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 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,
- Wrap in a towel like a bunny burrito,
- 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 examination and/or report from staff or 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 could indicate mites; odorous discharge could mean infection).

**Medical conditions in rabbits**

**Malocclusion.** Rabbits with malocclusion should be accessed 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 may 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.

**Ectoparastes.** Ticks, fleas and mites should be treated with the appropriate medications or parasiticide within 48 hours of findings. Rabbits displaying skin infections due to ectoparastes 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 indi-
cation 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 trim-
ing should be performed in the intake 
examination unless the rabbit is unduly 
stressed.

Facilitating Adoptions 
Rabbits will be more easily adopted 
if they are “displayed” in such a way as 
to make them seem like the fun, inter-
esting, 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 rab-
bit-specific adoption counseling and a 
comprehensive adoption packet address-
ing general rabbit care issues, includ-
ing 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 (hous-
ing, 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 adoptations 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; volun-
teers and staffed should be trained to 
facilitate such bondings.

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