

Litter Training Your Bunny

By nature, rabbits choose one or a few places to deposit their urine and most of their pills (fecal pellets). Urine-training involves putting a litterbox where the rabbit chooses to go. Pill-training requires that you give them a place they know will not be invaded by other rabbits. Good toilet habits may take weeks or months to achieve, depending on maturity. Here are some suggestions to help you to train your rabbit to use the litterbox.

Age

Older rabbits are easier to train than younger rabbits, especially babies. A rabbit's attention span and knack for learning increases as they grow up. If you have a baby, stick with it!

Spay/Neuter

When rabbits reach the age of 4-6 months, their hormones become active and they usually begin marking their territory. Both males and females feel a strong need to mark their territory with urine and feces. You should see an improvement in house training within two to three weeks of having your male bunny neutered. With females, the behavioral benefits of spaying may take as long as several months to be noticeable. By spaying or neutering your rabbit, he/she will be more likely to use the litterbox.

Setting up for Success

Rabbits learn about litterboxes by doing the right thing and being rewarded, not by getting into trouble and being scolded. Structure the environment so that she can do only the right thing, then praise and reward her.

The first rule of litter box training is: MORE IS BETTER. The more time your rabbit spends in a box filled with litter, the more accustomed to using a box she will become. It doesn't matter whether she is actually eliminating in the box or simply sitting in it; many rabbits even sleep in their box.

The second rule is: LESS IS BETTER. Less running area, that is. A rabbit who is not yet house trained should be confined to a single room that is plentifully supplied with litterboxes. You are setting her up to succeed by putting her in a situation where it is fairly easy for her to do what you want her to do. Don't worry that having more than one right place to eliminate will confuse her. In fact, you will probably be able to reduce the number of boxes as your rabbit matures and develops the habit of using a litterbox.

Even if your goal is to let your rabbit have full run of the house, you must start with a small running space, and when your rabbit is sufficiently well-trained in that space, gradually give her more space. But do so gradually! If you overwhelm her with too much freedom before she is ready, she will forget where her box is and lose her good habits.

The Method

Start with a box in the rabbit's home space. If she urinates in a corner of the space not containing the box, move the box to that corner until she gets it right. Once she is using the box in her space, allow her into the larger room. If she heads to a corner where there is no box, or lifts up her tail in the characteristic fashion, cry "no" in a single, sharp burst of sound. Gently herd her back to her space and her litterbox, or into one of the boxes in the larger room. Be careful. You don't want to make the litterbox seem like punishment. **A handful of oat and/or timothy hay in the box makes it a more welcoming place.** After she uses the box, praise her and give her a favorite treat.

If your bunny is making lots of mistakes, he probably has too much freedom and not enough supervision. Give him as much freedom as he is able to handle and let him stay in his home space more often. Time is on your side. If you supply praise, treats, patience, supervision, and litterboxes, time will do the rest.

It's advisable to keep a bunny off the beds and upholstered furniture until a litterbox habit is well established.

Pills vs. Urine

All rabbits will drop pills around their home spaces to mark it as their own. This is **NOT** failure to be litter-trained. It is very important for your rabbit to identify her home space as her property so that when she leaves it for the bigger world of your house, she will distinguish the family's area from her own and avoid marking it. To encourage this, make the rabbit the king of his space. Try not to force him in or out of it—coax him. Do not do things to his home space that he doesn't like, or things to him that he doesn't like while he is in his space.

Types of Litter

Organic litters are the safest to use. Among the approved litters are: **Care Fresh, Yesterday's News, Critter Country, Eco Straw by Oxbow.** **DO NOT USE CEDAR OR PINE SHAVINGS!** They can cause liver disease, cancer, skin sores and respiratory diseases in small animals. Do not use clumping or clay cat litter. It tends to clump in their stomach and can cause fatal blockages.

Cleaning and Disposal

Change hay and clean litterboxes daily, to encourage your rabbit to use them. Have a second box ready to go, so you can clean the first box when you have time. Use white vinegar to rinse boxes out—for tough stains, let pans soak. If a mishap results in a wet rug, sponge it with white vinegar. The high alkalinity of rabbit urine is neutralized by the acidity of the vinegar. It removes both urine and odors. If the urine has already dried, try products like Petcentric or Seventh Generation carpet cleaner to remove the stain and odor. Organic litters can be used as mulch or can be composted. Rabbit pills can be directly applied to plants as fertilizer.