

# What to know before adopting or fostering a pet rabbit

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**When I moved two years ago, I knew I wanted to volunteer for a local animal organization, the closest of which was a rabbit rescue. I didn't know much about rabbits, but I decided to take the plunge and fostered a large gray rabbit named Mabon. Eager to do right by my new charge, I embarked on a crash course in rabbit care and gained a newfound appreciation for an often-misunderstood pet.**

## Rabbit truths vs. tales

Rabbits traditionally have been viewed as "starter pets" who can be kept in a hutch outside or a small cage in the house. These days, savvy rabbit owners have better setups: Some bunny-proof their homes and let their rabbits freely roam, while others (like me) have a dedicated room for their rabbit and let them hop around the rest of the house supervised.

Unfortunately, there's still a lot of misinformation around rabbit care. Many pet stores sell products—like tiny cages, salt licks, drip water bottles and sugary treats—that don't meet rabbits' needs.

Before bringing Mabon home, I went to the pet care aisle and quickly purchased products with photos of rabbits on them. This is a common mistake, says

Dr. Krista Keller, a professor at the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine. "Unfortunately, consumers are blasted with so much marketing and so many products, and it's pretty rare that I would approve of that product." Many rabbit treats are full of unhealthy sugars, and some pellet foods contain corn kernels, seeds and nuts, which can cause stomach troubles. Owners should look for timothy hay-based pellets. "Humans look at pellets and think, 'Oh, that looks boring. My bunny wants some variety,'" says Paige Parsons, a board member with Rabbit.org Foundation. "But the truth is your bunny wants healthy food that tastes good and will not give them tummy troubles."

## The world of wabbits

The rabbits who live in our homes are the domesticated descendants of the European rabbit. As a prey species, they can be fearful around loud noises, generally don't like to be held and hide signs of illness.

Owners should be attuned to signs their rabbit is distressed or in pain. If they're fed the wrong foods, they can quickly develop life-threatening stomach problems. They have teeth that constantly grow and need proper food and toys to wear them down. Keller has seen rabbits develop overgrown teeth or teeth that curve outward due to improper diets.

In the wild, rabbits' lightweight bones

help them run from predators. In a home, they are at risk of fracturing or breaking a bone if a person picks them up and they squirm away. "This is, to me, one of the most important cautions to current or potential rabbit parents," says Dr. Barbara Hodges, program director at the HumaneVMA. "Proper handling and restraint, when necessary, of rabbits is absolutely essential to their health and longevity."

For new rabbit owners, the bathroom situation can seem a bit odd. Rabbits use a litter box lined with newspaper and topped with hay for their "business." They eat hay throughout the day, so their litter box is not just a bathroom

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