

# HABITAT: HAPPY RABBIT, HAPPY LIFE

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*Disclaimer: This guide is built on a decade of personal experience and a comprehensive review of available literature, as well as multiple engagements with rabbit veterinarians and responsible rabbit owners. One will always find competing information online, however you are encouraged to do your own research and talk to experienced rabbit owners. Safely experiment to find what works best for your rabbit, and keep in mind that this guide is just that: a guide.*

**A rabbit's habitat is not just its home, it's its safe haven!** So comfort, enrichment, and safety are key. Providing a stimulating environment and promoting a healthy diet and exercise will have a major impact on your rabbit's quality of life. A happy rabbit has a happy home!

When establishing your rabbit's long-term living space, the bigger the better! Rabbits are intelligent and social creatures, and a stimulating environment with ample space will promote their wellbeing. Your habitat should allow for plenty of social interaction with the family while still providing a safe and quiet space for your rabbit to retreat to. Regardless of the size of the habitat, your rabbit should have the opportunity to drink unlimited water, eat unlimited hay, sleep, and play at their will.

People have differing opinions on the best type of habitat for a rabbit; however, one thing we can all agree on is that rabbits love to run, play and binky! For this reason, supervised periods of free roaming time are encouraged. Keeping your rabbit in a large enclosure during the night and while you're away from home provides safety and routine, as rabbits are creatures of habit and can also be quite mischievous! This designated enclosure time can be balanced with regular play time, which allows your rabbit to exercise and explore spaces outside of their habitat. Daily "outing" give your rabbit something fun and exciting to look forward to!

Another good way to keep your rabbit interested and exploring is to switch around objects (other than litter pans) within their enclosure. When you have multiple rabbits and it is possible to do so safely, switching them within their enclosures is also a fun way to encourage exploring. (But beware of the imminent "chinning war"!)

## General Considerations

When creating a habitat for a domesticated rabbit, it is always best to establish an indoor space. Avoiding the outdoors will ensure their safety from outdoor predators and the elements. Wire-bottom cages and “cages” sold in pet stores should be avoided, as well, as these do not provide sufficient space or safety for your rabbit. While hutches also provide insufficient space, they can be used as fun additions to a much larger living space. If you are constructing an enclosure for your rabbit, be sure to avoid potentially unsafe items such as chicken wire, which can be chewed and cause serious injury to your rabbit’s teeth and mouth.

It is important to accommodate your rabbit and allow them to choose their set-up within their living space, as much as possible. For example, after they’ve established a “pee corner”, you can put their litter pan there (and move any scattered poos there) to encourage them to use that space. If you want to establish a new litter pan space, you will need to discourage them from returning by blocking and cleaning the area of all scents. When litter training your rabbit, it is best to begin with your rabbit’s own space and then expand on this living space. If you give your rabbit too much space initially, it could make the process more difficult and lengthy. It should always be easy for your rabbit to return to their litter pan, which should contain hay at all times, since rabbits like to chew while they poo! It is a good idea to keep your rabbit’s sleeping area separate from its food/litter area, as well.

Unless you’re fortunate enough to have a rabbit that loves to be held, they should only be picked up when necessary (like for nail clipping or when giving medications). Let your rabbit establish their “safe zone” within their habitat, and resist the urge to pick them up when they’re in this space. A safe zone could be a litter pan or hiding house - wherever your rabbit feels the most “home free”.

## **Exercise Pens (“X-pens”)**

Don’t underestimate how high a rabbit can jump! To keep your rabbit safe and prevent it from escaping its habitat, it is recommended that you use exercise pens (“x-pens”) that are at least 3 feet (36”) in height. When you have multiple non-bonded rabbits sharing a living space, it is important to separate their pens with space and/or sturdy objects to prevent them from moving their pens and potentially being bitten or scratched. It is always best to have your rabbit neutered/spayed whenever possible, however ensuring a separate enclosure for intact rabbits will prevent them from reproducing, as well.

## **Safety**

When designing your rabbit’s habitat, there are many things to consider. As a rule, whatever goes into the habitat should always be clean and safety inspected for potential hazards. If you allow your rabbit to free roam around the house, it is just as important to “bunny-proof” its living space. For example, ensure that there are no chewing/choking hazards, such as electrical wires, sharp objects or toxic houseplants. It is best to keep these hazards away altogether, however when this isn’t possible, measures must be taken, such as applying wire protectors and using pet gates to block off certain areas, for example. There are numerous products geared to baby- and puppy-proofing your home that may work well for your rabbit, as well. It is crucial to always provide safety and supervision from other (non-bonded) pets, and children, as well.

## **Habitat Design**

When designing your rabbit’s habitat, consider, “would I want to live here?” If the answer is “yes”, that’s great - keep up the awesome work! And keep in mind, “how could I live even more happily?”

## The Bare Minimum

- Indoor enclosure
- Size (4 feet long x 4 feet wide x 3 feet high for a single rabbit)
  - \* 6 feet long x 6 feet wide x 3 feet high for a pair of bonded rabbits
- Water bowl(s) made from heavy ceramics (or a Pyrex bowl)
  - \* having a bowl AND a bottle is best for water intake and in case of spills.
  - \* Studies show that rabbits drink 30% more water from a bowl vs. a bottle.
- A food bowl made from heavy ceramics
- Unlimited hay and water (Hay should make up 80% of your rabbit's diet, and the appropriate type to give is dependent on its age.)
- Fresh rabbit-safe greens and/or dried herbs (daily)
- Hiding area (wooden house, cardboard box, etc.)
- Dry, clean flooring and bedding
- Non-slip flooring. Plush, non-abrasive blankets are an excellent comfortable option. A small non-covered surface (such as a large tile or exposed non-carpet flooring) where your rabbit can cool down is a great idea too.
- Litter pan large enough for comfortable use (at least one per rabbit). Your rabbit's litter pan should allow for easy entrance/exit.
- Litter/paper bedding (or a safe alternative). Natural, odour-absorbing paper bedding such as Oxbow Pure Comfort is recommended.
- Enrichment/stimulating toys (See last page for QR code for "Bunny Stimulation and the Importance of Toys" another guide we have drafted). Every toy you choose for your rabbit should be free of glue, tape, staples, etc.
- Appropriate room temperature and air quality. A frozen water bottle works well for keeping your rabbit cool in the summer or if they exercise excessively by digging.
- Dividers to provide space between enclosures and keep multiple pets safe. Wooden boards at least 6 inches wide are recommended to prevent scratches and bites, which can cause serious injury to your rabbit(s).
- Rabbit-proofing of unavoidable hazards (e.g., floor vent guards, relocating toxic plants, etc.)

## **Considerations: How to take your habitat to the next level! (\* In addition to The Bare Minimum)**

- A room or large area to allow your rabbit to free roam (with multiple litter pans depending on amount of space provided)
- 2+ exercise pens (secured together with velcro or flex ties, etc.). Beware, the first thing your rabbit will do is explore to find an escape!
- Multiple levels within enclosure. If you have the space to include a mattress or foam/air bed within your habitat, this provides a great way to bond with your rabbit at eye-level. (Just make sure it is covered and that your rabbit is unable to chew it). Blankets on top of cardboard boxes are a fun way to create levels for your rabbit. Rabbits love having the “high ground” to establish hierarchy and to ensure that their surroundings are safe.

Note that ferret/chinchilla cages and similar enclosures are not considered appropriate/safe. Your rabbit should always be able to safely ascend and descend between levels without the worry of repetitive strain injuries over time.

- Digging “tunnels” (See last page for QR code for “Bunny Stimulation and the Importance of Toys”)
- Snuffle mat/pellet dispenser. These stimulating toys encourage foraging and help slow down your rabbit’s food consumption, if necessary (/overweight).
- “Ball pit.” A small tub containing tennis-sized plastic balls provides a fun way for rabbits to forage.
- A rabbit hutch (\* as an addition to a living space only). A rabbit hutch can be used as a sort of home away from home and is great for “time sharing” when you have multiple rabbits.
- Video monitoring (with recording feature, if possible). Viewing live footage of your rabbit in its living space is a great way to monitor their behaviour and provides peace of mind when you’re away from home. Video recording also allows you to review your rabbit’s behaviour and know whether they’ve been behaving differently than usual. Knowing that your rabbit has had very low energy and hasn’t been eating could prompt you to begin countermeasures for preventing G.I. stasis, for example.
- A wooden Ikea bed. A special place for them to catch a quick break from the hard life of being a spoiled rabbit. Rabbits love to establish areas within their enclosures for various activities. An extra cozy bed with the most plush blankets will make sure they rest up enough to play the following day.
- A “snuggle bed”. This type of bed simulates the feeling of being snuggled on both sides.

- A “dirt box.” A tub of garden soil is fun for your rabbit to play or cool off in, however you must ensure that the soil you’re providing is not potentially contaminated. Admitted this can be a little messy but the look of excitement on your rabbit’s face as they frantically dig their burrow to nowhere is worth it. We recommend using a tarp for easier clean up. You’ll want to avoid using sand as it could inadvertently irritate your rabbit’s eyes, ears, lungs, and genitals, as well.
- A night light. With sufficient light at night, your rabbit can move around more confidently when visibility is otherwise low.
- A long roll of fabric for a hallway or large space (such as a soft carpet or blanket folded to make it heavier). A non-abrasive, non-slip “floor” in an open space without many obstacles will make your rabbit want to run. Sit back and enjoy your rabbit strutting their stuff on the runway!)
- A closely supervised and fully enclosed outdoor exercise pen. While outdoor living is not recommended for rabbits, you may wish to allow your rabbit to play outside in a safe environment, such as an exercise pen pinned in place/weighed down safely and covered overtop to prevent your rabbit from hopping out or hunting birds from swooping in. Keep in mind that this does not prevent outside animals from getting too close for comfort. Measures must be taken to prevent your rabbit from squeezing through the pen, as well. If there are any potential spaces to escape from, trust that your rabbit will find them! As there has been a rise in RHDV2 in Canada, it is highly recommended that you have your rabbit vaccinated, especially if they receive outdoor time as their vulnerability to this deadly disease increases.

## **Cleanliness**

Providing a clean environment for your rabbit is essential for their happiness and health. Rabbits are naturally very hygienic and habitually tidy animals, which are unfortunately prone to fly strikes (especially during warmer weather). Regular daily cleaning should be done along with more intensive bi-weekly/weekly cleaning. A pet-safe and inexpensive cleaning solution can be made up of distilled vinegar and water (1 part vinegar: 1 part water). This “vinegar spray” works well for cleaning urine and diarrhea messes too. As a general guideline, the following schedule outlines the frequency at which your rabbit’s habitat and its contents should be cleaned:

### **Daily**

- water bowl/bottle: replacement and top up as necessary throughout the day
- litter pans: top up of fresh hay and fresh paper bedding
- lint-rolling blanket surfaces when your rabbit is molting. Reusable lint-rollers are an environmentally friendly and inexpensive tool for helping to prevent potentially dangerous hair build-up in your rabbit’s system
- greens: replacement of uneaten greens
- pellets: replacement of uneaten pellets

### **Bi-weekly**

- water bottles and bowls: thoroughly cleaned (and dried) to prevent bacterial contamination
- “vinegar spray” cleaning of litter pans and replacement of uneaten hay/used paper bedding

### **Weekly**

- carpets/blankets (used on flooring): vacuumed/washed and dried

### **As needed**

- spills and messes (e.g., soiled blankets, spilled water bowls)
- air filter: replacement of filters



## Rabbits with Disabilities/Special Needs

Special considerations are required when designing a home for your disabled or special needs rabbit. The type of disability will determine the best arrangement for them to live as comfortably and safely as possible.

- For a **blind rabbit**, their habitat should be at ground level with the easiest possible access to necessities like their food, water, and litter pan.
- For a **rabbit with only one eye**, various levels are okay if the rabbit can safely move from the upper level to the ground floor, for example. For a rabbit with only a right eye, everything they require or like to do for fun (e.g., hop from level to level) should be within right-eye view. Since rabbits like to be able to see when their owners are approaching, it is best to provide a space where a right-eyed rabbit can view their owners from afar without being startled.
- For a **rabbit requiring a wheelchair**, proper flooring and sufficient additional space are crucial in allowing the rabbit to manoeuvre without a struggle. A rabbit requiring a wheelchair will already have difficulty moving around their home, so their necessities should be handy at all times. It is also necessary to block off any sets of stairs to prevent a rabbit from falling down and further injuring themselves.
- For a **rabbit with vertigo**, “bumpers” such as rolled blankets or pool noodles should be placed around the perimeter of the inside of their habitat. Everything should be at ground level for these special needs rabbit who is prone to “rolling” or somersaulting, as well.
- For a **rabbit with arthritis** or another potentially painful conditions, in addition to proper medication(s), cushioning should be used to help reduce the impact on their joints when jumping and landing. For sore hocks, “rabbit boots” can help to reduce this impact, as well as any abrasiveness from flooring and various surfaces that a rabbit with sufficient hair on their feet could tolerate. For ease of entry and exit, low-sided litter pans are helpful to your arthritic rabbit, as well.

- For a **territorial rabbit** (and multiple pets), it is essential to have safeguards in place to prevent attacks and injuries to all, such as heavy-duty enclosure panels and objects in between used to separate enclosures.
- For a **3-legged rabbit**: regularly monitor their behaviours and movements to see how you can make things easier for them. For example, clean plush bedding should be available for them to lay down and wash their face. They may require a litter pan with easier entrance, as well.

Diligent attention is required to ensure disabled/special needs rabbits consume enough food, drink enough water and maintain cleanliness, as these rabbits are much more dependent on their owners in many ways. For example, your rabbit may require critical care feedings for supplementary meals or they may require this for every meal. They may also need to have their bottoms wiped with safe cloths following trips to the litter pan. If you have a rabbit with mobility issues, they would likely not benefit from a snuffle mat or pellet dispensing toy. Imagine your live in your rabbit's habitat... now consider, "could my day-to-day living be made easier in any way?"

Above all, remember you are not alone! The rabbit community is a great resource that you can rely on to expand your rabbit knowledge and experience. Whether it's your first or tenth rabbit, sharing our best practices with each other will collectively enhance the wellbeing of fur babies.























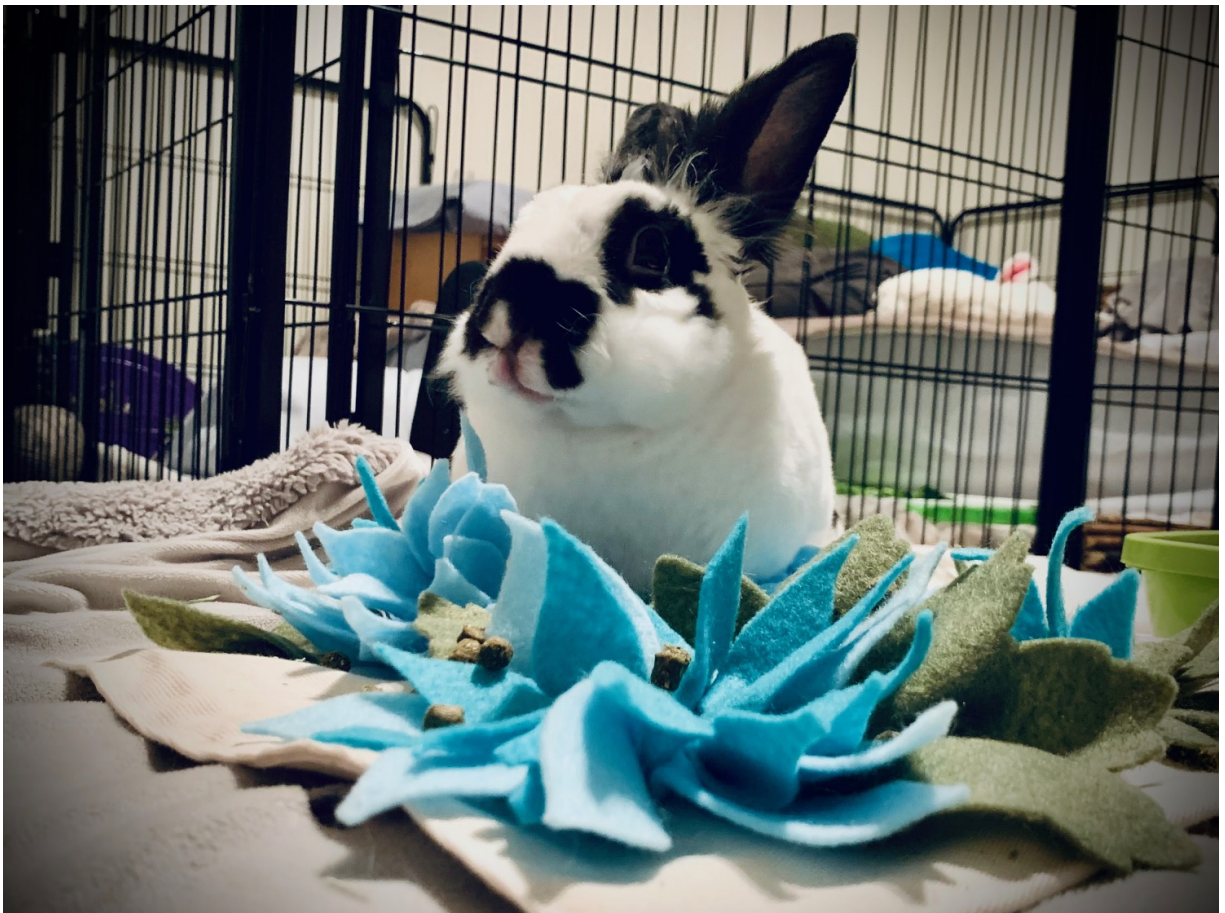


















## Bunny Simulation and the Importance of Toys

