



Rabbit Handbook

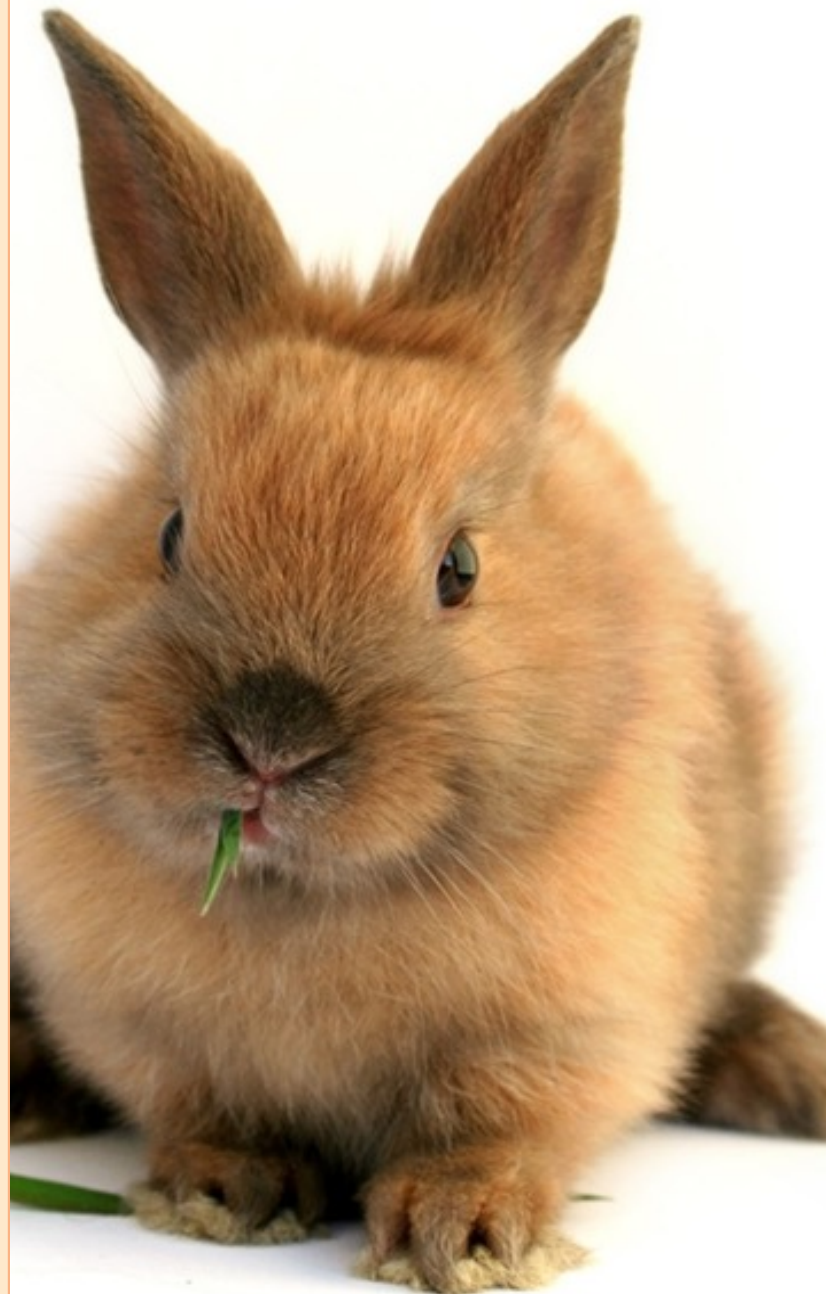
Information and advice from the Oregon Humane Society for a happy life with your pet.

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Other Rabbit Resources:

Rabbit Advocates - rabbitadvocates.org

House Rabbit Society - rabbit.org





Before Bringing Home Your Rabbit

Having a rabbit can be a wonderful experience. They are fun, interesting pets, but they also have specific requirements and needs.

There are many things to consider carefully before adopting a rabbit.

Did you know:

- A rabbit's average life span is between 8 and 12 years.
- Mature rabbits are ground-loving animals and mostly prefer to have all four furry paws on the ground at all times.
- Most rabbits are not comfortable being carried around or being held for long periods of time and may nip, bite or scratch in an effort to get away. This makes them more suitable to older children and adults.
- Rabbits are very sensitive to sound. Households that are active and noisy may create a situation that leads to health and behavior issues. Ask yourself if you have a safe, secure, and quiet place for the new bunny away from commotion.

- Rabbits are not low-maintenance pets. Attention to their needs on a daily basis is vital to their well-being. They need daily enclosure or pen cleaning, a consistent diet, and daily interaction with their family.
- Other animals may try to chase or harm a rabbit. If you have other pets, is there a way to keep them apart, and the rabbit safe, while still providing for your rabbit's individual social and environmental needs?
- Rabbits are prone to complex medical issues and will need to see a small animal (or exotic) veterinarian throughout their lives.
- Rabbits love to play with toys and throw them around.





Supplies to have ready before adopting:

Appropriate Housing:

Your rabbit will need an enclosure that is already set up and ready to go when you bring them home, so they don't have to wait in a carrier while you set everything up.

This includes:

- Food - high-quality rabbit pellets and timothy hay.
- Litter box - set up with hay or rabbit-appropriate litter (pellets or Carefresh/aspen bedding).
- Water bottle and bowl - most rabbits prefer water bowls over bottles. Rabbits will pick up and throw their bowls, so providing a ceramic bowl they can't easily tip over is ideal.
- Toys and hiding areas - providing appropriate hiding spots like huts and boxes is important so your rabbit feels safe. Providing wooden and plastic toys is a great source of enrichment as rabbits love to play and chew!

Cleaning Supplies:

- White Vinegar or Nature's Miracle to clean up potty accidents and spot clean enclosure.

Grooming Supplies:

- A slicker brush will work great for most bunnies. A comb can work well for longer haired rabbits as well.
- Nail clippers like you would use for a cat are perfect for rabbits.



Handling (picking up/putting down)

Hold rabbits gently but firmly, ensure one hand always supports their back and hindquarters. Help them feel secure by holding all four feet against your body.

Reduce stress and minimize the risk of injury by **using the minimum level of restraint necessary**. This depends on the animal's temperament, health status and the activity undertaken.

Supervise children at all times, and only adults or responsible older children should be able to pick up rabbits.

Avoid placing rabbits on slippery surfaces. Placing a towel down can help make rabbits feel more secure.

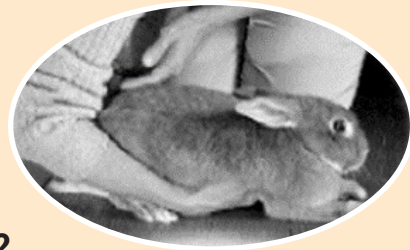
Be careful when putting your rabbit back down after holding. Follow the above steps for picking up, in reverse, as rabbits may scratch when using their hindlegs to push off you.

A few key steps:



Step 1

In a kneeling position, pet with one hand, while sliding the other hand down bunny's side.



Step 2

With your arm at bunny's side, slide it under his torso, while your (petting) hand moves toward his rump.



Step 3

Support bunny's chest with your hand and his torso with your arm. Lift, while the other (unseen) hand supports the rump.



Step 4

Once bunny is lifted, hug him securely against you with one arm, supporting his body and the other arm supporting his hindquarters.



Communication

Communication between two species takes time and patience as both parties learn to speak a new language.

The following sounds and actions will aid you in learning “rabbit talk” and consistency on your part will aid your rabbit in learning “human talk.”

Vocalizations

- **Growling** indicates an annoyed rabbit and is usually provoked by an assumed attack. It may also be followed by a lunge, scratch, or bite so it’s important to pay attention when you hear this sound.
- **Teeth grinding or loud squealing** can indicate pain in your rabbit and should be dealt with immediately by finding the source and/or visiting your veterinarian.
- **Purring** is a sign of contentment.
- **Chirruping** means the rabbit is happy. It usually occurs when the rabbit is eating.

Body Language

- **Thumping or tapping** occurs when the rabbit is very frightened or very excited. In the world of rabbits, thumping is used in burrows to announce danger to the other rabbits.
- **Tense body and an upright tail** indicates excitement.
- **Tense sitting position with ears laid back** means the rabbit is ready to defend itself.

- **Rubbing with underside of chin** on all kinds of objects indicates that these things are part of his territory. Both male and female rabbits mark their territory this way.
- **Nudging with muzzle** means your rabbit wants attention.
- **Rolling over on his/her side or back** is a sign of pure delight and total comfort with his surroundings.
- **Licking** means your rabbit has fully accepted you and is showing you affection.
- **Binky** is a unique and acrobatic jump accompanied by twisting the body or kicking the legs. It means they are feeling very happy and playful.





Free-Roam Rabbits & Rabbit-Proofing

With some training and house-proofing, rabbits can be free-roaming around your home! This can have enormous benefits, most importantly that it gives your rabbit plenty of space to exercise, explore and really be part of the family like a dog or cat would be.

Before your rabbit can hop around the house, you want to be sure to rabbit-proof first:

- Most rabbits love to chew, so you must protect all your exposed electrical, computer, and telephone cords. Hide the cords if you can, but it is best to cover the cords with heavy plastic tubing if possible. Other sturdier options are to use hard plastic telephone wire covers, split loom tubing, PVC pipe, or computer cord covers. Check these covers frequently to make sure they are intact.
- Relocate house plants. Rabbits will eat any plant within their reach.
- Wooden furniture, wall moldings, and rugs can become victims of a chewing rabbit. If they are chewers or diggers (and many are), you can try using Bitter Apple or lime on the items being chewed to discourage this behavior. You can also get plastic corner covers to protect moldings and place linoleum, carpet squares, or sea-grass mats where they are digging.
- A safety recommendation would be using outlet plugs in outlets rabbits have access to and baby-safe cabinet latches for keeping rabbits out of kitchen cupboards.



Litter Box Training

To start, confinement and supervision is the key.

If a rabbit is allowed to urinate and defecate wherever they like from the beginning, they will be much harder to train. At first, keep your rabbit primarily in his or her enclosure, with a litter pan. Place a litter box in the enclosure and note where your rabbit eliminates. He may start using the box or may pick another corner of the enclosure to use as a toilet. If this is the case, move the litter box to the area your rabbit seems to prefer. Flexibility on litter box placement may be necessary both in and out of the enclosure. Keep your rabbit's hay and food bowl in the litter box. Much like cows and horses, rabbits usually defecate while eating. Once your rabbit is using the litter pan in the enclosure, allow the rabbit out of the enclosure in a limited area. Provide a litter box within this area, and perhaps make it enticing by placing a treat or favorite toy in the box. If you notice your rabbit tends to head to one area to do her business, consider putting the box there.

Accidents will happen, and punishment has no place in training a rabbit. Your rabbit will absolutely not be able to make a connection with physical punishment and eliminating outside the litter box. If you catch your rabbit in the act, calmly and gently take him or her to the litter box immediately. But if you don't physically catch your rabbit urinating or defecating, it is too late for your rabbit to make the connection. Just clean up and watch your rabbit a little more closely next time (clean the spot with diluted vinegar or a commercial pet stain/odor remover). The key is to get your rabbit to the box before he goes, so a trip to the litter box every 10 minutes during playtime can be helpful.

Over time, your rabbit will probably develop a preference for using the box, and then the amount of freedom you give your rabbit can be increased. You may need to provide more boxes as you allow your rabbit access to more space (rabbits may not go far in search of a box, so have them handy). Again, if your rabbit repeatedly chooses one place in his room to eliminate, consider putting or moving a litter box there. Try to work with what your rabbit naturally wants to do, but if the location they choose is inconvenient, you can try putting a litter box there for a while and then gradually move it to a better spot. Sometimes, placing a bowl of food where you don't want them to potty works too.

The process sounds daunting, but usually goes smoothly as long as the owner works with the rabbit's natural tendencies and provides undivided attention to the rabbit during its free time in the beginning.

Establishing a routine with your rabbit will also help. Sometimes a previously trained rabbit will get a little careless, and this usually means backtracking and restricting freedom until your rabbit is trained again.





Marking

Older rabbits are usually easier to train than young bunnies, as they do not need to eliminate as frequently and their natural desire for cleanliness is more developed. However, once rabbits hit puberty the desire to mark territory becomes very strong, even previously well-trained rabbits may start urine marking and spraying as well as defecating to mark territory. Marking behavior will often result from a variety of stressors along with the natural instinct to stake out a territory. Urine marking does not always take the form of spraying, and both males and females mark, although it is far more common with intact (not neutered) males.

Have your rabbit spayed or neutered by 4-6 months of age. This has many health benefits for your rabbit and will make litter training easier. It will also reduce urine spraying and other marking behaviors. Getting the surgery done at a young age works best - once marking becomes an established behavior, it may be very difficult to litter train the rabbit.

Make sure the rabbit feels secure in its home. Try to avoid reaching into the enclosure and pulling a rabbit out, as this may make the rabbit feel threatened and more likely to mark. Be sure to do enclosure maintenance (cleaning the enclosure, etc.) while the rabbit is out of the enclosure.

Sometimes territorial marking is a temporary situation and may occur in response to some sort of stress, change in routine, change in the household, or addition of another pet (particularly another rabbit). Often, once the rabbit no longer feels stressed or is confident his territory is secure, he will stop marking.

With all that said, rabbits are prone to urinary tract health problems, so if there is a sudden persistent change in urination habits or in the color and amount of urine, a trip to your veterinarian is in order. This is especially true if your rabbit starts urinating small amounts frequently (most rabbits urinate infrequently and in large volumes).



Choosing a Litter Box

Choose litter boxes that are a good size for your rabbit. Any box that is waterproof and holds hay can be used as a litter box. If your rabbit has a habit of throwing their box, punch holes in the rim of the box and secure it to their enclosure with twist ties, wire or clips. Plastic storage bins with their high walls make great litter boxes.

Empty and clean the litter boxes daily. If your rabbit refuses to use their box, they might be telling you it's time for a change. Clean your boxes with white vinegar and hot water to disinfect and remove urine deposits. For accidents outside the litter box, clean up thoroughly with vinegar, club soda, or Nature's Miracle.



Housing

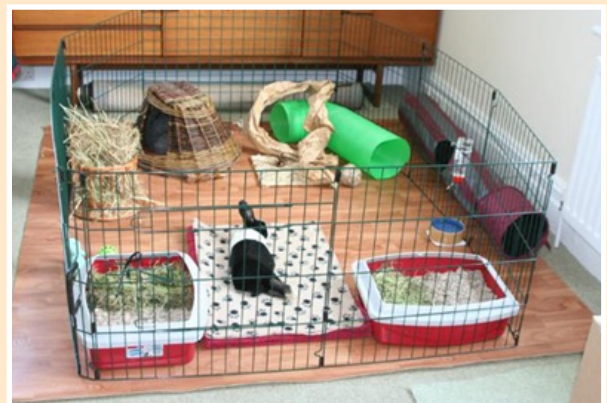
Your rabbit's enclosure is its whole world. Your rabbit cannot hop on the bus to the gym for exercise or visit the store to pick out a new bed to sleep in.

As a rabbit owner it is your responsibility to make sure that your rabbit's accommodation meets all its physical and mental needs.

Your rabbit should have an enclosure even if they are free-roam most of the day, so they have a home base and can be safely secured at night, or when you aren't home.

- Enclosure should be at least 4 times the size of the rabbit in each direction.
 - 36" by 48" (12 sq. ft.) for smaller rabbits.
 - 48" by 48" (16 sq. ft.) for larger rabbits. A wider open floor space is ideal.
 - You can enlarge the enclosure by using additional x-pens. This can be a good step before having your rabbit be free roaming, or in place of free roaming.
 - Wire floors (even those with very narrow spacing) are uncomfortable and can cause sores and injuries to feet.
 - A solid floor should be used and is easier to clean.
- Bigger is better!
- Some rabbits can and will jump over barriers - covered enclosures may be necessary for some buns. The ceiling should be tall enough that your bun can stand up comfortably.

- Doors should be large enough to get a litter pan and rabbit through easily.
 - Having two entry/exit points is best.
- Mats can provide traction on solid floors.
- Fleece blankets and towels can also be provided as long as your rabbit is not unraveling and eating them.
- Avoid cedar and pine shavings. Aspen, straw, and hay are good alternatives for substrate.





Enrichment

Paper: shredded newspaper, or paper bags with the handles removed. Place your rabbit's favorite food in brown paper to unwrap!

Cardboard: boxes with holes cut into them make great hiding places. Tubes can be stuffed with hay as part of their daily ration.

Tunnels: plastic and fabric tunnels can be purchased commercially. Create tunnels from cardboard boxes/tubes.

Objects to manipulate or throw: untreated straw, wicker, sea-grass mats and baskets, balls and plastic flower pots. Solid plastic baby rattles, stacking cups, and some robust cat and parrot toys can make good rabbit toys.

Digging opportunities: many rabbits will perform this behavior. Safe places for rabbits to dig include litter trays or cardboard boxes filled with shredded paper and other bunny safe enrichments.

Places to mark territory: ensure there are objects or areas within rabbits' home where they can mark their territory using chin secretions, urine and droppings. Rabbits gently rub their chin on an object/against part of their enclosure, transferring secretions from their scent gland onto the item, marking their territory, making it smell familiar and reassuring. These scents are not detectable by people.



Diet

Treats: Small amounts of fruit once a week, includes carrots.

Pellets: High quality pellets, no dried fruit or seeds.

Vegetables: 1 cup various greens daily.

Hay: Unlimited grass hay, consult with your vet.



Be sure to consult with your veterinarian on proper diet for your rabbit's optimum health.

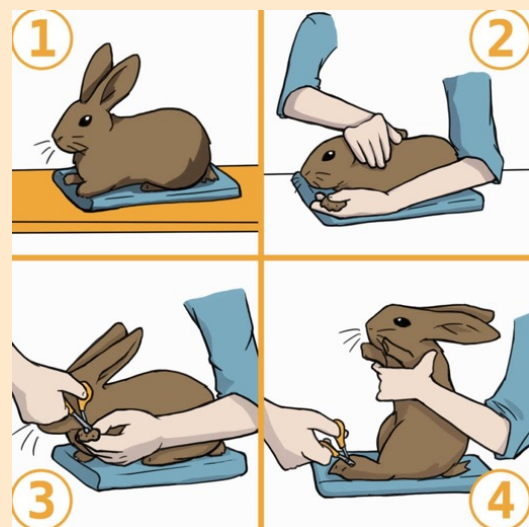
Grooming

Like any animal, rabbits need regular brushing and nail trims. Especially with longer haired breeds, rabbits shed, and can get painfully matted without proper care.

Rabbits do not need baths, unless they are covered in a dangerous substance, which they can't clean off themselves.

Nail trims can take practice for both rabbit and rabbit parent. Calmly practice touching your rabbit's feet. Making it a more positive experience than a stressful one will help with the next time you try.

Take care to avoid cutting the quick (vein) of the nail, as this will be painful and cause the nail to bleed.



Male rabbits may need boar cleaning from time to time as well. This is gently cleaning any debris away from the urethra, when necessary, as rabbits can get dirty where they can't quite reach when grooming themselves.



Rabbit to Rabbit Introductions

Rabbits are social creatures, and most do well in a pair.

Male-female pairings (if both are spayed/neutered) typically work the best. Same-sex pairings can work but it can be harder to find a pair that gets along long-term.

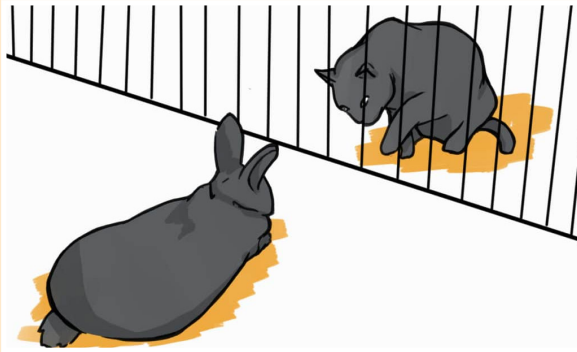
It can take anywhere from a few days to several months to establish a relationship between your rabbits. Some just aren't a good match and won't get along.

Starting introductions:

- Starting with two altered rabbits living separately, bring the two together in a **NEUTRAL** territory, a place where neither rabbit has been before. Familiarize yourself with bunny body language, as you'll have to know if they are acting appropriately or not.
- The first few "dates" should be short and sweet. Try to end them on a positive note, even if it is just a few minutes long.
- Mounting behaviors are common. If one or both rabbits are constantly trying to mount or chase one another, it could quickly turn into a fight, and they should be given break.

- Behaviors like laying down/relaxing next to each other and grooming each other are very good signs that they are getting off to a good start! One bunny will often be groomed by the other.
- If the bunnies are doing well together, they can start to spend more time together. They should still have separate enclosures, but can spend exercise time together, always supervised.
- After 6 weeks of successful bonding and supervised playtime, the buns can start to live together!
 - It's important to increase the living space for 2 rabbits and adding new items can help reduce tension around resources. Having 2 sources of water, hay, and hiding places can help the bunnies get along as well.
 - 16-20 sq ft. of enclosure space is recommended for 2 rabbits. Bigger is better!
- Once bonded, the bunnies will need to be together at all times. If separated, even just for a vet visit or overnight, it can cause stress to both rabbits and potentially break their bond.





Rabbits & Other Pets

Rabbits can coexist with other pets like dogs, cats, and guinea pigs! However, this entirely depends on your rabbit and your other pets. If your dog or cat is prey-driven, and likes to chase small animals, it is probably best to keep your rabbit separate from them. When rabbits are scared, they can panic, thrash, or flee, which becomes an extra fun game for your chase-driven dog or cat.

If you have calm, social animals at home, you can try to do very slow and careful introductions at your rabbit's pace. Keeping your dog on leash the first few times they are meeting without a barrier is important, in case you need to hold your dog back. If your rabbit can approach and sniff calmly with your dog or cat, they can spend more supervised time together.

Rabbits and guinea pigs have very similar care needs, like housing and diet, and won't typically fight like they would with a member of the same species. Typically, this can become a harmonious living situation. However, not all guinea pigs or rabbits will want to share their space with each other.

Common Ailments & Illnesses

Malocclusion

When the incisors aren't aligned properly, they won't be worn down through the normal process of eating and they will grow too long. This can cause overgrown teeth that can damage the tongue, cheeks, and gums of your rabbit. A high fiber diet can assist your rabbit naturally wearing the teeth, but a veterinarian will also need to trim the teeth regularly to prevent them getting too long. Occasionally your veterinarian may recommend that the incisors are removed if there are recurring dental issues.

Urine

Rabbit urine varies from yellow to red and from clear to cloudy. Urine sludge can be caused by too much calcium in the diet. If your rabbit strains or has thick urine you should consult your rabbit-savvy veterinarian.

Hairball

Since rabbits are unable to vomit, excessive hair intake can lead to a blockage. When your rabbit is shedding it is recommended to brush them daily. Some signs your rabbit may be blocked include anorexia, decreased or no stool output, stool strung together by hair and lethargy. If you suspect your rabbit has a hairball consult your veterinarian.

GI Stasis

This is when the digestive system slows down or stops completely. Bad bacteria then builds up in the intestines and releases gas into the system, causing very painful bloating and further decreasing a rabbit's motivation to eat or drink. This is a condition that requires an immediate vet visit.



Common Ailments & Illnesses (continued)

Cecotropes

These are small soft fecal pellets resembling a cluster of grapes. Cecotropes contain nutrients essential to your rabbit's health. Rabbits ingest them directly from the anus, and cecotropes should never, or rarely, be seen. The cecotropes are softer than regular pellets with a stronger odor and should not be confused with actual diarrhea.

Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease Virus (RHDV)

RHDV is a virus carried by wild rabbits that is very deadly. It is important to talk to a vet about getting the RHDV vaccine for your rabbit. Keeping your rabbit indoors is the best thing you can do to prevent exposure.

Pasteurella

This bacterium is common in the home environment. Signs are respiratory problems, eye or nose discharge and head tilt. This is easily transmitted from one rabbit to another. Antibiotics may sometimes be necessary to control the bacteria.

Wounds

With any wound or scratch consult your veterinarian before treating. Wounds left untreated may quickly turn into an abscess requiring surgery and antibiotic therapy.

Parasites

Ear mites produce itchy debris and inflammation in the ear. Rabbits may inflict wounds to their ears due to scratching or shaking their head.

Fur mites (*Cheyletiella*) usually occur on the back between the shoulder blades and look like flaky dandruff. Severe cases may cause hair loss.

Coccidia are internal parasites that affect the liver or intestine. Usually only young or stressed rabbits are affected. Signs may include diarrhea, lethargy, weight loss or poor weight gain.



When to See a Vet

Warning signs include:

- Rabbit doesn't eat anything for 12 hours.
- Repeated sneezing, nasal or eye discharge.
- Unconsciousness or inability to respond to stimulation.
- Obvious behavior changes.
- Gasping for air or stretching neck and head up.
- Seizures, acting drunk, rolling/tilted head.
- Uncontrolled bleeding.
- Blow out diarrhea.
- Known ingestion of a toxic substance or poisoning.
- Nonproductive straining to urinate.
- Limb dangling or unwilling to bear weight on a leg.
- Inability to use hind legs.

Remember to stay calm and minimize your rabbit's stress level. Stabilize your rabbit in a quiet place in a carrier.

Call your small animal veterinarian. Tell them the symptoms your bunny is exhibiting, what care you have already given, and when you expect to arrive.

Make sure you have the vet's phone number and good directions with you before you leave.