



of York County
A New Leash on Life

The York County SPCA receives and cares for numerous rabbits every year. Some rabbits are strays, some are relinquished by their owners, and some are products of cruelty or neglect. Sadly, rabbits can be easily neglected because their guardians are not knowledgeable about their needs or simply irresponsible in their care.

Rabbits are social animals and need attention just like a dog or cat. When well cared for, rabbits can live up to 7-12 years and while they can be challenging pets, the rewards of having a happy, healthy house rabbit are well worth the effort.

Food:

The most important element in your rabbit's diet is hay as it provides the fiber needed to keep the digestive tract working properly. Timothy hay is recommended over alfalfa. Unlimited amounts of fresh hay should be provided on a daily basis along with fresh leafy greens such as kale, dandelion, collard greens, red or green leaf lettuce, romaine, escarole, chicory, dill, cilantro, parsley, swiss chard, oregano and mustard greens. The rule of thumb is 2 cups of greens per 5 pounds of body weight. Carrots should be offered sparingly as well as pellets. Fresh water should also be available at all times.

Housing:

Rabbits need a safe place to consider their own. Their cage area should be no smaller than 24" deep x 36" wide x 24" high and should allow room for the rabbit to stand up on their hind legs with ears erect and easily stretch out on the floor. Wire bottom cages are not recommended as they can be damaging and uncomfortable to the rabbit's feet. A solid bottom cage with a litter box will be most enjoyable for the rabbit. Litter box training will provide the rabbit (and the guardian) with easy clean up and a sanitary environment for all. The litter box should be filled with newspaper and a large top layer of fresh hay.

Exercise:

Rabbits need exercise and play time and should be allowed at least 3-4 hours outside of their cage every day. However, rabbits can get themselves into trouble by chewing on wires or cords. They can also jump into high spaces or squeeze into small areas. So, make sure the environment is "rabbit-proofed" for safety.

Spay/Neuter:

Finally, rabbits should be spayed or neutered. Not only for the obvious reason of preventing unwanted births, but because spay/neuter provides health benefits including prevention of reproductive system cancers which can strike both male and female rabbits. Furthermore, both male and female rabbits can spray and exhibit sexually aggressive behavior unless altered. Rabbits should also receive an annual exam by a veterinarian who is familiar with the medical needs of rabbits.



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Precautions and Provisions:

The York County SPCA strongly suggests that rabbits be kept indoors. Outdoor rabbits often suffer from loneliness due to unnatural isolation, and may fall victim to severe weather or predators. However, in cases where rabbits live outside, a secure hutch must be provided. The hutch should be large enough for the rabbit to hop several times in any direction and should have an outdoor run along with a smaller enclosed area for sleeping and safety. The run area should have a solid floor and wire mesh on at least one side. The sleeping area should be accessible from the run through a small entranceway and should be completely enclosed. Furthermore, the entire hutch should have a sturdy roof to protect the rabbit from precipitation. The whole floor should be covered with bedding such as wood shavings, hay or newspaper. The layer of bedding should be thicker in the enclosed sleeping area. Rabbits will choose a section of the hutch to use as their toilet area. This area should be cleaned daily with a full cleaning of the hutch on a weekly or biweekly basis. Accordingly, the hutch should be placed in an area that is protected from the wind in the winter and in a shaded area in the summer.

Even in a secure hutch, life outdoors for a rabbit can be dangerous because they are susceptible to both human and animal predators. The hutch should be elevated with wire mesh that will adequately deter animals such as dogs, feral cats, raccoons and coyotes. Furthermore, to ensure the rabbit is safe from harm or theft from humans, place it in an area near the house or in an area with security lighting.

Lastly, water is very important and should be provided in either a bowl or a secure hanging bottle. Hydration is equally as important in cold weather as it is in hot weather. Frozen water due to cold weather is never an excuse. If a rabbit is kept outdoors, it is incumbent upon the rabbit guardian to make sure that all of the rabbit's needs are met.