
Creating a Fear Free Home for Your Rabbit

— A Science-Based Approach —

Basic Characteristics

- Small prey animal
- Descended from the European burrow rabbit (species *Oryctolagus cuniculus*)
- Crepuscular: active at dawn and dusk
- Territorial
- Social
- Rabbits can die from fear

This cute little bunny stuck her nose out of the cage and bit people. Who wants to live in a cage?



This rabbit never bites. He's engaging in some "back talk" here but he knows he's loved.



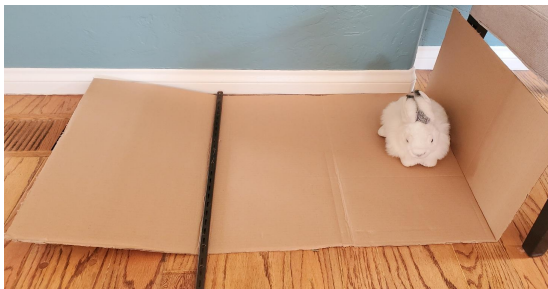
How to Reduce Fear and Stress

- Keep safe from predators
- Provide a safe, dark place to hide (a wooden box with two doorways, a tunnel)
- Set up a spacious environment: cage vs pen or free roam
- Have a daily routine
- Don't pick up/handle too much/bathe

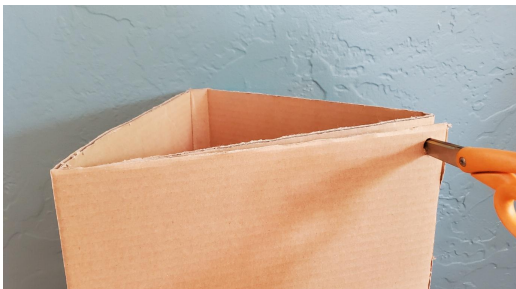
DIY Bunny Tunnel

Supplies:

- A clean 2' x 4' piece of cardboard
- Scissors with pointy tips
- Jute or sisal twine (2 pieces about 4-6" long)
- Optional: 2 12" seagrass mats



Using a straight edge, fold the cardboard 3 times to create a triangle-shaped tunnel



Poke holes near the edge of the doubled-up cardboard.



Push the twine through the holes and tie. Add grass mats.

Hearing



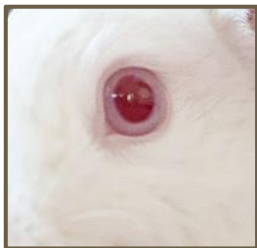
- Range of 96 to 49,000 hertz
 - Ears swivel to catch sound
 - Utilize acoustics: sound waves bounce off objects to orient surroundings
 - Rabbits thump to signal danger to one another
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- Rabbits enjoy music
 - Lop-eared rabbits do not hear as well as up-ears
 - Hearing is acute to compensate for limited accuracy in vision

How to Reduce Fear and Stress

- Keep bunny indoors in a quiet room, away from thunderstorms, fireworks, screechy noises
- Play light music or talk radio to reduce stress in loud environments
- Keep loud animals including humans away from the rabbit
- Establish a reassuring verbal phrase "it's ok, bunny"
- If away from the home, record your voice for the pet-sitter

Vision

- Panoramic field of vision
- Grainy close-up vision
- Blind spot right in front of their nose and directly behind them
- More rods than cones
- See best in dim light
- Rabbits with “pink” eyes don’t see as well as others and often scan to get a clear picture of their surroundings

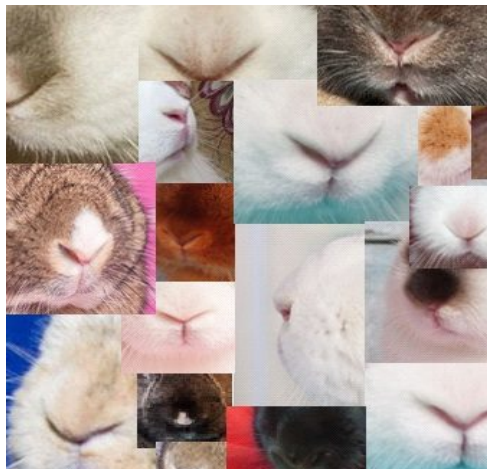


How to Reduce Fear and Stress:

- Approach rabbit slowly, from top or sides
- Create environments with green and blue
- Cover the playpen/hiding house in dark opaque shades
- Avoid bright white blocks of color, anything large or shiny moving toward or past
- Make sure bunny can get out of light
- The best lighting for a rabbit is low without any harsh or moving shadows

Smell

- Acute, with 100 million olfactory receptors
- Nasal membrane is sensitive to perfumes, chemicals and dust



How to Reduce Fear and Stress

- Wash hands after petting the dog
- Don't wear strong perfume or use household chemicals around the rabbit
- Keep your bunny's area clean
- Do add mint, dill, or fennel to your rabbit's salad to create a happy experience

The nose knows. And if it doesn't, it wiggles up and down to better catch a scent. This is called "nose blinking."

Touch



- Sensory nerves at the end of whiskers help bunny navigate through narrow spaces
- Entire body covered with sensitive nerve endings

How to Reduce Fear and Stress

- Always groom and pet your rabbit gently and slowly, petting in direction of the hair growth
- Don't trim your rabbit's whiskers!
- Keep furniture in the same place as much as possible

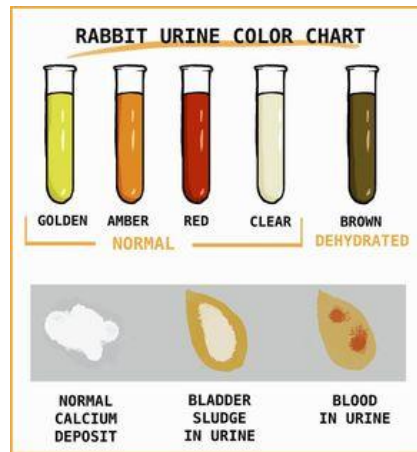
Taste

- 17,000 taste buds
- Distinguish sweet, sour, bitter and salty, and have discriminating tastes
- Most have a "sweet tooth"

- Feed a small treat daily
- Watch where your food is!

Signs of Fear or Stress

- Panic attack
- Vocalizing (snorting, screaming)
- Tooth chattering
- Thumping
- Trembling or breathing faster than usual
- Doesn't eat or drink normally (cause? Separated from bonded rabbit, human?) Urine is orange or red (if not caused by diet)
- Self-barbering (overgrooming/plucking hair)
- Fearful or stressed body language



With all these, make sure to rule out medical causes.

Discover and remove the cause of fear or stress.

Reading Body Language

Fearful or Stressed

- Tense
- Ears are like springs
- Tail is up
- Pupils are dilated, white around eyes
- Bunched



Relaxed and Happy

- Relaxed pose: "Superbunny"
- Ears and tail are relaxed
- Eyes are open but not buggy, or shut but not squeezed shut
- Binky: the bunny happy dance
- Butt twitching: extreme happiness



Summary

- Make sure bunny has a safe place to hide and room to get away from stressors
- Let the rabbit come to you
- Be aware of sights, smells, and sounds that can frighten the bunny
- Create a familiar and consistent routine
- Monitor children and other animals around rabbits
- Learn the signs of stress in rabbits and how to read bunny's body language
- Consider adopting a friend for your rabbit

