What's Up Doc? House Rabbit Basics

Introduction
Are you up on your rabbit care? The number of American households that include rabbits continues to multiply. Up by three percent (43%) since 2000, more than four out of ten small animals owned by American families in 2002 are rabbits. According to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, this is a dramatic increase from the 24% of households owning rabbits as pets in 1992.

Rabbit Habits
Rabbits easily learn to respond to their names and simple words, use litterboxes, enjoy chewing and digging, and circumvent barriers meant to restrict them. Male rabbits tend to spray, and females tend to be territorial, but neutering significantly reduces or eliminates these tendencies.

The potential lifespan of a well-cared-for house rabbit is seven to 10 years - and some live even longer. Common health problems include dental abnormalities, gastrointestinal problems, and ear and upper respiratory infections. Rabbits are most active in early mornings and evenings and have a keen sense of hearing, sight, and smell. If properly socialized, they make excellent companions to those owners who delight in their beauty and antics.

Although rabbits can entertain themselves for hours with a simple cardboard carton and toys such as plastic baby keys, they should get about 30 hours of out-of-cage exercise time per week under close supervision in a rabbit-proof area.

House Cleaning
House rabbits need cages at least three to four feet long. These should not be placed in areas of direct sunlight, heat, wetness, or drafts. Paper-based materials are recommended for the cage floor; pine and cedar shavings and all clay litters are not. Droppings and soiled flooring material, as well as the water bottle and food dish, should be cleaned daily.

It is normal for a rabbit to quickly bob his head between his back legs and then sit up chewing. He is catching his soft, moist fecal pellets and swallowing them again to get as much nutrition as possible from them. The hard pellets that occupy the cage floor consist of the indigestible portion of the diet.

Beyond Carrots
A mature rabbit should be fed a daily diet of fresh, unlimited grass hay (alfalfa is not recommended for mature rabbits), supplemented with a salad of dark green leafy vegetables. Avoid rhubarb leaves, peas, potatoes, beans, corn, onions, and garlic. Never feed hay that does not smell fresh or is wet or damp, and avoid spoiled greens. Commercial high-fiber rabbit pellets are suitable in very limited quantities. Anything beyond hay, vegetables, water, and pellets should be considered a treat and given in limited quantities (approximately 1 tablespoon per day total). Suitable treats include banana, strawberry, blueberry, grapes, papaya, pineapple, apple, whole oats, peanuts and an alfalfa cube. Fresh water should always be available.

Signs of Illness
A rabbit who stops eating or moving his bowels for 12 hours or longer should be seen immediately by a veterinarian. Because rabbits do not throw up, it is important to groom rabbits regularly to avoid serious intestinal blockages that can be caused by hairballs. This may mean daily brushing for long-haired rabbits.
Find out what grooming routine your client follows, including a possible remedy for hairballs.

**Signs of illness include:**
- Change in droppings (particularly diarrhea or constipation)
- Bloating or a change in appetite, activity or behavior
- Discharge from the eyes or nose
- Sneezing or coughing
- Sores which look infected and don't heal
- Loud tummy growling
- Lumps or swelling under the skin

**Proper Handling**
In the wild, rabbits are prey animals and survival may depend on masking symptoms of illness. Therefore, it is important to pay close attention to a pet rabbit's normal behavior, and act on even subtle changes. As prey animals, they generally do not enjoy being held, so you need to know the proper technique for picking up rabbits: support the forequarter with one hand, the hindquarters with the other, and hold snugly against your body (they will kick and struggle if they do not feel secure). If picked up or held improperly, rabbits may kick you, which can injure you and cause injury to their backs. When mishandled, rabbits may scratch or bite to protect themselves.

Finally, rabbits survive by knowing their environment very, very well. It is stressful for them when their environment is changed; therefore it is best for pet sitters to care for a rabbit in his home. Be sure your client provides a carrier to safely transport the rabbit to the veterinarian or to use for evacuation in case of an emergency.

**Helping Hands**
A great place to find out more about caring for rabbits is your local animal shelter. Volunteering a couple of hours a week at the shelter to help care for the rabbits who are awaiting new homes will help you educate yourself, and one may win your heart in the process.

**Recommended Resources:**
- House Rabbit Handbook - How to Live with an Urban Rabbit by Marinell Harriman