



## RABBIT BEHAVIOR AND TRAINING (Including Litter Box Training)

A rabbit's behavior depends on its age, gender, personality and past experiences. The following paragraphs detail normal rabbit behavior across all of these variables except for gender and age. As long as you provide all of the "comforts" that any rabbit would need (space, food, water, hiding places, human or rabbit companionship, toilet areas and toys), your rabbit should behave in a relatively normal manner and shouldn't display any problem behavior such as (e.g. moving around in the same area in the same pattern), self-injurious or abnormal behaviors (excessive grooming, self-mutilation, etc.).

**Rabbit Body Language:** Body language/position plays a huge part in indicating how they are feeling.

1. What does a **happy/relaxed/content** rabbit look like?
  - **"Sphinx" position:** Lying down with legs tucked underneath body. Also called the "meatloaf".
  - Body relaxed and extended, on their side with legs stretched out behind and slightly in front.
  - **"Frog" position:** completely stretched out with front legs extended directly out in front and back legs extended out directly behind them.
  - **"Binky" position:** Rabbit jumps into the air with all four paws off the ground and twists mid-air.
2. What does a **worried/concerned** rabbit look like?
  - Rabbit is crouched, head flush to the ground, ears back and/or splayed to side, muscles tense and pupils dilated.
  - Rabbits that are nervous or anxious often hide. It is very important for there to be at least one hiding place for your rabbit.
3. What do these **ear positions** mean?
  - Forward: curious or interested
  - Straight up: alarmed and trying to listen for the direction and proximity of a possible threat
  - Flat to head: frightened and trying to make itself less noticeable
4. What do these **tail positions** mean?
  - Elongated or extruded: curious or interested. Usually paired with forward ears
  - Raised higher up its back: excited or aroused
  - Flicking from side to side: about to attack or wants to mate
5. What do these **feet signals** mean?
  - Thumping: used as a warning to other rabbits of approaching danger but in an intact male could mean an intention to mate. In a neutered male, it is done when they are annoyed/bothered
  - Up in the air: during a "binky", the back legs will extend – usually in a twisting motion – up and behind the body, signaling excitement or happiness
6. What do these **face/head signals** mean?
  - Teeth grinding: Though counterintuitive, grinding of the teeth can actually mean happiness/contentment; usually in the context of being stroked or rubbed in a favorite place. If the grinding is more intense, then it could indicate pain or discomfort

- Nudging: An attention-getting behavior to communicate to you that they are not happy with what you are doing... to stop and/or go away
  - Chinning: A scent marking behavior to claim territory. Scent is a very important communication tool and has even been used on humans to mark them as a rabbit's possession.
7. What do these **vocalizations** mean?
- Growling: usually displayed by a female, growling indicates that you are interfering with the rabbit's space (like cleaning her litter tray). Lunging with their front feet may also accompany this vocalization. This is related to territory protection and is rarely if ever followed by an actual bite or attack
  - Honking or Grunting: Sign of wanting or intending to mate. It presents itself as a small exhalation of breath. It may continue even after spaying/neutering.
8. Why does a rabbit **move in a circle**? Circling is an attention-getting behavior and form of territoriality, circling around your feet or another rabbit is meant to "lay claim" to he who is being circled. It can go on for bouts of up to 10 circles in both directions.
9. Signs of Stress:
- Panting:** The optimal temperature range for a domestic rabbit is between 50 & 70 degrees Fahrenheit. Rabbits do not do well in high temperatures. They can suffer from heat stroke, even if kept too close to a heat source like a vent, radiator or direct sunlight, even for a short period of time. If you don't get the rabbit to a cooler/shadier area, it could be fatal.
- Fur Pulling:** Though sometimes due to boredom (which, in itself is stressful), excessive grooming or fur pulling can lead to GI problems like hairballs and blockages. Feeding the rabbit more hay will not only help reduce boredom, it will help the rabbit's digestive system, reducing hairball buildup. You can also try giving them more enrichment like toys or puzzle feeders.
- Over eating:** Usually an indication of boredom, excessive eating can lead to an obese, unhappy rabbit, especially if what he is eating is mostly pellets or veggies/fruits. A quick and beneficial remedy to this is to replace the over-eaten food with hay. A rabbit can never have too much hay. The hay will keep them busy, keep their gut motility moving and provide them with fiber and roughage so important in their diet.
- Screaming:** Rabbits only scream if they are in extreme pain, anger or fear. It is an unusual sound for a rabbit to make and you may not recognize it as the rabbit making the noise. It is very high in pitch and disturbing to hear.
- Dribbling:** If you see that your rabbit's chin is wet with saliva or witness the saliva dripping down its chin, check their teeth. Overgrown teeth are most often to blame for drooling or dribbling.
- Hiding:** Though hiding is a normal behavior for a prey animal such as a rabbit, excessive hiding can be a sign that something is physically or behaviorally wrong. Observe them carefully to determine what could be the cause. If they are eating, drinking and eliminating normally, there may be something or someone in their environment causing them undue stress. Perhaps another rabbit or animal is bullying them.

**Training Your Rabbit:** Rabbits are very trainable. There are several benefits to training.

- It engages them.
- To take part in their own self grooming. You can train your rabbit to present different parts of the body for inspection, maintenance like nail clipping.
- Litter box training.

**How do I train my rabbit?**

1. Devote plenty of time to training. For best results plan on initially devoting a little time every day to training your rabbit. Two or three short sessions of 5 to 10 minutes at a time will keep your bunny interested in learning.
2. Use your rabbit's favorite treats. Training is based on incentives.

3. Have a plan. Start simple. Carefully plan what you want your rabbit to perform and break that task down into small steps. You will reward the rabbit after completing each new step.
4. Give your rabbit a treat immediately when your rabbit does something you want to reward. If the rabbit sits up as you lift your hand above its head as if sitting up to beg, give the treat right away to reinforce “sit up.” The reward will need to be given within 2-3 seconds of the behavior.
  - If the rabbit does something else before you give the treat, you are reinforcing the wrong behavior.
  - If you want to teach your rabbit to come when called, start its training by having it positioned very close to you. When it comes to you, give it the reward. Be consistent so that your fluffy companion knows why it's getting treats.
  - Use the exact same commands, such as “Sit, (Your Rabbit's Name),” or “Up, (Your Rabbit's Name),” every time, so your rabbit will learn to recognize your requests and associate those exact words with getting a treat.
  - Add praise to the act of giving the treat. For instance, “Good Sit” or “Good Up.”

Keep providing the treats until your rabbit responds correctly nearly every time. When you're trying to teach a new skill, don't skimp on the rewards. You need to make sure you are thoroughly conditioning your rabbit.

Wean your rabbit off the treats gradually. Once your rabbit has a skill down begin to give the treats less frequently. Give its reward once and then don't the next time, or give it a treat only every few times. Eventually you may not need treats at all.

- In time, reward your rabbit with petting and toys and only use food occasionally to keep the behavior strong.
- Rabbits like gentle strokes on their heads. Do not stroke the rabbit on its body; this is alarming to a rabbit. Be patient and take things slowly to avoid creating fear in your rabbit.
- Never scold, punish, shout or even say "no" to the rabbit during training. This is counterproductive and will make your rabbit more fearful and delay training.

**Litter box training:** Many rabbit owners enjoy having their rabbit able to roam around the house. To combat the problem of fecal matter scattered about the home, rabbit owners have taken to training their rabbit(s) to use the litter box.

**Litter box:** Use the rectangular one that is usually meant for cats or the corner fitting ones meant for ferrets.

**Litter:** Acceptable to use: Yesterday's News, Crown Bedding, recycled newspaper pellet litter or animal bedding, Carefresh or other paper pulp litter, wood stove pellets, ground corn cob pet litter/bedding. Always check the label. Don't buy litter that has cedar, cedar oils, zinc or clay based litter. Not acceptable to use: Clay litter (can cause respiratory problems), Cat Works litter (can cause zinc poisoning and possibly death), pine or cedar based litters. “Bait” the box with a layer of fresh Timothy hay on top of the litter.

**Litter box placement:** choose a place where the litter box will “live” and then secure it to something to prevent the rabbit from digging at it or trying to move it. If the litter box is placed in a room with slippery floors, put a rug outside of the box to prevent the rabbit from having trouble jumping into the box. Confine the rabbit and box to one room at first. If he defecates outside of the box pick both poop and bunny up and place them both in the litter box. Give chin scratches and praise.

- If you are going to be out of the room, the rabbit should go back in their cage.
- Don't clean the litter box too much or too fast at first. You want the rabbit to smell their urine and feces.
- Have treats available to reward the rabbit when they actually use the litter box.
- Expand the space when you see the rabbit use the box consistently in the confined space. Use multiple litter boxes so each room has one or more until you feel confident that the rabbit will know to use only one. (Though you still may want to keep more around.)
- Never scold or yell at the rabbit for not doing what you want or for going outside of the box. Only reward for desired behavior.



# Understanding rabbit behaviour

YOUR RABBIT'S BODY LANGUAGE CAN HELP YOU TO UNDERSTAND HOW THEY ARE FEELING

## A happy rabbit

These rabbits are relaxed and happy.

Rabbits 1-3 show ears close together, facing slightly backwards and pointing outwards. Eyes may be partially closed.

1



Rabbit is lying down, with a relaxed body posture and legs tucked under the body.

2



Rabbit is lying down, with front paws pointing forward and rear legs stuck out sideways. Body is relaxed and extended.

3



Rabbit is lying down with a fully extended, relaxed body. Back legs are stretched out behind the body and the front paws are pointing forward.

4



Rabbit jumps into the air with all four paws off the ground and twists in mid-air before landing.

## A worried rabbit

These rabbits are telling you that they are uncomfortable and don't want you near them.

1

Rabbit is in a crouched position, muscles are tense, head held flat to the ground, ears wide apart and flattened against the back, pupils dilated.



2

Rabbits who are worried or anxious may hide.



## An angry or very unhappy rabbit

These rabbits are not happy and want you to stay away or go away.

1



Rabbit turns and moves away flicking the back feet. Ears may be held against the back.

2

Rabbit is sitting up on back legs with front paws raised displaying boxing behaviour. Ears pointed upwards and facing outwards, rabbit may be growling.



3

Rabbit is standing tense, with back legs thumping on the ground. Tail raised, ears pointing upwards and slightly turned outwards, facial muscles are tense and pupils dilated.



4

Rabbit is standing tense with body down and weight towards the back, head tilted upwards, mouth open and teeth visible. Ears held back and lowered, tail raised, pupils dilated.



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