

What's up, doc?

Good reasons to have bunnies as house pets

Each year, there are more and more people adopting bunnies, making rabbits the third most popular pet in North America, right behind cats and dogs.

Rabbit owners get to experience a gentle, curious and sometimes humorous animal that makes a wonderful home companion.

Did you know rabbits can be house trained to use a litter pan? It is extremely easy to train a rabbit because they are naturally clean and tidy animals.

The most commonly used rabbit litter is a product called Yesterday's News. It is safe for rabbits, unlike regular cat litter, which can cause digestive problems and respiratory illnesses. The cheapest alternative is furnace wood pellets. If your rabbit likes to eat the wood pellets then Yesterday's News is your best option.

Provide your rabbit with a small amount of high quality Timothy pellets every day (no added grains or dried fruits); lots of fresh, dark leafy greens; unlimited Timothy hay; dried apple wood sticks; and fresh water from a bowl. Rabbits can drink as much as a small dog so avoid using hanging water bottles. For a complete list of safe foods for rabbits, visit <http://rabbit.org/suggested-vegetables-and-fruit-for-a-rabbit-diet/>

AT A GLANCE

Shedding some light on shedding facts

▶ Rabbits shed their fur through molting, and it occurs 3-4 times a year. Molts will alternate between heavy and light sheddings.

▶ Rabbits are constant groomers, but they cannot vomit a hairball like cats. Hairballs can be fatal for rabbits. It is extremely important to groom them while they are molting so they do not ingest large amounts of fur.

▶ During molting, feed your rabbit papaya pellets from your local pet store or vet clinic. (A fresh piece of pineapple is an easy alternative as well.) The acid from the pineapple or papaya works as an active digestive enzyme helping break down the hairballs.

▶ Rabbits have paper-like skin so it is not recommended to cut mats with scissors. Use a mat splitter.



Animal Talk

Erin Mullen



Rabbits make excellent house pets and can be easily integrated into a family with other animals such as dogs and cats. In this picture Max is posing with his dog friends, Carlos and Mick. PHOTO SPECIAL TO THE GUARDIAN BY ELLA HARRIS OF ELLAGANT PHOTOGRAPHY

If you see a bit of dirt on the coat, sprinkle corn starch on the spot and comb it out with a baby comb. Rabbits actually spend more hours per day grooming themselves than cats, so if you see a dirty rabbit it is usually an indication of a serious health problem.

Although they share many similarities to your pet cat or dog, rabbits are still prey animals and are masters at disguising pain and discomfort. Silence is their defensive advantage so you won't see a rabbit pawing at you, whining or crying for help. Take your

house rabbit to a vet once a year for a routine check up.

Spaying or neutering rabbits can prevent spraying, can make house training easier, and can make them less territorial and temperamental. Dr. Emily Pringle of Brudenell Animal Hospital performs many rabbit surgeries each year and says, "It has been noted that over 50 per cent of unspayed female rabbits over the age of four will die due to uterine cancer. Spaying a female rabbit can literally double her lifespan."

Most bunnies want a partner in crime. If you adopt a rabbit, get two, and never separate a bonded pair. Give them an opportunity to live a full and rich life where they are free to express their natural behaviours with an animal of their own species.

New rabbit owners usually don't realize one important thing — bunnies are not cuddly. They don't like to be picked up; they don't feel comfortable or safe. An improperly held rabbit can kick out its powerful back legs and break or fracture its spine. Rabbits can be conditioned to accept being held by their owners over time, but this is not a rabbit's preference. They would much rather sit beside you on the couch while you watch TV and cuddle the night away.

Reliable rabbit resources include House Rabbit Handbook: How to Live with an Urban Rabbit by Marinell Harriman and the online House Rabbit Society at <http://www.rabbit.org>.

Next Month in Animal Talk: The Chinook project.

Erin Mullen is the Intake and adoption counsellor at the P.E.I. Humane Society, one of the member groups of the P.E.I. Companion Animal Welfare Initiative (CAWI). Animal Talk is a monthly column in



A litter pan for a rabbit often consists of a nice layer of wood pellets on the bottom. The rabbit's food and hay is placed in the pan. This is a good way to start training your rabbit to use the litter box because rabbits like to eat and poop at the same time. The box should be scooped every day.

PHOTO SPECIAL TO THE GUARDIAN BY ERIN MULLEN

The Guardian produced by CAWI, the goal of which is to improve the welfare of owned and unowned companion animals on P.E.I. CAWI consists of the P.E.I. Humane Society, SpayAid, Cat Action Team, P.E.I. Veterinary Medical Association, P.E.I. Department of Agriculture and Forestry, 4-H P.E.I., and Sir James Dunn Animal Welfare Centre at the Atlantic Veterinary College. Links to each of these groups are at gov.pe.ca/agriculture/CAWI. Readers are invited to send questions related to the well-being of owned and unowned companion animals to cawipei@gmail.com.

A happy ending

Stewart, Maximilian and Francis were all adopted from the P.E.I. Humane Society. They were adopted at different times from separate litters as adult rabbits but had no problems bonding and currently live as free range house rabbits. Stewart is one year old; Max is five; Fran is three. PHOTO SPECIAL TO THE GUARDIAN BY NICK MULLEN

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