

# Rabbit Care Basics – Getting Started



Rabbits can be a wonderful addition to your homestead. Once you know the rabbit care basics you will be on your way to successfully raising rabbits for meat, fiber, or pets. You will notice several areas of importance concerning rabbit care. Many are the basics that you need to learn and provide for any animal you bring to your homestead. Other rabbit care points are specific to the species. If you provide the basics for all life you will increase the odds of having healthy animals. These basics include proper food, shelter and health care.

# What Should You Feed the Rabbits?

Following the stereotype of Bugs Bunny munching on carrots all day long will not provide proper nutrition for your rabbits. Rabbits main source of food should be high quality forage. Hay, grasses, and pellet rations provide this basic food. The commercial rabbit pellets are mostly compressed timothy hay or alfalfa hay with added vitamins and minerals. Protein level for dry does, bucks and growing kits is recommended to be 12 to 15 percent. The multicolored bits in some commercial rations should be limited and fed as a treat. While not necessarily bad food, your rabbits should be eating primarily forage. Rabbits eat sporadically throughout the day but primarily eat in the evening.

## Water!

Water is the most important nutrient when discussing rabbit care basics. Make water readily available at all times of the day and night. Making sure it is clean and fresh is an important task to perform at least once daily. On our farm, we check twice daily for food and water availability.

Water can be available in a sturdy flat bottomed bowl or a traditional hanging water bottle if you are using cages. We use a habitat style of housing for our rabbits so a water bottle doesn't work for us. The thick stoneware bowls are nice and easy to clean but often break during freezing weather. The Fortex brand rubber feed bowls are a good choice. If water freezes in these, twist like an old fashioned ice cube tray and the ice pops right out. These bowls last a long long time.



## Rabbit Housing

Speaking of housing, how will you take care of the rabbit care basics of secure housing? Rabbits can be housed in many different ways. House rabbits can be trained to use a litter box and freely roam the house, when you are supervising. You should take precautions and remove or guard cords and other chewable items from the curious bunny.

Farm raised rabbits are often kept in a rabbitry. This could be a building or a three sided shed that provides shelter from the sun, wind and rain. Cages are stacked in the rabbitry with each rabbit having it's own cage. The cages usually have an

open end that is wire and an enclosed end for sleeping, kindling, and hiding when they feel threatened. The wire cage bottom should have a section that is solid of some sort to allow the rabbit to rest without always sitting on wire. When the rabbit sits on the wire cage floor all the time, the feet and hocks can become injured.

Rabbit housing can be as simple or elaborate as you like. The time involved in building a natural rabbit habitat varies. If you feel this is the path you want to take, you will want to read this e-book about Habitat Housing for Rabbits. The eBook I wrote includes plans and instructions for building an area like we did for our outside bunnies. *Habitat Housing for Rabbits* is also available on Amazon.



## Building an Outdoor Habitat

The first step to building an outdoor rabbit habitat is to prepare the ground. Some type of wire should be laid first, then a layer of thick tarp or used poly feed bags, to prohibit digging out of the enclosure. Cover the area with a few inches of dirt, mulch, or sawdust, to allow the rabbit to dig and scratch in a natural environment. This system has worked well for us with outdoor rabbits. Enclose the area with solid, sturdy fencing surrounding the hutch and the natural play area.

In the house you will need to provide water and food, plus any

treats you want to give to the rabbit. For bedding we use plain pine shavings. In hot weather the rabbits prefer to lie directly on the cooler floor of the hutch and will kick the shavings out of the way. This is fine as long as they have an area to use for eliminating waste.



## **Rabbit Care Basics for Good Health**

Being aware of signs of illness in your rabbits will make a big difference in the animals recovery. Once a rabbit becomes ill, you must act quickly or you will likely lose the animal. One way to determine illness is to know the signs of a healthy rabbit. Healthy animals will be moving around freely and not sitting in a corner looking unkempt and depressed. Healthy animals are alert, interested in food and treats, and aware of the surrounding area. Check the fecal droppings for signs of runny discharge, diarrhea, unusual bad odor, or color.

# Viral and Bacterial Illness

Sneezing and watery eyes and nose can be a sign of allergies, dust in the hutch, a mild illness, or snuffles. Snuffles, or Pasturella, is a serious viral illness that is highly contagious. Treatment with antibiotics, usually Duramycin or Penicillin can cure the infection if caught early enough. It can travel swiftly through a rabbit colony so make sure to do regular health checks with your rabbits.

Sore Hocks occurs when rabbits have thin fur padding on their hocks and rest on wire cage floor. Using a piece of plywood over part of the cage floor gives the rabbit somewhere to rest that doesn't contribute to the issue.



# Parasites

In the parasite area, coccidiosis and enteritis are the main threats to your rabbit's health. Muroid Enteritis is a mucus diarrhea that quickly causes a rabbit to lose condition and

strength. In young rabbits the result is often death within 24 hours.

**Coccidiosis** is caused by an over abundance of coccidia in the digestive tract. The rabbits suffering from coccidiosis do not thrive, often look sickly, and are likely susceptible to other ailments too. Coccidiosis can be treated with a coccidiostat added to the water. The form of coccidiosis that infects the liver of rabbits is harder to treat. It is less likely to occur in mature rabbits, as they are more resistant to infections.

**Bot Fly Infestations**— Bot flies lay their eggs on the fur of the rabbit and the larvae migrate into the rabbit through the skin. It's a fairly disgusting thing to treat as the grown larvae emerges from the rabbit through a skin hole leaving a gaping wound that can lead to infection.

You can prevent many illnesses and infections with good ventilation, regular cleaning and manure management. Flies are attracted to wet manure and bedding and breed in this condition. Keeping the cage and area clean and dry will make the area less attractive to flies which carry disease.

## **Rabbit Care Basics in First Aid**

In our first aid box we keep supplies that can be used immediately if a rabbit is sick or injured. Here are the items we feel need to be on hand to tackle an emergency.

VetRX – For relief and prevention of snuffles and pneumonia in rabbits

Vibactra – all natural, organic herbal support against viral and bacterial infections

BlueKote -Antiseptic and Anti-Fungal spray for wounds and skin infections. Coats with a blue coloring, that is mostly needed for chickens but won't do any harm when used on rabbits

Vetericyn Wound Care spray – alcohol free antibacterial spray for all animal care. This is my go-to product for almost every type of wound, except around the eye. (see Vetericyn Eye Gel)

Vetericyn Eye Gel – For irritations and infection control in or near the eye (see also Vetericyn Pink Eye Gel)

Vet wrap – Cohesive stretch bandage for wounds and injury protection

Gauze pads – 2 x 2 pads for most rabbit needs

scissors, tweezers, flashlight

Neosporin Triple antibiotic ointment

## **Herbal Health Care for Rabbits**

Herbs are a wonderful way to supplement your rabbits feed. The nutrients in herbs will help rabbits stay healthy and build strong immune systems. I particularly like to give my rabbits fresh or dried thyme. Thyme is a great support for respiratory health. Parsley, lemon balm and oregano are also favorites in our rabbit family. I highly recommend regular additions of fresh or dried herbs as part of your rabbit care basics.



## Other Treats

I try to bring treats to our rabbits frequently but not every day. In addition to their pellets, hay, herbs and water, I bring an occasional banana, strawberry tops, fresh greens (leaf lettuce, kale, and Swiss chard) and apple slices. Fruit can lead to runny poo if given too often therefor, keep fruit as an occasional treat.

Your rabbits will love being part of the family and the farm life. Many farms have a breeding pair or two that provide meat for the family table. Other people raise Angora rabbits for spinning fiber. Our rabbits are currently enjoying pet status on the farm, and we have one rabbit who retired to our house. Once you provide the rabbit care basics you are ready to start raising rabbits for your homestead. Are you raising rabbits? Would you consider rabbits as a part of your homesteading journey? What would you add to the rabbit care basics

discussed here?





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From A FarmGirl in the Making

The Fewell Homestead – Rabbit Care for Beginners

