



Caring for Rabbits in Animal Shelters

If you work or volunteer for an animal shelter, we have materials that can help you better educate the public about rabbits, improve your rabbit adoption program, and better care for the rabbits staying at your shelter. Following are some places to start.

Housing Rabbits

All rabbits should be sheltered indoors, and to reduce stress levels for the sheltered rabbits, should be housed away from dogs; either in a rabbit-only room, a small animal room, or in the cat room. Housing rabbits outdoors will lead to not only rabbits being ignored by potential adopters but also to the perception that rabbits are “livestock.” In addition, they will be susceptible to a variety of parasites such as flies, fleas, mosquitoes and ticks, some of which can carry disease.

All rabbit cages should be 30 X 36 X 18 inches or larger and should be made with solid bottoms (no wire flooring, as this causes “sore hocks”). Litter boxes and rugs or towels to rest on should be provided. (Rabbits are easily litter box trained and will be much more adoptable when they are so trained.) Litter should be a rabbit-safe or organic litter (avoid softwood litters), and can be topped off with fresh hay for easier training. Every cage should be disinfected prior to a new rabbit inhabiting it. Various toys (for chewing, tossing and rolling; can be rabbit toys as well as bird and cat toys) should be provided as well, and if space permits, a cardboard box with a hole cut out can be used for privacy. The room in which the rabbits live should be temperature controlled just like the rest of the building.

Cages and litter boxes should be cleaned every morning and as needed should the cage become soiled from soft stool or diarrhea, excessive urine, or from water spilled from crocks or water bottles. Basic household vinegar, while not a disinfectant, is a terrific cleaner for used on rabbit cages & boxes when there is no need for disinfecting (ie when the same rabbit occupies the cage.) Routine disinfectant should be used when new rabbits arrive.

Intact male and female rabbits 3 months of age and older should not be housed in mixed gender cages or playgroups. Intact females are not to be housed with their intact male babies once the babies reach 2-3 months of age.

Feeding and Dietary Guidelines

Rabbits should be fed daily in accordance with individual needs based on age and overall physical condition. Diet should consist of plain alfalfa pellets (in limited quantity based on size and condition of rabbit; ¼ to ½ cup daily is adequate for 6 pound rabbits), unlimited oat, grass or timothy hay and fresh vegetables (dark green leafy vegetables, carrots, and herbs are great) daily.

Fresh water should be replenished as needed but no less than once daily, and can be offered in either hanging water bottles or heavy crocks. Every attempt should be made to keep water free of flying insects, as well as any type of build up of food, hair, feces, fur, etc.

Food and water bowls should be replaced with clean and sanitized bowls each day.

Grooming

Rabbits should be groomed as needed by volunteers or staff.

Bathing should not be used unless the rabbit is extremely dirty, as it can be traumatic or even fatal.

Toenail trimming should be performed at time of intake examination if indicated. Rabbit volunteers and staff who are experienced in the proper techniques of restraint and nail trimming are encouraged to perform nail trims as needed.

Handling

To immobilize a rabbit, press gently to floor or table surface with a towel. To pick up, think of a rabbit as you would a cat. The most common ways to hold a rabbit include:

- Carry like a football, nose tucked into the crook of your arm, or
- Wrap in a towel like a bunny burrito, or
- Support front half with one hand and use the other hand to cup the hind-quarters into a C shape, facing away from you.
- Put rabbits down rump first (back them into cage) to avoid them leaping from your arms

Exercise

Every effort should be made to exercise the rabbits each day. Rabbits should be allowed to play outside of the cage in a defined or designated area within the confines of a constructed pen (x-pen). This is a great opportunity for volunteers to not only allow rabbits to exercise, but to socialize with them as well.

For rabbits in isolation, the floor surface must be covered by a sheet or towel of adequate size to prevent contact with the floor and reduce possible cross contamination between rabbits. This cover is to be removed and placed in the dirty laundry immediately after the rabbit is placed back into its kennel.

Any rabbits determined to be a risk for infection to the general rabbit population must not share any sheet, bowl, litter pan or toy with any other rabbit at the time of exercise. Toys that cannot be sanitized must remain with the individual rabbit or disposed of immediately and may not be transferred to another rabbit.

Behavior Screening

Rabbits in a shelter environment may often exhibit “aggressive” behaviors such as lunging, biting, and growling. Some of these behaviors can be traced

to hormones in unspayed or unneutered rabbits, and other aggressive behaviors are associated with the territorial behavior many rabbits exhibit in a cage. Still other times rabbits behave aggressively because they are fearful and do not have many ways to show their fear. Staff and volunteers should be trained to deal with these types of behaviors, and should not assume that a rabbit who lunges is aggressive or is not adoptable.

Staff and volunteers should spend some time with each rabbit daily, petting and socializing the rabbit. Many rabbits who are brought to the shelter have never been handled in their adult lives and will thrive from this gentle attention.

Intake and Examination

All rabbits should receive an examination by a clinic technician within 24 hours of arrival at the facility. An exami-

nation by the veterinarian should follow at the next available scheduled date of the veterinarian in the facility.

As for all species in the shelter, priority is given to those animals with apparent or possible medical conditions. The veterinary staff will prioritize need after an examination and/or report from staff or volunteers regarding behavior, discharge, appetite, etc. that suggest a medical need.

The following should be attended to: Body weight, body temperature (normal temp for a rabbit is 102), teeth (drooling may indicate a tooth problem; malocclusion of the incisors or molars is a treatable condition), eyes (discharge is possible sign of infection, cloudy eyes is possible sign of disease and closed eyes may be sign of pain), ears (crusty debris could indicate mites; odorous white discharge could mean infection), skin (bite wounds need medical attention; flea dirt

Medical conditions in rabbits

Malocclusion. Rabbits with malocclusion should be assessed for possible treatment options. Malocclusion of the incisors can be treated by regular trimmings by trained staff or volunteers, or could be treated by surgical extraction if the veterinarian feels it is warranted. Rabbits with malocclusion make excellent house pets because they cannot chew furniture and cords.

Upper Respiratory Disease. Rabbits displaying ocular or nasal discharge should be cultured for potential pathogens if possible. These rabbits may display ocular and/or nasal discharge, and abscesses of tooth root or organs, including the eye. Rabbits who culture positive for a particular strain of bacteria should be treated with the proper antibiotic.

Rear limb paralysis. This is often from spinal fracture but may also be due to abscess formation in the brain or from overwhelming protozoal (single celled parasite—*Encephalitozoan cuniculii*) infection. This condition requires intensive management to prevent dermatitis caused from urine and stool accumulating on the coat, and often the rabbit requires assistance in urinating and gastrointestinal function may be compromised. Rabbit rescue groups should be called to assist with such special needs rabbits.

Vestibular Disease. This is usually manifested as a head tilt to one side or the other but may be as severe as extreme, continuous rolling to one side. This is due to inflammation of either the vestibular nerve

(a peripheral nerve) or the central nervous system (brain, brainstem, or spinal cord). Causes include chronic or acute infection by bacteria, viruses, protozoan organisms and tumors. Head tilt can often be successfully treated or managed with antibiotics.

Trauma, and/or fracture(s). All rabbits arriving at the shelter with evidence of external trauma should be assessed for overall body condition, and treated accordingly.

Coccidia. All rabbits with soft stool or diarrhea should be screened for intestinal parasites including coccidia. Coccidia positive rabbits will ideally be isolated from general population in Level 1 housing. All rabbits testing positive for coccidia will be placed on Albon for the prescribed therapy.

Gastrointestinal distress. Gastrointestinal distress in rabbits is identified by decreased stool volume, diarrhea, abnormal appearance of stool, perineal staining, lack of interest in food, and general malaise. The animal should be examined by the clinic staff within 24 hours of receiving the information. The exam will determine care needs and diagnostics.

Ectoparasites. Ticks, fleas and mites should be treated with the appropriate medications or parasiticide within 48 hours of findings. Rabbits displaying skin infections due to ectoparasites will be treated accordingly to resolve the skin condition.

can be treated with Advantage or carbar-mate flea powder; NEVER use Frontline; white flaking can be a sign of fur mites, which can be treated with flea powder or Ivermectin), feet (check for sores), fur (hair plucking from the chest is an indication that a rabbit may be pregnant or nursing), droppings and urine (normal urine can be white and creamy, yellow, or bright orange; stools should be plentiful (at least 50 per day), round and firm), and rear end (a messy rear can indicate infection or poor diet, and can be spot cleaned with Zap cleanser or a gentle soap and water). Finally, a toenail trimming should be performed in the intake examination unless the rabbit is unduly stressed.

All rabbits, unless a pre-existing medical condition prohibits it, should be scheduled for their spay or neuter surgery at the initial examination. Spay/neuter surgery obviously prevents accidental litters, but it also cuts down on negative behaviors such as spraying and some aggressive behavior, and for females, spaying prevents uterine, mammary and ovarian cancers.

Facilitating Adoptions

Rabbits will be more easily adopted if they are “displayed” in such a way as to make them seem like the fun, interesting, companions that they are. Cages should be outfitted with toys and litter boxes, to demonstrate that they are litter box trained and interactive; the cage should have a cage card filled out by an attentive staff member or volunteer with detailed information on the personality of the rabbit; and the shelter should have posters and flyers in different parts of the building extolling the virtues of adopting a rabbit. A rabbit can also be displayed in an x-pen in the front of the building to show off to the public. In addition, if the shelter has a store, merchandise should be sold which can demonstrate what wonderful companions rabbits are, such as a great variety of toys sold by rabbit-friendly companies (ask us for a list of vendors).

Rabbit adopters should receive rabbit-specific adoption counseling and a comprehensive adoption packet addressing general rabbit care issues, including education on rabbit handling and a strong recommendation to house rabbits indoors. House Rabbit Society has dozens of handouts available for animal shelters

to use for this purpose. Families with children should be interviewed to ensure that the adults want the rabbit as much as the children do, and families with dogs need specific counseling on living with a dog and a rabbit. An additional item that shelters can provide to adopters would be a copy of the House Rabbit Handbook. Potential rabbit adopters can also be asked to watch a video on living with a house rabbit before adoption. Finally, the pre-adoption interview should include making sure that the adopter knows what is needed to have a rabbit, and what items will need to be purchased (housing, litter box, toys, bowls, food, litter, etc.) as well as what needs to happen in the home before the rabbit can arrive (bunny proofing, etc.)

All rabbit adoptions should occur with a signed adoption contract and an adoption fee that is over \$20. Under-age rabbits who are not yet neutered or spayed should be adopted with a spay/neuter deposit taken. The shelter should encourage adopters who live with a spayed or neutered rabbit to bring that rabbit in to meet a companion; volunteers and staffed should be trained to facilitate such bondings.



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