

#### IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Finding out about rabbits before you get one
- » Discovering the realities of rabbit ownership
- » Examining your rabbit readiness
- » Parceling out duties to family members

## Chapter **1**

# Jumping into Rabbit Ownership

**T**he two most common pets in North America, if not the world, are cats and dogs. Rabbits, on the other hand, aren't as common (although they have enjoyed a recent rise in popularity and now rank fourth after cats, dogs, and birds). As a result, many folks don't know too much about them.

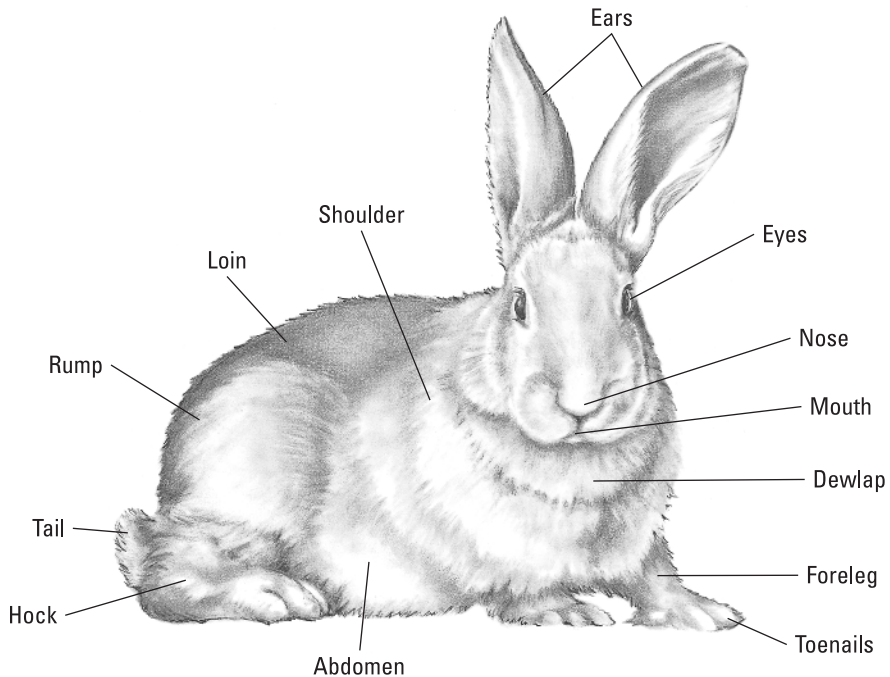
Rabbits are complicated creatures, both physically and psychologically. In addition to a uniquely designed social structure, their bodies have helped them to survive as a species for eons. As the caregiver to one of these special animals, it behooves you to understand the inner workings of the rabbit. If you do, you'll not only be able to take better care of your pet, but you'll also have a greater appreciation for this special member of the animal kingdom. (See Chapters 9 and 10 for more information about the health of your rabbit.)

Because they're so misunderstood, rabbits are the unfortunate victims of much neglect, mostly by well-intentioned folks who simply weren't properly suited or prepared for sharing their lives and homes with these fine long-eared creatures. In addition to providing a primer on the rabbit form, this chapter guides you through the process of looking at your own life and how well a rabbit might fit into it. Those who fit the rabbit profile are fortunate, indeed.

# Admiring from Afar

Rabbits are mammals, which means that they're in the same general classification as dogs, cats, horses, sheep, tigers, elephants, humans, and a lot of other animals. To be a *mammal* means that you're *warm blooded* — that is, your body regulates its own temperature (as opposed to a reptile who needs an outside heat source to maintain its body temperature). Your species also gives birth to live young and nurses them with milk produced by mammary glands (hence the name mammal).

The rabbit's body, shown in Figure 1-1, is uniquely designed in large part to escape predators. The rabbit is also put together in a way that helps him take in food, which in turn provides energy for escape and reproduction.



**FIGURE 1-1:**  
The map of the  
rabbit body.

## Digesting this information (and that carrot)

One of the most interesting aspects of a rabbit's body is his digestive system. Unlike cats or dogs, rabbits can eat a wide variety of plant material. They can process and extract nutrients from many plants that are indigestible to less adaptable herbivores or omnivores. This flexibility helps make them highly successful in a variety of environments around the world. Understanding how your rabbit's

digestive system functions is important so that you feed him in a way that's most efficient for his body. (For more on feeding your rabbit, see Chapter 6.)

Rabbits have a large stomach for their body size to enable them to eat large amounts of plant material quickly. They are *crepuscular*, meaning they eat primarily at dawn and at dusk. They don't need to eat small amounts all day long. They graze primarily in the morning and evening with little food intake during the rest of the day, depending on what's available, the weather, and so on. Rabbits can do nicely eating a large meal twice a day.

The digestive process begins in the rabbit's mouth. The rabbit's *prehensile* lips grab the plant material first, and then the front teeth called *incisors* — four upper and two lower — neatly slice off pieces of plant matter. The food is then passed to the molars (the back teeth), where it's chewed into small particles and finally swallowed.



TIP

All of the rabbit's teeth grow continuously throughout its life. If he's on a good diet, like the one described in Chapter 6, and is given some additional materials to munch on throughout the day, your rabbit is less likely to pick something else to eat, such as your couch legs, your bed legs, or your legs. (Chapter 14 lists some fun toys for rabbits.)



TECHNICAL  
STUFF

Rabbits have a very large blind sac called a *cecum* that is located where the small intestine and the large intestine join together. The cecum contains a wonderfully diverse population of healthy bacteria, yeast, and other organisms working to help the rabbit digest his food.

When the food in the small intestine reaches the cecum and large intestine, the gastrointestinal tract knows which materials to divert into the cecum for further break down. The materials that were already digested in the small intestine and that don't need to make this little side trip to the cecum pass directly into the large intestine as waste. This waste then leaves the body as the little round droppings you see in your rabbit's litter box.



TECHNICAL  
STUFF

## MUNCHING ON FIBER

Rabbits are *herbivores*, meaning that they dine only on plant material. A rabbit has an esophagus, stomach, and intestinal tract like other mammals. However, because they often dine on plants that are high in fiber, rabbits have developed a strategy for dealing with the high fiber foods called *hind gut fermentation*. This area of the digestive system is where the indigestible materials are broken down into manageable chemicals. (We talk more about this interesting process in a minute.) Many other herbivore friends, including horses, guinea pigs, and chinchillas, have this specialization of the digestive system.

What is happening in the cecum? The microorganisms are breaking down the indigestible fiber and turning it into digestible nutrients. In order for the rabbit to use these nutrients, he must take this material and move it through the digestive tract one more time. So, at certain times of the day (which coincides with several hours after a rabbit eats a big meal), the material from the cecum is packaged up into small round moist pellets called *cecotropes*. The rabbit gets a signal in his brain about when these little delicacies are ready to be passed out of the body; he eats them the minute they emerge. Your rabbit will often look like he is grooming his hind end, but actually he is taking in these nutrient-rich cecotropes.



REMEMBER

The various types of fiber in a rabbit's diet is not only there to be used for nutrition, but they're vital to keeping the rabbit's gastrointestinal tract in excellent working order. The indigestible fiber is particularly important in making the intestines move along smoothly. You can think of the fiber as a tool to sort of "tickle" the lining and keep things moving smoothly. A diet that is low in appropriate types of fiber and too high in rich carbohydrates can lead to a sluggish intestine and cecum and subsequent serious disease (see Chapter 9).



WARNING

Normally you will not see any cecotropes in your rabbit's cage or at the most a rare one here or there. They're soft, green to brown, mucous coated, and have a stronger smell. If you see a number of them in your rabbit's cage, it may indicate a diet too rich in protein or another more serious condition. Please consult your vet.

## Taking advantage of skin and bones

Watch rabbits run and leap in play, and you get a sense of the complexity and flexibility of their skeletons and muscles. Nature equipped rabbits with this kind of flexibility to allow them to make lifesaving maneuvers when being chased down by predators. Basically, the rabbit's bones and muscles are what keep it ahead of the game.



WARNING

Unfortunately, poor diet, inadequate housing, lack of exercise, and improper handling can be a deadly combination for rabbits. Accidental injuries to the spine can occur in any rabbit, but are extremely rare in rabbits on proper diets who get plenty of exercise to strengthen bones and supporting muscles.

For this reason, it's important that

- » Rabbits who are outdoors for a period of exercise must be well protected from predators. (See Chapter 8 for more information about outdoor safety.)
- » You handle your rabbit properly (see Chapter 7). Incorrect handling or lifting can result in serious, if not fatal, injury.



WARNING

Rabbits are excellent swimmers, but taking them for a dip in the pool with you isn't a good idea. Although the rabbit's skeleton and muscles allow it to swim effectively, swimming is reserved for life-and-death escapes. Needless to say, your bunny won't enjoy any excursions in the pool.

## Taking a whiff

Rabbit noses are always on the go. They wiggle almost incessantly. Although much of this wiggling is a result of the rabbit's rapid breathing, it also helps facilitate taking in certain odors when the rabbit needs to do so. Rabbits can tell much about a situation just by taking a good whiff.



REMEMBER

Rabbits are like cats and dogs in that their olfactory sense gives them access to an entire unique world that humans aren't privy to. Rabbits can smell even the faintest odor and use their noses to do the following:

- » Distinguish one rabbit from another or one sex from another.
- » In the case of males, find out whether a female rabbit is ready to breed.
- » In the case of a mother rabbit, identify her own babies.
- » Determine whether they want to eat a particular food.
- » Detect danger from predators and from weather conditions.



REMEMBER

Also, given your rabbit's sensitivity in the olfactory department, refrain from using harsh chemicals, perfume, or anything particularly strong smelling in his presence or around his cage. His nose will thank you for it.

## Putting those ears to good use

Rabbits haven't survived for eons just on their good looks. Their profound sense of hearing has served them well over time. (For a prey animal like the rabbit, being able to hear predators approaching and detect the warning thumps of other rabbits is crucial to the *colony*, a group of rabbits living together in a *warren*, a series of dens and tunnels.)

The shape of a rabbit's ears allows them to pick up barely detectable sounds in its environment, sort of like radar dishes. The large exteriors intercept sounds and funnel them into the ear canal where the ear drum is located. Rabbit ears are also flexible. They can pivot around at the base to help detect the exact location where a sound is coming from.



REMEMBER

What does all this great hearing mean to you, the rabbit owner? Be aware of the sensitivity of your rabbit's ears and treat him accordingly. Spare him loud music, screaming children, barking dogs, and any other nerve-frazzling racket. Your rabbit is less stressed if his environment is free of harsh, jarring noises.



TECHNICAL  
STUFF

Rabbits also use their ears to release excess body heat. Applying cool wet cloths to his ears (if he hasn't gone into shock already) can help cool down an overheated rabbit. Thus, cool blood circulates through his body and lowers his body temperature. (For more on heatstroke, see Chapter 9.)

## Figuring Out Whether a Rabbit is Right for You

Rabbits are cute and fuzzy and make great pets, but these truths alone aren't good enough reasons to own one. If rabbits are so wonderful, why not have one? The answer is simple: Though rabbits are terrific companions for many reasons, they also demand plenty of work and a serious commitment.

For example, Sarah works eight hours a day at an office job and spends another hour a day commuting back and forth to work. She's gone from her home a good nine hours a day, and that's on the days when she comes right home from work. Often, Sarah, who is single, meets her girlfriends after work or heads off to the gym to exercise. On those nights, she doesn't get home until 9 or 10 p.m. Because Sarah's schedule doesn't give her enough time to spend with a dog, she opted for a rabbit. A rabbit, however, is a very social animal and will be just as unhappy as a dog in this situation.

### Asking yourself whether you're rabbit-ready

Fantasizing about owning a rabbit is quite different from actually being ready to take one on. Think hard about your lifestyle and whether it's the right time to be adding such an animal to your household. Ask yourself these questions:

- » **Do I have at least three hours of free time a day?** Your rabbit needs at least two hours of exercise, which we describe in Chapters 15 and 17. That leaves another hour to clean his hutch and to groom, feed, and water him. Are you embroiled in something right now that's taking up much of your time or energy, like the holiday season, a move, or a personal transition, such as a



REMEMBER

baby, a new marriage, or a divorce? Are you putting in long hours at work on a special project? Do you travel often for work?

Adding a new pet to the household during an already stressful time can be disastrous for all involved. Wait until things settle down and are back to normal. That's the time to bring a new rabbit into the home.

- » **Do I have the space to house a rabbit?** Can I put him in my yard or in my house? Does my apartment complex allow pets? Rabbits require adequate cage space (see Chapter 5 for more information), and you must have the room to accommodate this need. You must also do some investigating to find out whether you're zoned for rabbit ownership. Rabbits aren't allowed in some residential areas. Check with your local zoning board.
- » **Does anyone in my household have allergies?** Those who have allergies know how miserable and even debilitating they can be. Chapter 5 offers some tactics to minimize the evil effects of bunny-related allergens (rabbit fur, rabbit saliva, rabbit hay, and so on), but people who have serious allergies may want to spend some time with rabbits before making the decision to adopt.
- » **Can my kids handle the responsibility?** Kids and rabbits can make fine companions, providing the children are old enough to respect the rabbit and are properly supervised; the general consensus is 7 years of age, but all children should be considered individually. Mishandling can result in serious injury or even death of the rabbit. Likewise, rabbits who kick — or even bite — when held improperly can hurt children. See Chapter 7 for a more detailed discussion of how to properly handle a rabbit.



REMEMBER

Give serious thought to whether your children are old enough to behave responsibly around a rabbit and whether you have the time to properly supervise their interaction time with the new pet. Children can't be expected to be in sole charge of the rabbit. In fact, an adult must oversee the rabbit-caring tasks that children are given for the sake of the rabbit.

- » **How will my other pets get along with a rabbit?** Rabbits can get along with other pets, depending on the type of pet they're being asked to live with. Introducing your pet rabbit to another strange rabbit may jeopardize one or both pets, putting them in serious danger. (Chapters 2 and 11 offer tips for how rabbits can coexist with other pets peacefully.)
- » **Am I willing to alter my lifestyle?** Rabbits are notorious diggers and chewers and can make short work of your backyard or your wooden furniture legs if you don't make certain changes to your home environment. You have to thoroughly rabbit-proof your home and/or backyard if you bring a rabbit into your life. And in many cases, the results of your rabbit-proofing won't exactly be an asset to your home decor. (Chapter 5 can help you figure out how to rabbit-proof your home.)

- » **Do I have enough money to set up and sustain my rabbit?** You need cold, hard cash (or a warm credit card) to purchase any rabbit, plus the cage and supplies that your rabbit must have to be comfortable. You should also have money on hand to pay veterinary bills for the annual preventative physical exam, in the event of an illness, and the health difficulties that becomes more likely as the pet ages. (See Chapters 9 and 10 for details on rabbit health.)
- » **Am I ready for the emotional commitment?** Rabbits are friendly, sociable creatures who need plenty of attention to thrive in a domestic environment. Think about whether you can make the emotional commitment to a rabbit.



WARNING

What happens if you don't ask yourself these questions and just go out and get a rabbit because you *think* you want one? If it turns out that rabbit ownership isn't really right for you, then the rabbit will ultimately suffer. Typically, when people don't want their rabbits, they end up taking them to an animal shelter or turning them loose in the woods in the hopes that the rabbit can get by on its own. Sadly, rabbits are put to death in animal shelters, just like their canine and feline counterparts, and domesticated rabbits that are set free to fend for themselves are rarely capable of doing so. Finding another home for him is an option but not an easy one. Prospective rabbit owners don't grow on trees, as you'll quickly find out when you start trying to find another home for your rabbit. So spare yourself and the rabbit all the heartache and probe deep into your psyche before taking the plunge.

## Considering the right reasons to own a rabbit

People are drawn to rabbits for different reasons. Most of them think rabbits are cute (and they're right). Others want to breed and show them for enjoyment and prestige. Some are looking for a pet that's less work than a dog yet different from a cat. The fact that rabbits are cute and fuzzy may motivate you to explore the possibility of rabbit ownership. But before you acquire a rabbit, you need to find out as much as you can about rabbits and what's involved. Only then can you have a thorough understanding of rabbit ownership really means. This book can help you do that.



REMEMBER

The only truly legitimate reasons to get a rabbit are for companionship and/or to get seriously involved in the purebred rabbit community. Any other reason bodes trouble — for the rabbit.

## THE DOWNSIDE OF THE EASTER BUNNY

Easter is a time of joy for children everywhere, but for those running rabbit rescue groups and shelters, Easter is nothing to celebrate. In their holiday excitement, many people impulsively buy a cute pet bunny for their children. Sadly, a family's enthusiasm quickly wanes after these little bunnies turn into teenage rabbits, when a variety of troublesome but natural behaviors emerge (see Chapter 2). It's not long until children lose interest and parents tire of the chores. Enter those rescue groups and shelters. This annual deluge of unwanted rabbits is an event that organizers and volunteers dread. Faced with an overwhelming number of rabbits, many groups are forced to euthanize — certainly not what the Easter Bunny had in mind.

Check out the following few reasons *not* to own a rabbit:

- » It's Easter time, and you think getting a rabbit would be a fun way to celebrate the holiday.
- » You think a rabbit would look good sitting in a hutch outside in your backyard. A bunny in the yard may lend a rural feeling to your garden decor.
- » You want to breed rabbits, so you can make a pile of money.
- » Your child wants one, and you plan to teach him responsibility by making him care for the rabbit.
- » Your dog needs a companion, but you don't want to get another dog.

If these reasons don't apply to you, then you may be one of the fortunate folks who are suited for a life with rabbits. Of course, before you go out and get that rabbit, make sure that you did your homework and know *exactly* how to take care of this delightful creature. (See Part 2 in this book for more on housing, nutrition, and healthcare.) Find out about rabbit breeds to make sure that you know what kind of rabbit you want. Study up on rabbit behavior so that you can understand your pet right from the get-go and be sure to make that all-important decision about whether your rabbit will live indoors or outdoors before you bring your pet home. (They should live indoors.) Find a veterinarian experienced in the treatment of rabbits before you make your purchase rather than *after* an emergency arises.

## Knowing What You Want in a Furry Friend

Like many other animal companions, rabbits come in all shapes, sizes, and colors — not to mention breeds, ages, and gender. Some people are happy with whatever rabbit needs a home, which is great for rabbits at shelters who need

adopting. Other people may have a particular rabbit in mind. It's good to remember, however, that when it comes to living with a rabbit, what matters most is personality — and that has little or nothing to do with breed or color.

That being said, you have to consider a variety of options when it comes to choosing a rabbit:

- » **Mixed breed or purebred:** If you're not interested in breeding or showing, a mixed breed bunny is likely to do the trick. Chapters 2 and 3 provide loads of information about the differences between bunny mixed and the many recognized breeds of purebred rabbits available.
- » **Age:** Although rabbits of all ages can be wonderful companions, it's a good idea to understand a bit about the challenges that typically come with babies, teenagers, and even older rabbits. Chapter 2 has the details.
- » **Gender:** Ask rabbit people whether they prefer male or female rabbits, and you'll hear great arguments for both. See Chapter 2 for some of the conventional wisdom about differences in gender.
- » **Coat type:** With rabbits, coat type comes down to this question: Longhair or shorthair? Your answer should be based on how much time you have for grooming. Read more about the coat types in Chapter 2 and the grooming involved in Chapter 7.
- » **Size:** The question of size can matter for those who have children or who have physical limitations when it comes to lifting. (Rabbits don't care much for being carried, but it will have to be done.) Although you may think a smaller rabbit would be best for a child, the opposite is in fact true: Small rabbits are too fragile, really, for most children; a larger, sturdier rabbit is a better bet for most families with kids. Chapter 2 has more on size considerations.

## Providing Shelter

Not just any home will do for a rabbit. All rabbits deserve safe, comfortable, and inviting accommodations. Responsible rabbit caretakers will



REMEMBER

- » **Set up house indoors:** Rabbits are increasingly being brought in from lonely outdoor hutches so that they can live indoors with their human companions. Indoor living is a brilliant idea for many reasons: better health, a longer life, protection from predators, and more fun for all. Read Chapter 5 for more on this happy trend for bunnies and their humans.



TIP

- » **Get equipped ahead of time:** Rabbits require some basic equipment, including a cage, nest box, litter box, as well as food and water vessels. Chapter 5 outlines a basic shopping list to guide you in your interior design efforts.
- » **Take care of rabbit-proofing:** To create a successful indoor living situation, you must first take precautions to protect your home from your rabbit and your rabbit from your home. Chapter 5 details those measures, which involve electrical cords, furniture, and carpeting.

## Feeding Your Rabbit

This chapter's earlier "Admiring From Afar" section delves into the fascinating world of the rabbit gastrointestinal system. Rabbit nutrition is the subject of much discussion and debate, leaving many new owners to puzzle over pellets and parsley. Practically speaking, your rabbit's nutrition is a critical part of caring for your rabbit. Chapter 6 covers this topic in detail, but here's a glimpse at what's in store for you and your bunny kitchen:



REMEMBER

- » **Making hay:** Fiber is critically important to a rabbit, and hay is the ultimate in rabbit fiber. The average rabbit should be given an unlimited supply of grass hay (such as timothy). Keep it fresh and keep it coming!
- » **Keeping it fresh:** Leafy greens and some vegetables are another vital part of your rabbit's diet and should be fed daily. Chapter 6 discusses those veggies considered to be good for bunnies, as well as recommended quantities; fruits, which are high in sugar, should be fed sparingly.
- » **Considering pellets:** Much of the discussion about rabbit nutrition is centered on the subject of pellets. It now appears that alfalfa-based pellets, which are convenient and have been used by those breeding rabbits, are probably not the best choice for companion rabbits. See Chapter 6 for more on this debate, as well as for guidelines for using pellets that are timothy-based as one part of a rabbit's diet.
- » **Tempting with treats:** Commercially prepared rabbit treats are the rabbit equivalent of junk food, and so are best avoided. Instead, when feeling the need to treat your bunny (maybe once a day or during training), opt for a bit of fresh fruit. Suggested treats are listed in Chapter 6.



REMEMBER

# Grooming Your Rabbit

Rabbits are pretty good about taking care of their own grooming and personal hygiene (that's what all that licking and preening is about). Most human companions need to lend an occasional hand, however, when it comes to coat, nail, and ear care. Chapter 7 includes a list of grooming tools you should have on hand, as well as guidelines for

- » **Brushing:** The amount and frequency of brushing you need to do will depend on your rabbit's coat. Longhaired rabbits, such as angoras, often require daily brush sessions; short coats, like rexes, may need brushing only once or twice a week.
- » **Clipping nails:** This grooming chore is probably the most intimidating, but with a bit of guidance (from a vet) and practice, most owners do fine when it comes time to tame unruly rabbit nails. Chapter 7 outlines the steps to a successful clip session.
- » **Cleaning ears:** Making the ears a regular part of the grooming process can help detect problems such as ear mites or infection. These are no regular ears, however, so treat them with care, as discussed in Chapter 7.
- » **Bathing:** Rabbits rarely need bathing, which is a good thing because rabbits aren't fond of being bathed, and bathing causes them undo stress. Typically, you can handle the need for a bath with a spot treatment to clean the offending area (usually the hind end). Keep in mind that rabbits are susceptible to cold when they're wet; Chapter 7 describes bathing precautions to prevent your bunny from catching a chill.

Many rabbits don't like being handled, but grooming will become easier as you build a trusting relationship with your rabbit. Chapter 7 also offers tips for proper handling and bonding.

# Keeping Up with Chores

Having any pet is going to add a certain amount of work to your to-do list around the house. Staying on top of chores, such as food prep, cleaning, and litter box maintenance, is a critical part of keeping both your home and your rabbit healthy and happy.



TIP

All rabbit owners must do a number of tasks that take time, but you must also determine who can perform them. If you live alone, you'll obviously perform them. (No rabbit likes to clean his own litter box.) If you have a family and the rabbit will belong to everyone, then tasks must be delegated. Before your rabbit comes to live with you, sit down with your family and have a meeting. Discuss the tasks described in this chapter, as well as who will perform them, and when. A written schedule can do wonders to encourage slackers to keep up their end of the bargain. This meeting is a great way to find out whether your family is committed to owning a rabbit. If they're not, then you can put off any plans for a new pet rabbit and thus spare your family and the rabbit from going through the hassle.

However, for the family that's willing to undertake a few extra chores for the sake of a furry new pet, taking care of a rabbit isn't too hard, especially if everyone in the family agrees to pitch in. Table 1-1 has tips on who may best be able to perform the various tasks required of rabbit owners. (All these tasks are described in detail in Part 2.)

**TABLE 1-1**      **Divvying Up the Tasks**

Task	How Often	Who
Feeding the rabbit	Daily	Kids of all ages can easily perform this task as long as an adult monitors them and makes certain that the child is performing this important job. An adult should wash and cut up fresh foods for the child's safety and measure out pelleted feed.
Changing the water	Daily	Older children can make sure that the rabbit has fresh water daily; adult supervision ensures the job gets done.
Exercising	Daily	A child of any age can help a rabbit exercise by playing with the bunny or simply watching to see that the rabbit doesn't get into anything he isn't supposed to as the rabbit runs around on his own. It's important that adults be the one to lift and carry the rabbit if the children are young. Children should be monitored when they're playing with the rabbit to ensure that they don't chase or accidentally hurt the bunny in any way.
Cage cleaning	Weekly	Depending on the type of cage, an adult or an older child should do this job.
Grooming	Varies	Adults or older children can tackle this job, which entails brushing (daily for longhaired rabbits and weekly for others), nail clipping, and ear cleaning.

## Monitoring Your Rabbit's Health

Like any other animal companion, rabbits can become injured, contract diseases, or get infections. Of course, your rabbit is going to be less likely to become ill or injured if you follow the advice in this book and provide her with a proper diet, a

clean home, and plenty of exercise. But even the best cared for rabbits can become sick, and your best defense is to be prepared for whatever comes your way. You should

- » **Find a vet.** Don't delay. Chapter 9 discusses how to find a vet who can care for rabbits. If your rabbit is intact, make spaying/neutering a primary topic of conversation.
- » **Keep up with annual checkups.** Even though rabbits don't require annual vaccinations, an annual checkup is a critical part of your rabbit's healthcare regiment.
- » **Put together a first-aid kit.** Having basic medical supplies on hand may mean the difference between a minor health situation and a medical emergency. Consult Chapter 9 for how to put together a first-rate first-aid kit.
- » **Be on the lookout for symptoms of illness.** The better you know your rabbit, the better you're able to spot unusual behaviors or symptoms associated with bunny illnesses. By conducting regular home checkups, as described in Chapter 9, you're more likely to detect problems early on.
- » **Respond to issue of aging.** Thanks to better care and living conditions, house rabbits can live 10 years or longer. Unfortunately, geriatric bunnies have their own health problems. Arthritis, kidney disease, cancer, and blindness are among the ailments you should look for as your bunny ages.

## Training Your Rabbit

Whether it's to use a litter box, come when called, or stop chewing the carpet, training is a rewarding part of living with a house rabbit. Chapter 12 covers some basic ideas of training, with stops for training rabbits to do "tricks" like sit, jump, and come. Chapter 13 goes a bit deeper into training to cover troublesome behaviors such as kicking and biting. Consider the following:

- » Many "problem behaviors" are simply the result of your bunny acting on natural urges — digging, chewing, urinating, for example.
- » Take time to bond with your bunny by "listening" to your rabbit's body language and sounds, which are described in Chapter 11.
- » The success of your training efforts will depend a great deal on how good of a trainer you are. Are you consistent? Patient? Firm but kind?

Though people are surprised to hear it, rabbits are quite capable of being litter box trained, which is a goal for many rabbit owners. Most rabbits take to litter boxes quite readily, but Chapter 5 outlines the steps to success, with advice for those who come across stray pellets in the parlor.

## Thinking Like a Bunny

You may love your rabbit, and your rabbit may love you, but underneath your bunny's overt affections, a worried creature still exists. Think about it: For thousands of years, humans have hunted rabbits for food and fur. In fact, they still do!

The genetic makeup of the wild rabbit enables him to recognize human beings as predators. Try walking up to a wild bunny and see what happens. Although your pet rabbit is tame and comes from a long line of domesticated rabbits, that innate fear of humans still prevails. You can win your bunny over to the point where he's incredibly comfortable with you, but be aware that he's still easily frightened by quick movements, loud noises, and rough handling. In fact, some rabbit experts believe that even lifting a rabbit off the ground can be terrifying to the animal because this sensation normally comes with being carried off by a predator.



REMEMBER

For this reason, treat your rabbit gently at all times. You can get more details about how to ease your rabbit's fears and build a trusting relationship by reading Chapter 11.

A large part of building that trust will come from reading your bunny's body language and sounds. Whether he has an urgent message or is just being social creature that he is, your rabbit has a lot to say! Chapter 11 describes the sounds and movements you'll come to recognize and understand.

## Having a Good Time with Your Pet

Living with a rabbit is so much more than chores, rabbit-proofing, and training — be sure to make time for some fun! Rabbits and their people love to have a good time, and they've come up with some fairly ingenious ways of doing so.

- » **Playing games and tossing toys:** It's natural for rabbits to play, but many rabbits, especially those confined to a cage for long periods of time, may need some encouragement. Toys and games are the perfect way to keep bunnies

healthy, active, and energized. Get involved in a game of tag or take a seat and enjoy the jumps, dashes, and leaps that follow a session with a new toy. Chapter 14 is loaded with ideas for games, as well as for toys, both homemade and store bought.

- » **Making friends with other rabbit owners:** Like their rabbit companions, many rabbit people crave social activity. Some people love their rabbits so much that they want to share them with others, and rabbit clubs and shows are the perfect outlet. Others go a more philanthropic route and volunteer their time with a rescue organization, whether by fostering bunnies waiting to be adopting or interviewing prospective adoptees. Still others find happiness in rabbit hopping, a sport managed by the Rabbit Hopping Association of America. Chapter 15 offers details on all of these activities.
- » **Traveling when you have a rabbit:** For most rabbits, travel is not high on their list of fun things to do, but you can make unavoidable trips more pleasant for your bunny companion. Safety is first, of course, and Chapter 16 offers guidelines for auto and air travel, with tips for finding hotels that accept long-eared guests. The chapter also includes helpful advice for finding someone who can care for your rabbit at home while you're away.