



JSPCA HOUSE TRAINING RABBITS FACT SHEET

Traditionally, rabbits have been kept in a hutch in the garden. Nowadays more and more people keep their rabbits indoors; with a little training rabbits can become a delightful addition to your household and offer as much companionship as more traditional house pets. House rabbits also fit very well into the lifestyle of a working person. House rabbits can display more natural behaviour patterns than hutch-kept rabbits and because they get plenty of exercise, rarely develop skeletal problems seen in some caged rabbits.

However, house rabbits are not suitable pets for everyone. Just like cats and dogs they can be demanding and destructive, especially as youngsters. Even after training and “bunny-proofing”, some wear and tear on the household furnishings as well as a bit of mess such as pet hair is inevitable. (Further information about keeping house rabbits can be obtained from the dedicated JSPCA Animals' Shelter 'House rabbit' fact sheet.

What type of rabbit would be suitable as a house rabbit?

Any rabbit can be a house rabbit. Rabbits over one year of age are usually quicker to train as house rabbits and it's easier to assess the personality of an adult rabbit, but house rabbits can be pure or cross bred, male or female, youngsters or adults. Adult rabbits over one year old are easier to litter train and are generally less destructive, especially if they have been neutered.

The JSPCA Animals' Shelter is often flooded with domestic pet rabbits awaiting new homes. Why not adopt a rescue rabbit? At the JSPCA, all of the rabbits available for re-homing have been micro-chipped, vaccinated and neutered.

Litter training

Wild rabbits are clean animals that go to the toilet in large areas away from their burrows. They are also highly territorial animals, using faeces and urine as sexual and territorial markers. Marking behaviour is reduced, but not totally removed in the neutered, housetrained pet rabbit, who may occasionally eliminate in 'inappropriate' places if his routine is disturbed or his territory violated in some way.

Rabbits tend to urinate in just one of a few places and can be litter trained at any age. It is generally easier to litter train rabbits if they have been neutered and many problems associated with house training rabbits are easily solved by having the rabbit neutered.

General pointers for house training rabbits:

- o Cover the floor of the cage with newspaper. Put the litter tray in one corner of the rabbit's cage or living area and place at least another one in his exercise area.

- o Fill the tray with newspaper covered with hay or straw or the organic paperbased litter. Do not use softwood or clumping cat litters as they can harm your rabbit.

- o To encourage your rabbit to use the tray, you could try putting a treat in one corner – rabbits like to chew on something whilst they are going to the toilet. Also, remove any stray droppings and place them in the litter tray. Rabbits recognise their toilet area by smell, until they get into the habit of using a particular area. Therefore, until your rabbit is reliably using his litter tray, adding stray droppings into the litter tray can help encourage its use.

- o Don't place the litter tray too close to the bed in your rabbit's cage.

- o Initially, it may be necessary to confine your rabbit to his cage on the first day, until he starts to use the tray reliably.

- o Avoid going into the cage when the rabbit is in it – this will help to prevent territorial marking.

- o Remember, baby rabbits, like puppies, are easily distracted and take time to learn.

Baby rabbits (8 - 14 weeks of age) generally will not have good control over bladder and bowel functions, although some babies

(especially bucks) do remarkably well. They will usually urinate in their litter tray when confined in their cage, but will forget to go back to the tray if given too much freedom too soon; a cage is essential to use as a home base for house rabbits. Therefore, baby rabbits need frequent, brief, supervised playtimes outside of their cage. Those that do learn to use their trays at a young age often forget about it when they reach sexual maturity.

“Teenage” rabbits (approx 14 weeks of age onwards) reaching sexual maturity are usually very difficult to housetrain until they have been neutered and hence their hormones have settled down again.

Mature rabbits (over 8 months and neutered), particularly those living as single house rabbits, should be easily litter trained to use their litter tray for all urination and virtually all defaecation. Rabbits kept with other rabbits tend to leave a few more droppings scattered about, but should urinate in their litter tray.

Rules for successfully house-training your rabbit:

- If you want a house rabbit to enjoy living free range (when supervised) as soon as possible, adopt an adult. Baby rabbits will often require supervision until at least 7 or 8 months of age.
- Neutering is absolutely essential. It will be difficult to housetrain an un-neutered rabbit of either sex. Neutering has health benefits, as well as behavioural benefits.
- If your rabbit is making a lot of mistakes outside his tray regularly, remember some rabbits do take longer to train than others.

Litter substrate:

The type of litter that you use in your rabbit's litter tray should be something that will absorb urine and odour, be easy to handle and dispose of, and that isn't hazardous to your rabbit. Do not use softwood or clumping cat litters as they can harm your rabbit. Simply, a layer of newspaper covered with hay or straw can be used. Rabbits like to chew whilst they are going to the toilet and the presence of hay in the litter tray offers the opportunity for the rabbit to do so. However, litter trays lined with newspaper will need to be changed daily.

Common house training problems

o If an adult house rabbit that is usually well house trained starts to urinate frequently around the house, this could indicate a urinary problem and the rabbit should be taken to your local veterinary surgery for a health check. Urinary tract infections, urinary stones (calculi) or 'sludge' can cause urinary problems in rabbits. Neurological or kidney damage caused by the parasite *Encephalitozoan cuniculi* can also cause urinary incontinence.

o Housetraining behaviour may lapse in a male neutered adult rabbit if a female rabbit is introduced to the family. The male rabbit may urinate and defaecate around the house. This is normal rabbit territorial behaviour and is often seen when new rabbits enter the home. Eventually the rabbit will stop territorial marking when he bonds to the new arrival.

o Urine spraying – this behaviour in rabbits is almost entirely dependant on hormones and often ceases after the rabbit is neutered. Castrating or spaying an older adult rabbit will also help to stop the spraying behaviour, as well as reducing the strong odour of the urine.



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References and further reading:

- "BSAVA Manual of Exotic Pets," 4th Edition 2002.
- The Blue Cross Rabbit Pet Facts – www.bluecross.org.uk
- Bunny Basics, The Rabbit Charity 2001
- London Zoo, Zoological Society of London – Pet Fact Sheets
- The British Houserabbit Association – www.houserabbit.co.uk