

## Rabbit Litter Training

Like cats, rabbits can be litter-trained with relative ease. Rabbits naturally urinate and defecate in only one or a few places and are happiest this way. However, there are some biological and behavioural differences that make rabbit litter-training unique.

### Starting Out

Training a rabbit to use the litterbox is generally quite simple. Start by placing the litterbox in their designated “toilet” spot (where the rabbit has been urinating and defecating in his home). The rabbit will often get the idea and start using the box soon after. Rabbits respond well to



scent clues, and to help steer your furry companion to the litterbox, place any urine or droppings that are deposited elsewhere into the box. Use a tissue or paper towel to clean up stray urine and place it in the litterbox. If the rabbit chooses a new litter spot, simply move the box to the new spot and continue putting droppings into it. After one or two moves, the rabbit should catch on.

Rabbit digestive systems are constantly moving, so providing unlimited amounts of hay in a hay rack above the litterbox or in the litterbox or in a container accessible from the litterbox will encourage the rabbit to go there. Remember, if putting hay in the litterbox make sure to change the hay daily, so the rabbit always has clean hay.

Rabbits will also play, dig, or lounge in their litterboxes. This is completely normal behaviour. Rabbits like to take their time about the process, munching a bit of hay, finding a good spot, flopping out for a bit, etc. Rabbits produce an average of 350 droppings per day, so they they will be spending a lot of time in their litterbox.

Positive reinforcement never hurts. Give a treat (a small piece of fruit or favourite veggie) when the rabbit uses the litterbox. Never shout at or physically discipline a rabbit for unwanted behaviour. The rabbit will only fear you and will not respond positively. If you see your rabbit urinating or defecating outside the box, gently “herd” her into the box or, if she doesn’t mind being held, place her in it and reward her for using it.

## Helpful Hints

### Don’t Litter: Spay/Neuter

Unaltered rabbits are far more difficult to litter-train. When rabbits reach sexual maturity they naturally mark their territory, using urine and fecals as well as scent gland markings. This behaviour is almost always improved by spaying or neutering the rabbit. Altered rabbits also live longer, are less prone to cancer and illness, and are more likely to get along with humans and one another.



### **Aged to Perfection**

Older rabbits, even those never exposed to the concept, are often much easier to litter-train than young rabbits. Be patient with babies, as they will pick up the behaviour as they mature if you continue to provide a litterbox and pay attention to their chosen toilet spots. Adopting an adult rabbit will often make this process substantially easier.

### **Pristine Potty Please**

Rabbits do not naturally bury or cover their droppings as cats do. They can also be very picky about cleanliness. You should dump and refill the litterbox every 2-3 days and clean the box with vinegar, dish soap or specially marketed rabbit-safe products (sold at pet stores) weekly or when especially soiled. Never use harsh chemicals, as rabbits are very sensitive to environmental toxins.

### **Size Matters**

Litterboxes should be sized for the rabbit. Avoid corner litterboxes that do not comfortably contain a rabbit. The rabbit should be able to comfortably fit their whole body in the box and ideally lie down in it. Bonded pairs should have two litterboxes next to one another or a litterbox big enough to comfortably fit both together, as using the litterbox is an activity they will often take part in together.

Sometimes a rabbit will favour urinating in a corner of the box and may occasionally over-reach, going down the outside of the box accidentally. Some rabbit also enjoy using their litterbox for digging, which can create a mess. High-sided will solve both of these problems.

### **Litter Types**

The best types of litter for rabbits are recycled paper litter products, like CareFresh and Yesterday's News. They are safe and highly absorbent. Another good option is Aspen shavings.

To keep your rabbit healthy, it is important not to use the following products: pine or cedar shavings, corn cob bedding, regular newspaper, or clay/clumping kitty litter. These products are known to cause respiratory problems, liver damage, and/or are harmful if ingested.

## **Trouble Shooting**

### **Territoriality**

Rabbits, even spayed or neutered ones, will often start "marking" when another rabbit has been brought into the home. This is their way of saying "this is my house." They will often leave fecal droppings around the other rabbit's cage or pen and will sometimes urinate there as well. Once they have become accustomed to one another, this behaviour should stop. When rabbits are bonded, territoriality is no longer an issue and litterbox use should resume.



## Such a Thing as Too Free?

If your rabbit is going to be “free-range” in your home, which is highly recommended, don’t let him have full run of the place all at once. Start by confining the rabbit to one room and providing more than one litterbox. Rabbits may choose more than one “toilet” place in their room and a litterbox in each location will help the rabbit learn more quickly. If your rabbit is in an enclosure, remember to offer one litterbox inside the cage and at least one in the designated space for “free time”.

Once the rabbit has mastered her room, she can be given more freedom. Again, take it slow. If your home is large, the rabbit may get confused or simply be too lazy to go all the way back to the litterbox. Open up one level at a time and provide several litterboxes around the house to help remind the rabbit where to go. As litter habits improve the number of litterboxes can be reduced. No One’s Perfect

Many rabbits will still leave the occasional fecal pellet around their home to let you know it is “their” space. This is especially likely if you have rearranged their living space or cleaned their belongings recently, and they no longer smell like “rabbit.”

## Health Problems

Some lapses in litterbox use are indicators of health problems. If you notice your rabbit is not producing droppings, is straining to urinate, or if your litter-trained rabbit suddenly urinates or defecates outside the litterbox, contact your rabbit-savvy veterinarian immediately. These symptoms might indicate serious medical issues like kidney failure, bladder infections, or GI stasis.

## Psychological Issues

Stress of any kind can often disrupt a rabbit's litter habits. This can include moving to a new home, a change in routine, visitors to the home, lack of attention, or any unsettling change. This stress can be caused by something as simple as a bad litterbox experience, such as a loud or sudden noise when the rabbit was in the box, making it a “scary” place.

If physical illness has been eliminated as a cause, try determining what might be causing the rabbit stress. Help to build the rabbit's confidence through rewards for going in the box and try moving the box to the rabbit's new chosen spot. This can be a difficult process and patience and praise will go a long way.

## What is normal?

Most people are surprised to learn that rabbits produce two kinds of excrement: fecals and caecal matter. Fecal pellets are round, dry and often contain hay fibres. They are easy to clean up and should not be loose or too moist, which are signs of illness. Rabbits also produce caecal droppings, which are rarely seen. This is because rabbits eat their caecals, often as they expel them. This is perfectly healthy and natural as caecals contain unabsorbed nutrients that a second digestion can extract. If your rabbit ever leaves these uneaten they will appear as a collection of very small, wet, balls stuck together in a pile and are usually easily differentiated from normal fecal pellets.

Rabbit urine is normally pale yellow in colour. White urine for several days may indicate excess calcium in the diet. Rabbit urine may occasionally turn dark yellow, carrot orange, brown or bright red, and this is commonly caused by antibiotic use, heat stress, or consumption of carrots, spinach or other beta carotene-rich vegetables. Bloody urine in rabbits is quite rare. There are, however, instances in which a medical problem is indicated. If concerned, it is best to have your rabbit examined by a knowledgeable vet.

