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Behavior

Social Creatures

In the wild, rabbits live in groups and are very social animals. As pets, they do not like to be alone. Your rabbit will be happier if she has a rabbit buddy. So please consider getting two rabbits at a time. Rabbits establish male and female hierarchies to keep order within the group. If you are going to own a pair of rabbits, there is usually less competition if you have a male-female pair rather than a same-sex pair. Of course, your rabbits should be altered to avoid offspring.

Marking

Because rabbits are social, they have developed a marking system to communicate with each other. Three systems of marking are used:

- *Spraying urine.* This is most common in sexually intact male rabbits. Males spray objects within their territory but can also spray other males who are lower-ranking and females during courtship. It is not uncommon for pet rabbits to spray objects around the house or even owners (as part of a courtship ritual). Neutering the rabbit usually eliminates this problem. If your rabbit is already neutered, spraying or inappropriate urination may be done for a different reason. Please consult your veterinarian for advice.
- *Defecating.* Your rabbits will deposit most of their fecal balls in a designated area, such as their litter box. However, they will also distribute fecal balls around the living area. This is a natural behavior performed in the wild to mark a rabbit's territory. Therefore, do not punish this behavior.
- *Chinning.* Your rabbits have scent glands on their chins, just as cats have on their cheeks. Rabbits rub their chin on items around their territory to mark it. They may even rub on you. Rabbits should be allowed to do this because it makes them feel more comfortable in their environment.

Digging

- In the wild, rabbits dig warrens (dens) to protect themselves from predators and the elements. To fulfill their needs with regard to hopping and exploring, your rabbits need to have daily supervised exercise time outside their cage. However, when your rabbits are loose in the house, they will have a natural urge to dig and may damage items in the house if not provided with an appropriate outlet. Rabbits may especially enjoy digging carpet edges, rugs, pillows, and furniture. Please do not allow your rabbits to have access to anything valuable or dangerous while you are teaching them what items are acceptable to dig on. You can place heavy objects in corners to block them from carpet edges. Allow your rabbits to be only in a safe rabbit-proof area, and always supervise their activity.
- Giving your rabbits an appropriate digging outlet is the best way to prevent them from damaging your home. If your rabbits are allowed outside, allow them to dig in designated secure spots in your yard. Always supervise them to ensure that they do not escape and are

Information cited from:

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safe from predators. If your rabbits are strictly indoors, provide them with an untreated wicker basket filled with hay or an old pillow or rug to dig on. If your rabbits dig on inappropriate items, interrupt their behavior by clapping your hands (try not to scare them) and redirecting them to more appropriate items. Always praise with attention and treats for appropriate digging.

Chewing

- Rabbits are natural grazers, so they continuously eat small amounts of food throughout the day instead of a few large meals. Consequently, your rabbits have a sometimes overwhelming drive to chew. When first allowing your rabbits to roam, it is essential to rabbit-proof your house and always supervise them. Removing valued or dangerous items from their reach is the safest way to prevent chewing on them. Taste deterrents, such as bitter apple spray or citrus-scented cord protectors, are unreliable, and their successful use depends on the individual rabbit. In the beginning, give access to a small area only under strict supervision. As your rabbits learn what is appropriate to chew on and what is not, you can gradually increase their access to other areas of your home.
- As with digging, if the chewing urge is not redirected to safe items, your rabbits can destroy your house and hurt themselves (e.g., getting shocked by chewing on TV cords). Ensure that your rabbits always have access to hay or toys (i.e., paper towel rolls, sisal rope toys, phonebook, etc.), and praise them for chewing on these. If they chew on something inappropriate, interrupt your rabbits by clapping your hands and redirecting them to a toy. Chewing is essential for mental stimulation and dental health and so should be encouraged instead of discouraged.

Coprophagy

Coprophagy is the act of eating fecal material. Although you may find this disgusting, your rabbits have to practice coprophagy daily to stay healthy. Rabbits produce two types of fecal balls. One type, called a cecotroph, is softer, larger, and rich in nutrients. The second type is harder, smaller, and devoid of nutrients. Your rabbits will eat the cecotrophs to absorb the maximum quantity of nutrients from their food. This is a natural behavior that is essential to their health. Therefore, coprophagy should not be interrupted or discouraged. In fact, if one of your rabbits stops eating her cecotrophs, she is sick and needs to be seen by a veterinarian.

Grooming

Rabbits are naturally very clean animals and spend hours each day grooming themselves, as do cats. Also similar to cats, rabbits can get hairballs, especially during shedding season. Unlike cats, rabbits cannot vomit, so hairballs can get stuck in their intestines. To prevent hairball problems, it is important that you feed your rabbits a high-fiber diet (see our handout "What Should I Feed My Rabbits?"). To catch a problem early, monitor your rabbits' behavior and their fecal balls daily for consistency, volume, and shape. If one of your rabbits eats less, grooms less, defecates less, seems to have difficulties defecating, or has diarrhea, seek medical attention.

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