbit's diet. Fruit and vegetables are perfect for the occasional treat.

## **4. Locking your rabbit up**

So you moved your rabbit inside, but now what? Many cages sold by pet stores are far too small for even a young rabbit, let alone a grown one. Keeping them in these tiny cages can cause a range of health problems, including obesity and even deformities if they're not able to move around naturally.

It's also cruel. Rabbits are smart, social and highly curious, and they need to be able to explore their surroundings. They're also incredibly active, and love to run and jump. The House Rabbit Society recommends at least 8 square feet of housing with at least 24 square feet of exercise space, which the rabbits can access at least five hours per day.

And that's the minimum. Many rabbit owners choose to let their rabbits have free range of their house (after rabbit-proofing them, of course) just like a dog or cat would.

## **5. Not spaying or neutering**

Some people avoid fixing their rabbit because they think it's "unnatural," or simply because they don't want to pay for it. But rabbits are the third-most euthanized pet in the country, and fixing is the only way to prevent unwanted litters.

But the main reasons for spaying or neutering apply even if your rabbit doesn't have a mate. Spaying is absolutely crucial for female rabbits, as 80 percent of unspayed female rabbits will develop reproductive cancers by the age of 6. The disease can hit as early as 1 year old — spaying eliminates this risk and increases their life span by years.

It's also important for males. Hormonal rabbits are territorial rabbits, which can mean lots of biting, scratching and grunting. They also engage in fun house-destroying activities like spraying urine and refusing to use their litterbox. A fixed bunny will be happier and less stressed — and you're less likely to be attacked every time you enter bunny's favorite room.

## **6. Bathing your rabbit**

This might seem harmless, but it's a big no-no in the rabbit world. Never bathe your bunny. Rabbits are self-cleaning animals, and a dirty rabbit is a sign of a sick rabbit who needs a vet visit, not a bath.

Even if a mischievous rabbit winds up making a mess and needs to be cleaned, they should only be spot-cleaned or placed in a few inches of water at most (read here for more detailed instructions).

While there are a rare few rabbits who enjoy water, bathing is highly stressful for most rabbits and can cause respiratory infections, hypothermia and even heart attacks.

## **7. Not paying attention**

As prey animals, rabbits are very good at hiding their illnesses, so owners need to be attuned to the slightest changes in their routine. Any difference in eating, going to the bathroom or behavior can be a sign of serious discomfort and a medical emergency.

They also need specialized care from an exotics vet, not your neighborhood cat or dog vet, which means researching a vet ahead of time so you have her on call for emergencies.

## **8. Trying to cuddle**

Yes, some rabbits are miracle bunnies who just love being cuddled from day one, but the average rabbit is much more aloof. It can take months before a new rabbit warms up to his owner.

Rabbits are prey animals and very independent, and even after a rabbit settles in, he may never enjoy being cuddled like a puppy would.

That doesn't mean he doesn't like you. Some rabbits will deign to sit quietly on their owner's lap — more often they'll prefer running up to their owners for some gentle pets and then running off when they're done. Others will show their affection simply by being in the same room as you.

Having a rabbit means being OK with a "look but don't touch" pet, and accepting whatever personality your rabbit turns out to have and loving him for it.

### **9. Not being in it for the long haul**

Rabbits are rewarding pets. But they're also a big time commitment, and an expensive one at that. Rabbits need a lot of attention and can live 8 to 12 years or longer. They cost hundreds of dollars per year to take care of — and that number can quickly reach the thousands if they have a medical emergency.

As always, if you think you're ready for a new pet, **adopt don't shop**. There are thousands of rabbits out there who are waiting for a more responsible owner to come along, and a good rescue can help you find a rabbit whose personality matches yours.