

Preparing for Your New Family Member

Deciding Where Your Rabbit Will Live

The first step in preparing your home for your new family member is choosing your rabbit's living arrangements. Your rabbit needs to have a spot in your house that he can consider his territory. Your house plan, family, and lifestyle will determine whether your rabbit will have a cage, exercise pen, or room of his own. If your home has a lot of activity, your rabbit will be happier having his space in a quiet corner of the house. If your family is more sedate, your rabbit may prefer his area to be near where you spend most of your time.

Wherever your rabbit's space is, it should include a place he can retreat to when he wants to be left alone. This can be as simple as a cardboard box or as luxurious as a one-story cat condo. All family members should be taught to respect his privacy when he is in his area. Some rabbits do not object to being petted and given treats when in their private space while others prefer to be left completely alone — your rabbit will let you know what he prefers. Both children and adults should be taught to **not** reach in a pull a rabbit out of this “human free zone.” Note: Many rabbits will retreat to this safe area when you are trying to catch them for a vet appointment. This is the one time you may have to drag him out of his private space!

If your rabbit will spend much time in a cage, make sure you choose a location for him that will accommodate the size cage he needs to be comfortable. If room size seems to be limiting cage size, either change to a non-cage housing option or consider another area of your home as your rabbit's primary space.

Even if your plan is to ultimately give your rabbit full run of all or most of your home, it is best to start him in a small area. Too much freedom too quickly makes litter-box training more difficult. A bathroom, laundry room, kitchen or other uncarpeted area is a good place to start because litter-box accidents are easier to clean up. These rooms also tend to be easier to bunny proof since most electrical outlets (and therefore cords) are either behind heavy appliances or at



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countertop level.

Basic Supplies

Once you have chosen your rabbit and decided where he will live it is time to start shopping for supplies. Basic supplies fall into four basic categories: housing, litter training, food, and toys.

Housing Supplies

To provide your rabbit with a space that is his, you will need to purchase (or build) a cage, condo, exercise pen, or baby gate. The Housing articles and links on this website offer a wide variety of options. Readers are encouraged to read these articles before purchasing a rabbit cage.

Most rabbit cages sold at pet stores are much too small for even a **dwarf** breed of rabbit. The resources section lists several mail-order companies that sell quality rabbit cages and condos. Ask other rabbit caretakers, rabbit rescue groups, shelters, or your local 4H group to suggest local cages sources. Fence companies in some areas will custom build cages with slide-out trays.

Where I live, you can get a cage twice as big as those sold at pet stores for half the price from the fence company. Be sure what you buy is large enough to comfortably hold your rabbit at his adult size and has plenty of room for his litter-box. When considering a cage, make sure the door is big enough for the litter-box to fit through without having to turn it sideways.



If you decide to use baby gates, you can often find the exact gates sold at pet stores for less at a toy or baby supply store. You can also find a good selection of gates at discount stores. The article on The “Gated Community” discusses in detail things to consider when purchasing a baby gate for your rabbit.

Litter Training Supplies

There are many different types of litter-boxes available, but until you get to know your rabbit and assess his individual needs, start with the simple rectangular litter-boxes that are available at most pet stores and discount stores. For small breeds, the medium box may be big enough. The

large size litter-box works best for rabbits from five to ten pounds. The extra-large or giant size is recommended for the largest breeds. Rubbermaid dishpans can also be used as litter-boxes and come in a variety of sizes.

Individual rabbits often have a definite preference for a specific type of litter or bedding. Start with any of the types of bunny-safe litter described in the Litter-Box Training articles. Don't buy more than one large bag to start with — you don't want to be stuck with several bags of a litter your rabbit hates (or enjoys tracking all over your house)! You may choose not to buy litter at all. Many people just use newspaper topped with a handful of hay, and this works just fine as long as you clean the litter-box frequently.



Food

If you adopt from a shelter or rescue group, the adoption package often includes a small amount of the pellets and hay your rabbit has been eating. If you find it necessary to change pellets, it is best to change pellets gradually unless your rabbit has been eating “gourmet” pellets which are dangerous. If you purchase your rabbit from a breeder, ask her to include a small amount of the pellets and hay your rabbit is used to eating even if you have to pay extra for it. If you purchase your rabbit from a pet store, buy a small supply of the pellets and hay the rabbit has been eating. This will allow you to introduce changes gradually and give you time to find a source for the pellets and hay you want to feed your rabbit on a regular basis.

If you are adopting an adult rabbit or one older than four months, you will also want to offer your rabbit fresh produce. If you are adopting from a shelter or rescue group, find out your rabbit's favorite fresh foods and stock up on them (as long as they are on the healthy list) before you bring your rabbit home. Nothing makes a rabbit feel “at home” like being offered his favorite foods (yes, the way to a rabbit's heart is through his



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stomach)! Once your rabbit is settled in his new home, you can try introducing new items. If your rabbit has never had fresh produce, start with a few simple items like carrots (small amounts), romaine lettuce, and parsley. Introduce them one at a time and discontinue if you see any signs of GI upset. You will fine-tune your rabbit's salad recipe based on your rabbit's likes and dislikes, your budget, and availability of produce in your area.

Toys

Resist the urge to spend a lot of money on toys before you get to know your rabbit. Cardboard boxes, plain white paper, empty (or almost empty) toilet paper rolls (by themselves or stuffed with hay), and an old phone book make excellent "starter" toys and give you a chance to observe how your rabbit likes to play before purchasing any toys. My own experience has been that the more expensive a toy is and the more it appealed to **me**, the less interesting it is to the rabbit I purchased it for!



Bunny Proofing Basics

Before you bring your rabbit home, you will want to bunny proof the parts of your house that he will have access to. Even if you plan to carefully supervise his time outside his cage or exercise pen, you will want to do basic bunny proofing of any room that he **might** gain access to.

The first rule of bunny proofing is that anything within your rabbit's reach is "fair game" for him to tear up. He doesn't know the difference between the discarded phone book you gave him to tear up and your son's \$100 college textbook. If the textbook is left on the floor, it is a toy. The same goes for important papers and designer clothes — if you don't want your rabbit playing with them, don't leave them on the floor. Remote control devices for TV, VCR, DVD, and stereo seem to be particularly attractive to rabbits. They love to chew off the rubber buttons — and of course, if they are selective, they **never** chew the ones you don't use!

Sometimes the family rabbit can actually help train your children or significant other to hang up their clothes and keep things picked up. This is particularly effective if you can maintain a sense of humor and remember that your rabbit is not being bad, he is just being a rabbit. It is the human who failed to adequately protect his valuables.



The second rule of bunny proofing is that **everything** is potentially within your rabbit's reach. Depending on your rabbit's age, agility, and resourcefulness, he may be able to reach items you think are safely out of reach. Even shelves and decorations hanging on the wall may be reachable from the back of a sofa or chair. Desks, tables, and counter tops can be reached from a neighboring chair. My laptop computer is missing the "shift lock" key because I assumed the computer was out of reach on the desk and failed to close it. Dante, who at the time lived in my study and

liked to sit in my desk chair, taught me otherwise.

Rabbits are also surprisingly resourceful at gaining access to rooms that are “off limits” — it is wise to bunny proof them anyway as a backup. Some rabbits consider a closed door the ultimate challenge. Some try to chew their way in, damaging doors and woodwork in the process. Most can — and will — open the door if it is not securely latched. The more human family members you have, the greater the likelihood that someone will fail to get the door securely closed. If your rabbit doesn't jump gates, a gate may actually be a better barrier since humans can often step across the gate and your rabbit may feel less compelled to gain access to a room he can see into.

The most important aspect of bunny proofing is to protect electrical, phone, and computer cords for the safety of both your rabbit and your equipment. No one is sure why, but these cords are a magnet for most rabbits. Wires may emit an imperceptible (to humans) sound or vibration that is irresistible to most rabbits. Whatever the reason, your rabbit can easily chew through most cords in a matter of seconds — before you have time to realize what is happening. In addition to damaging expensive equipment, your rabbit runs the risk of being electrocuted.

In some rooms, such as bathrooms, kitchen, and laundry rooms, you may be able to place cords safely out of your rabbit's reach or block access completely with appliances. Remember, however, that depending on your rabbit's determination and your room's arrangement, your rabbit may find a way to get to “out of reach” cords or behind appliances. For example, your rabbit may be able to hop from toilet seat to sink or from chair to desk to kitchen countertop. Small rabbits have been known to squeeze behind refrigerators, washers, dryers, and microwave carts. If in doubt, cover cords!

Cords can be protected by hollow plastic tubing available at home improvement and hardware stores. Use a utility knife to cut the tubing to the proper length and slit it lengthwise, then slip over cords. I have had good luck with shower curtain rod covers, available at most Walmart stores for about one dollar for a five-foot length. These come in a variety of colors, are already split lengthwise for you, and are large enough in diameter to discourage most attempts to chew. They can easily be cut with a pair of scissors and if you need more than a five-foot length, you can use more than one, overlapping a bit to ensure complete coverage. Whatever you use to protect your cords, watch your bunny carefully and check cords periodically to make sure the covers have not been chewed through or cleverly removed by your bunny.

Houseplants are another important item to consider when bunny proofing. Rabbits are herbivores, so they have a natural interest in plants. Some common houseplants such as philodendron are toxic to rabbits. For your rabbit's safety, you may want to give these plants to a friend — don't count on your rabbit to stay away from plants that can hurt him. Non-poisonous houseplants should be placed out of your rabbit's reach unless you want him to eat them — or dump the contents of the pot on your floor.