

Breeders and Pet Stores

Because of the years I have spent helping rescue groups across the country, I would prefer that **everyone** adopt from a shelter, rescue group, or individual rather than purchase a rabbit from a breeder or pet store, but this is not always possible. You may have tried to go through a shelter or rescue group and had a bad experience. Or you may have your heart set on a baby rabbit or a breed that rarely needs to be rescued.

If you choose to go to a breeder or pet store, I recommend starting the search by phone since this allows you to focus on questions about environment and diet — two major keys to a healthy rabbit — before you have a chance to fall in love with a particular rabbit. Remember that if the mother rabbit does not have proper care, her babies are likely to have health problems. There is also evidence that some chronic health problems such as malocclusion, chronic GI problems, and weak immune systems have their roots in poor diet or improper care during the first weeks of life.

Breeders

If you decide to go through a breeder, find at least three that are possibilities and phone each before visiting any of them. Recommended questions for the phone interview include:

- **How old are baby rabbits when you sell them?** Rabbits should not be taken from their mother until they are at least six weeks old — eight weeks is even better. Rabbits taken from their mother too soon may suffer both physically and psychologically. Ask if the rabbit you adopt can remain with its mother until it is eight weeks old, even if this is not the breeder's normal policy.
- **What should I feed my rabbit?** Breeders often feed mostly pellets and may not offer fresh greens. However, they should recognize the importance of hay in a healthy diet.
- **What type of litter or bedding do you use?** Beware of those who use cedar or pine shavings. These litters contribute to respiratory problems and liver damage.
- **Do you allow sibling/sibling or parent/child mating?** Answer should be a resounding “No!” Inbreeding contributes to physical deformities and health problems.
- **What is your policy on “culling?”** Culling is a euphemism for killing the babies who did not turn out as desired. Breeders usually cull any rabbit who is actually physically deformed. Many also cull those with treatable problems like malocclusion or those who are the weakest. Some breeders may actually cull a rabbit just because he has “imperfect” markings for the breed! Keep in mind that when you purchase a rabbit from a breeder you are encouraging her breeding policies, even if the rabbit you take is one that would otherwise be culled.

Arrange to visit those breeders whose answers you are comfortable with. Resist the urge to visit a breeder who does not meet your standards unless you are willing to make a conscious decision to adopt a rabbit who is likely to have physical problems. When visiting a breeder's facilities look for the following:

- Clean cages with room for the rabbit to move around.

- Ample supply of food, hay, and clean water.
- Rabbits with a healthy appearance — clear, dry eyes and nose; healthy looking coat; bright, alert, inquisitive attitude.

Ask about the possibility of adopting an imperfectly marked rabbit or one with incisor malocclusion. Rabbits with malocclusion actually make excellent house pets since they are less able to damage woodwork, furniture, and cords.

Pet Stores

The strategy for selecting a pet store is similar to that for selecting a breeder. Start with phone calls to find out which ones have the breed of rabbit you are interested in purchasing. However, keep in mind that pet stores do not always give you correct information about breeds. If the store carries the type of rabbit you are interested in, continue with the following questions:

- **How old are your rabbits and how old were they when they were taken from their mother?** Rabbits should stay with their mothers until at least six and preferably eight weeks of age.
- **What type of pellets do you feed?** The “gourmet” pellets that contain dried fruit, nuts, and/or seeds are high in fat and are known to cause health problems.
- **What kind of hay do you feed?** Pet stores should provide young rabbits with alfalfa hay.
- **What kind of bedding do you use?** Beware of those who use cedar or pine shavings either as litter or bedding. These litters contribute to respiratory problems and liver damage.
- **What do you do with rabbits that are not sold before they reach adolescence?** If the store also carries snakes, be prepared to hear that they are used for snake food.

Arrange to visit those pet stores whose answers you are comfortable with. As with breeders, resist the urge to visit a store that does not meet your standards unless you are willing to make a conscious decision to adopt a rabbit who is likely to have physical problems. When visiting a pet store look for the following:

- A clean environment with plenty of room for number of rabbits housed.
- Ample supply of food, hay, and clean water.
- Rabbits with a healthy appearance — clear, dry eyes and nose; healthy looking coat; bright, alert, inquisitive attitude. Rabbits can easily catch bacterial infections from each other. If one rabbit in a group is sneezing or has drippy eyes, all rabbits who come in contact with him have been exposed to infection.

Good Samaritans may choose to purchase the sick or undernourished rabbit in the group. If you make this choice, be prepared to see a veterinarian immediately and expect a long, uphill battle to good health. Know, however, that good health is possible and that if you succeed you will also have rescued a rabbit who might not have survived otherwise. Most people who nurse a rabbit back to health develop an incredibly deep bond with the rabbit during his illness — a bond that lasts a lifetime.