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2nd Edition

# Rabbits

for  
**dummies**<sup>®</sup>  
A Wiley Brand



Choose the right  
rabbit for you

Train your bunny and deal  
with behavior problems

Prevent and  
treat illnesses

**Connie Isbell**  
**Audrey Pavia**



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for  
**dummies**<sup>®</sup>  
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2nd Edition

**by Connie Isbell and Audrey Pavia**

for  
**dummies**<sup>®</sup>  
A Wiley Brand

## Rabbits For Dummies® , 2nd Edition

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# Introduction

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**W**elcome to *Rabbits For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, the one and only book that you need to get started in the wonderful world of rabbit ownership. Of course, when it comes to rabbits, you can never stop discovering. Although they may seem like simple little creatures, rabbits are actually physically and emotionally complex and they never cease to amaze those who live with them.

If you're interested in rabbits, you came to the right book. Whether you're thinking about getting your first rabbit or you already have a bunny and want to find out more about how to take care of him, this book can be a great help.

How hard is owning a rabbit? *Rabbits For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, is designed to be a useful reference for those who aren't experts, as well as those who know zero about rabbits. Even people who know a thing or two about bunnies can benefit from this book because it's a reference for behavior and health.

Rabbits are nothing like cats and dogs, the two most common pets. The rabbit's digestive system is more akin to a horse than a feline or a canine. And the psychological makeup of a bunny is closer to that of a bird than that of a cat or dog.

In order to understand your rabbit and care for him properly, you have to know the details specific to rabbit ownership. By finding out about rabbit psychology, rabbit physiology, and basic rabbit care, you'll have what it takes to take care of a rabbit just right.

## About This Book

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*Rabbits For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, is like a department store: You're able to enter on whatever floor you like. You don't have to walk past that smelly perfume counter to get to the housewares section on the third floor. You just walk into the housewares section. Likewise, you don't have to start reading this book at the beginning, going through each page until you reach the end. You can turn to any section of the book that interests you and begin reading at that point and not feel lost. You don't have to remember what you read yesterday, and you don't have to read chapters or sections in order. Just find something that interests you, read it,

do it, and put the book back on your shelf. (No one expects you to read from cover to cover except maybe your high school English teacher, but you can ignore her this time around.)

Each part of the book is divided into chapters that address basic questions about rabbits and their care. You'll find answers to questions like

- » Am I really cut out to be a bunny owner?
- » How do I prepare my home for my rabbit's arrival?
- » How do I communicate with my bunny?
- » What's the best way to make sure that my rabbit is healthy and happy?
- » What do I do in the event of a medical emergency?

## Conventions Used in This Book

*Rabbits For Dummies*, 2nd edition, makes information easy to find and use. To help you navigate through the text, we've used certain conventions:

- » *Italics* are used for emphasis and to highlight new words or terms that are defined.
- » **Boldfaced** text is used to bring attention to key words or highlight points in a series.
- » Monofont is used to set apart Web sites and e-mail addresses.

In this book, we refer to rabbits with the male pronouns (he, his, him) and the female pronouns (she, her). This convention is merely for readability's sake. We don't call rabbits "it" because they're living creatures.

## What You're Not to Read

From time to time in this book, we share information that may be interesting but isn't essential to the complete understanding of the topic at hand. You can find this nonessential information in two places:

- » **Sidebars:** The gray shaded text boxes contain supplementary information that you can skip or read later.
- » **Technical Stuff:** Paragraphs highlighted with the Technical Stuff icon contain technical rabbit facts and tidbits that are interesting but not required reading.

## Foolish Assumptions

In writing *Rabbits For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, we made some assumptions about our readers:

- » You know a rabbit when you see one.
- » You're one of the many people who think about adopting a cute, fur ball of rabbitness, but you want to make sure that a rabbit is the right pet for you and your family.
- » You're lucky enough to own a rabbit, but you want to be certain that you're doing all you can to properly care for him.
- » You care about rabbits and want to treat them with kindness, especially when it comes to housing them in your home.
- » You're allowed to keep rabbits in the area where you live.
- » You know that the best way to find out about things is to read about what the experts have to say on the subject.
- » You're no dummy, despite the title of this book. In fact, you're pretty smart — otherwise, you wouldn't have bought this book.

## How This Book Is Organized

This book is put together in a way that allows you to find the information you need quickly and easily. *Rabbits For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, is divided into five parts made up of several chapters relating to that specific rabbit topic.

### Part 1: Bringing on the Bunny Basics

Before you even get a rabbit, you need to know what rabbits are all about. This part offers information about whether a rabbit is right for your lifestyle, how rabbits are put together, how to go about choosing a rabbit, and the best places to find one.

## **Part 2: Taking Care of Creature Comforts**

Housing, grooming, and feeding — these three important elements for keeping a rabbit are all covered in this part of the book. You can find out why rabbits are happier and healthier as indoor pets, how to litter box train your house rabbit, why keeping your pet clean and groomed is so important, and how best to feed your bunny.

Because rabbits are prone to illness, bunny healthcare is an important matter. In this part, you can find out how to recognize common rabbit illnesses, how to prevent them, and when to go to the vet. You also get help putting together a bunny first-aid kit, and you discover how to handle rabbit emergencies. Finally, this part discusses how to say the final goodbye when that inevitable moment comes.

## **Part 3: Rabbit Psychology: Behavior and Training**

Rabbit personality is what makes living with a bunny so much fun. Find out how to understand bunny body language. (They can't speak English.) Discover helpful tips on training, as well as how to train your pet to do a few fun tricks. This part also includes invaluable information on how to deal with common behavior problems, such as biting, chewing, and digging.

## **Part 4: Enjoying Your Fun Bunny**

Think rabbits don't do much except sit in a cage all day? Wrong! You can have all kinds of fun with your rabbit. Part 4 discusses playing with him, getting involved in rabbit clubs and shows, and even traveling with him. This part also covers the unique sport of rabbit hopping, along with details on how to get involved with rabbit social issues.

## **Part 5: The Part of Tens**

In the Part of Tens, we tackle three different subjects: health emergencies, useful rabbit Web sites, and ways of enhancing a pet rabbit's life. In the health chapter, you find an overview of the ten signs that require emergency action. Follow the advice, and your rabbit is likely to live a long, healthy life. Chapter 18 has the best links on the Internet for rabbit lovers. And last but not least, the final chapter offers ten ways to make your bunny's day special.

## Appendix

The Appendix in this book contains a plethora of rabbit resources, including rabbit rescue groups, purebred rabbit clubs and registries, rabbit activity groups, educational organizations, rabbit publications, and other useful resources for rabbit owners.

## Icons Used in This Book

As with all the other books in the *For Dummies* series, this book has useful little icons in the margins to call your attention to specific types of information. See the following explanations of what each of those icons means:



REMEMBER

You see this icon throughout this book because when it comes to rabbits, you need to do plenty of remembering. We place this icon next to important information that you won't want to miss or forget.



WARNING

When you see this symbol, beware! This icon highlights information about dangers that can cause your rabbit harm.



TECHNICAL  
STUFF

Occasionally, rabbit information gets a bit technical, hence this icon. When you see it, put the left side of your brain in high gear. But if you're short on time, know that this information is interesting but not essential.



TIP

This icon alerts you to helpful hints regarding rabbits, pertaining to their care and handling. If you read the information next to this icon, you'll have a happier, healthier rabbit.

## Where to Go from Here

Go wherever you want. You can start at Chapter 1 and read all the way through to the final appendix, or you can hop, skip, and jump around — much like a rabbit.

If you're going to do that skipping around thing, can we at least ask you for a favor? Before you start jumping from place to place, take a few moments to read

through Chapter 1, which contains the most important questions you want to ask yourself before you embark on the responsibility of rabbit ownership:

- »» If you're considering getting a rabbit, hop over to Chapter 1.
- »» If you've decided that you're going to buy a rabbit, Chapters 2, 3, and 4 help you find the right one.
- »» If you already have a rabbit or two and want to get the latest perspective on a healthy bunny diet, see Chapter 6.
- »» If you want to train your rabbit, Chapter 12 can help you.
- »» If you want to participate in rabbit-related activities, Chapter 15 can get you started.

# 1

## **Bringing on the Bunny Basics**

### **IN THIS PART . . .**

If you're just starting out with a rabbit, you need the basics. This part gives them to you. You find details on how to tell whether a rabbit is the right pet for you, the different breeds and types of rabbits available, the benefits of adopting a rabbit who needs a home, and how to find a healthy rabbit. You also see details about how the rabbit's body works and receive pointers on how to choose the right rabbit for you.

#### 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.

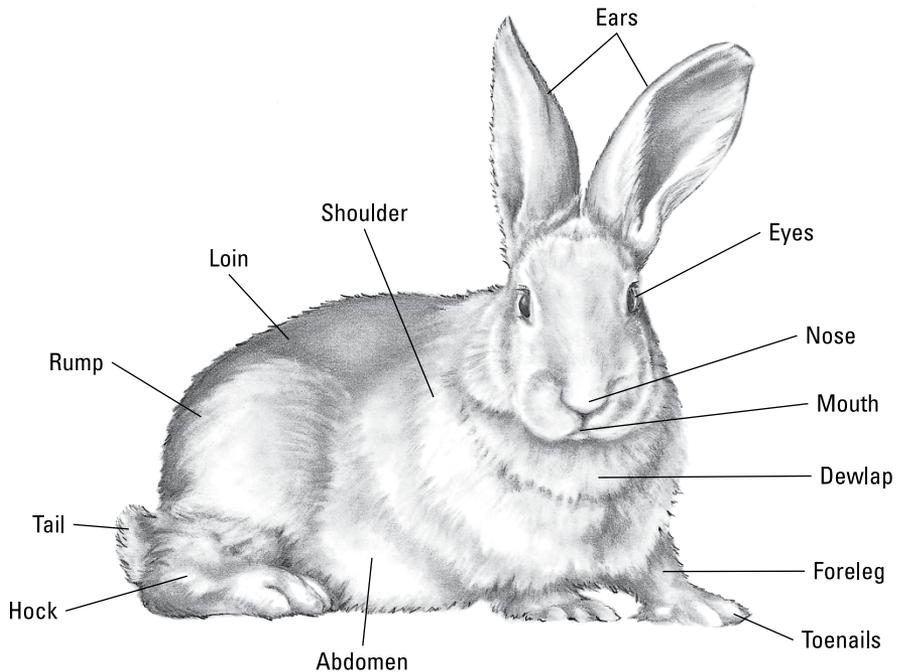
Rabbits are complicated creatures, both physically and psychologically. In addition to a uniquely designed social structure, their bodies have helped them to survive as a species for eons. As the caregiver to one of these special animals, it behooves you to understand the inner workings of the rabbit. 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