



21257 Leitersburg Pike  
Hagerstown, Maryland 21742  
240-513-6030  
[www.northpawsanimalhospital.com](http://www.northpawsanimalhospital.com)

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## **Rabbit Care Guide**

*Adapted from [www.myhouserabbit.com](http://www.myhouserabbit.com)*

### **About Us**

My House Rabbit is an educational website that promotes keeping pet rabbits inside the home. The site was founded by veteran rabbit owners Abi Cushman and P.A. Smith of New London, CT, who currently share their home with two mischievous agouti rabbits named Coco and Cosette.

### **How to Care for a Pet Rabbit**

Rabbits are unique pets. They have specific needs in order to live a long, happy and healthy life. Here is a basic overview on how to care for a pet rabbit:

#### **Step 1: Set Up Safe Indoor Housing**

There are several options to house rabbits inside. They can live free-reign in a bunny proofed room/rooms, or they can be contained within a puppy pen, bunny condo, or large rabbit cage. If contained, their space should always be large enough so they can hop around, and they should be let out of their pen for at least a few hours every day for exercise.

Make sure the primary location of your rabbit is not isolated from you and your family. A family room or living room is a good place. Learn more about indoor rabbit housing at [Housing Your Pet Rabbit Indoors](#) (*on website.*)

#### **Step 2: Bunny-Proof Your House**

Rabbits need space to run around and explore. In order to create a safe space for your bunny and to protect your belongings, you will need to thoroughly bunny proof the area. This includes covering all wires with plastic sleeves or flex tubing, or lifting them 3-4 feet out of reach of your rabbit.

If you don't want your baseboards gnawed, you can cover them with plastic guards, 2x4s or furring strips. You'll also have to block off certain areas since rabbits like to chew the undersides of beds, items on bookshelves, house plants, and more. Basically, your rabbit will try to chew everything in reach. Learn more at [Bunny Proofing Your House](#) (*on website.*)

#### **Step 3: Provide Fresh Hay**

A rabbit's diet should mainly consist of hay. Fresh hay should be provided to rabbits at all times. Baby rabbits should be given alfalfa, and adult rabbits should be fed timothy hay, grass hay, or oat hay.

Using a large hay feeder is helpful because it keeps large amounts of hay dry, clean, and accessible. Learn more about the importance of hay and where to buy it at [Hay for Rabbits: The Basis for a Healthy Diet](#)(*on website.*)

#### **Step 4: Provide Fresh Greens, Fiber-rich Pellets, and Fresh Water**

Supplement your rabbit's hay with fresh vegetables, fiber-rich pellets (in limited quantities for adult rabbits), and fresh water daily. You can learn more about what kinds of food to feed your bunny at [What to Feed Your Pet Rabbit](#) *(on website.)*

You can also learn about growing many of your rabbit's favorite vegetables at [Bunny Gardening for Beginners](#) *(on website.)*

#### **Step 5: Set Up a Litter Box**

Rabbits have a natural inclination to poop and pee in one area. Take advantage of this by setting up a medium-sized cat litter box or shallow storage bin near their food/water bowls and hay feeder.

Put a thin layer of rabbit-safe, recycled newspaper pellet litter at the bottom of the litter box. Do not use clay/clumping cat litter or wood shavings, as they are not safe for rabbits. Then put hay on top of the litter. Rabbits like to eat hay and poop at the same time, so this will encourage good litter box habits. Learn more at [Litter Training Your Pet Rabbit](#) *(on website.)*

#### **Step 6: Provide Enrichment**

Rabbits can get bored easily. Not only do they need space to exercise, they also need mental stimulation. Cardboard castles are great because rabbits spend hours chewing new windows and doorways. Cardboard castles also provide a quiet refuge for the rabbit when necessary. Learn more at [Building a Cardboard Castle for Your Bunny](#) *(on website.)*

You can also provide a variety of toys for your rabbit to pique his or her interest. Learn more at [Enrichment for Your Pet Bunny](#), [Logic Toys for Rabbits](#), and [Playing with Your Pet Bunny](#) *(on website.)*

#### **Step 7: Groom Your Rabbit**

Rabbits are naturally clean animals and wash themselves frequently. But you still need to groom your rabbit on a regular basis. Rabbits go through shedding cycles a couple times a year. It's important to brush your rabbit to remove all the excess fur. Otherwise, your rabbit could ingest it and have serious digestive issues. Learn more about keeping your rabbit looking and feeling sharp in our article, [Grooming Your House Rabbit](#) *(on website.)*

Regular nail clipping is also important because long nails can get snagged on things or they can curl into your rabbit's paw. Learn how to clip your rabbit's nails yourself at [Clipping Your Rabbit's Nails](#) *(on website.)*

#### **Step 8: Bring Your Rabbit to a Rabbit-Savvy Vet**

Rabbits are prey animals, and so their natural instinct is to hide any symptoms of illness. You must keep a watchful eye to ensure your rabbit is eating, drinking, pooping, and peeing regularly. If you notice any change in behavior, it is important to call a rabbit-savvy vet immediately. Learn about common rabbit diseases to look out for at our [Rabbit Health section](#) *(on website.)*

In addition to responding to illness, it is also essential to bring your rabbit in for regular veterinary checkups. The vet can check the ears, eyes, teeth, and gut to make sure the rabbit is in good health. Finally, consider spaying or neutering your rabbit. Spaying/neutering can reduce aggressive behavior, improve litter box habits, and improve a rabbit's overall health. Learn more at [Spaying or Neutering Your Pet Bunny](#) *(on website.)*

Find a rabbit-savvy vet in your area at the [House Rabbit Society Veterinarian Index](#) *(on website.)*

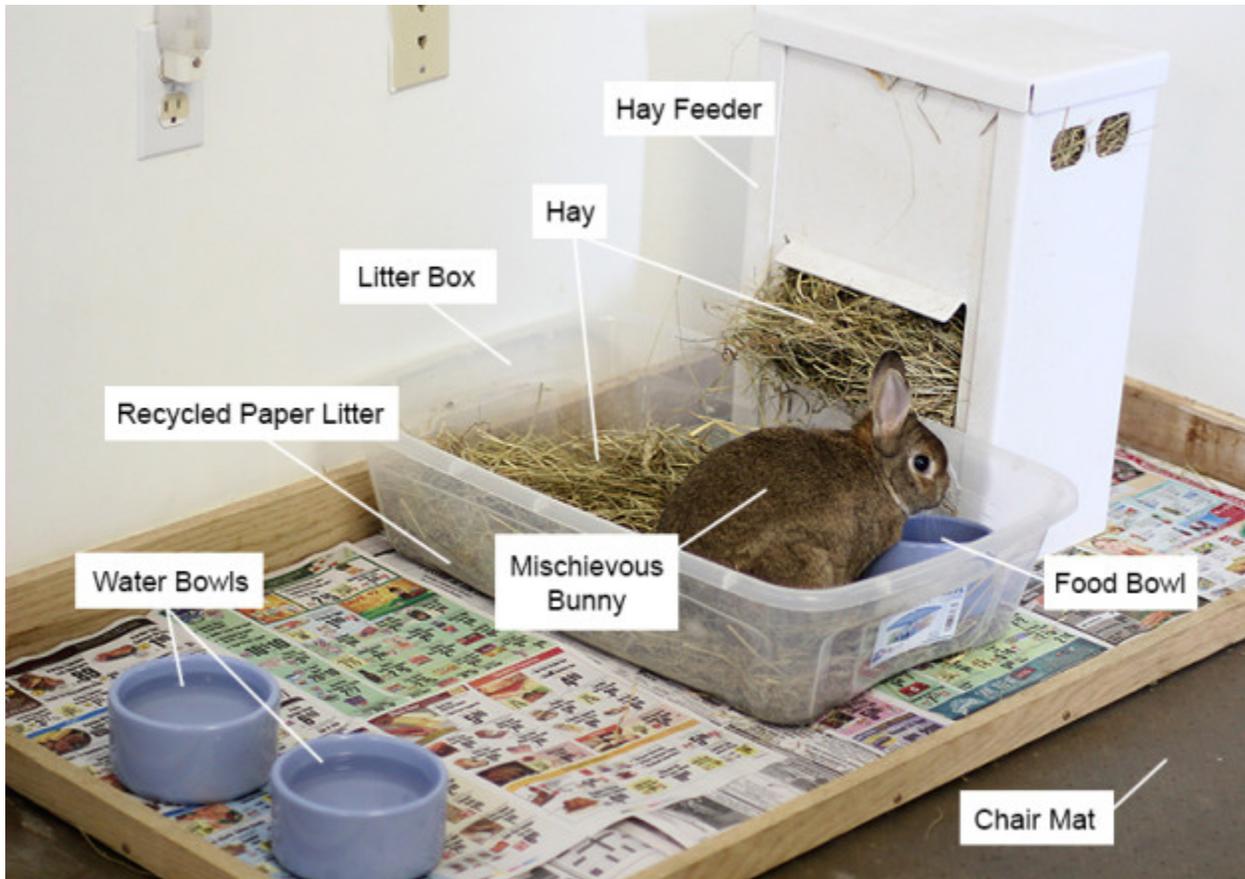
#### **Step 9: Understand Rabbits' Unique Language and Behavior**

Pet rabbits are different from cats and dogs. It's essential to understand how rabbits think so you and your rabbit can live a happy life together. Learn about their unique language at [Binkies, Nose Bonks and Flops: Rabbit Behavior Explained](#) and demystify unfavorable rabbit behavior by reading [Help! My Rabbit Hates Me!](#) By catering to your rabbit's natural inclinations, you can build a trusting, loving relationship with your bunny. See [Building a Relationship with Your Rabbit](#) for more information (*on website.*)

## Rabbit Supply Checklist

- **Indoor housing**  
Get a puppy pen 36 inches or higher so your rabbit can't jump out.
- **Wire covers**  
Plastic sleeves can be neatly connected to your wall.  
Flex tubing is another great option for covering and/or bundling wires.
- **Furniture / baseboard protection**  
Large split flex tubing can fit over wooden table or chair legs.  
Furring strips, 2x4s or other wood panels can be used to cover baseboards.
- **Puppy pens / baby gates**  
Puppy pens can help block off areas or confine your rabbit to a safe area of a room.  
Metal baby gates can be used to block off rooms.  
Storage cube panels can be attached to the bottoms of baby gates with zip ties if the slats are too far apart.
- **Litter box**  
A medium-sized cat litter box (no top) or a shallow storage container will do.
- **Rabbit-safe litter**  
Opt for a recycled newspaper pellet litter such as Yesterday's News (unscented). **Food / water bowls**  
Ceramic dishes are heavy enough so your rabbit can't tip them over.
- **Hay feeder**  
This helps keep hay fresh and available to your rabbit at all times.
- **Chair mat (optional)**  
You may want to protect your floor in the bunny area. Make sure to get a hard plastic one to resist chewing.
- **Food (hay, pellets, vegetables, and water)**  
Purchase hay by the bale from a local farmer (check local Craigslist ads) or order bulk hay online at [Small Pet Select](#) (*use coupon code MYHOUSERABBIT for free shipping*).
- **Cardboard box**  
Create a cardboard castle by cutting doorways and windows in a large cardboard box.
- **Chew toys**  
Sea grass mats are acceptable to chew and can be used to cover areas.  
Woven grass play balls are also a favorite for distraction.  
Wood and rope activity centers/toys capture rabbits' interest.
- **Nail clippers**  
You will need to regularly trim your bunny's nails. If your rabbit has dark claws, a small flashlight helps you to locate the quick and avoid it.

### An example of a rabbit area setup:



This works for rabbits that are contained by a puppy pen or roam free in a bunny proofed room. A cardboard castle and other chew toys complete the area.

Now that you have a good overview of how to care for a pet rabbit, you can visit our [Rabbit Care](#), [Rabbit Behavior](#), and [Rabbit Health](#) sections for more information (*on website.*)

### What to Feed Your Pet Rabbit

Just like people, bunnies enjoy a good meal. A nice mix of hay, vegetables, pellets, as well as fresh water will make your rabbit healthy and happy. Read on for more information about what to feed your pet rabbit.

#### Hay

Fresh hay should make up the bulk of your rabbit's diet and needs to be readily available at all times. Adult rabbits can eat timothy, grass, and oat hays, while younger rabbits should be fed alfalfa. Alfalfa should not be given to adult rabbits because of the higher protein and sugar content. Hay is important for rabbits because it provides the essential fiber needed for good digestive health and it helps wear down a rabbit's teeth (which continuously grow) for good dental health. Placing hay at one end of a litter box will also encourage the use of the litter box, as rabbits tend to eat hay and poop at the same time.

When choosing hay, make sure it looks and smells fresh. Do not choose a hay that looks brown or moldy or no longer smells like fresh cut grass. Store hay in a dry place in a container that allows air flow to keep it from getting moldy. Buying hay in bulk from a local farmer tends to be much more economical than buying bags from a pet store.

## Vegetables

A varied assortment of vegetables should be a part of your rabbit's daily diet. When choosing vegetables look for something fresh and free of pesticides. Always wash your vegetables thoroughly before feeding them to your rabbit. Feed new vegetables in small quantities until you can judge if your rabbit reacts well to them. Do not feed rabbits the leaves from houseplants as many are poisonous to rabbits. For a full list of poisonous plants, visit the [Sacramento House Rabbit Society's page](#) on the subject (*on website.*)

Your rabbit may enjoy some of the following vegetables:

- Basil
- Bok choy
- Broccoli leaves (stems or tops can make rabbits gassy)
- Carrot tops (carrots are high in calcium and should be given sparingly)
- Celery
- Cilantro
- Clover
- Collard greens
- Dandelion leaves
- Dill
- Kale (sparingly)
- Lettuce – romaine or dark leaf (no iceberg lettuce and no cabbage)
- Mint
- Mustard greens
- Parsley
- Water cress

## Water

Fresh water must always be available to your rabbit. If you have a cage, a hanging water bottle is a fine option. Rabbits will also drink from a water bowl. On a hot day you can drop an ice cube or two in your rabbit's water dish. If your rabbit does not seem to be drinking enough water you can leave the vegetables fairly wet when you present them.

## Pellets

These should be purchased so that they are fresh, as bunnies will turn their noses up at stale pellets. Look for pellets that are high in fiber and low in protein. You will need to limit your rabbit's pellet intake as he/she ages. Pellets that are high in protein can lead to obesity and other health issues in rabbits. Do not give pellets that have "treats" mixed in (dried corn, etc.). These additives are never healthy for rabbits and can cause digestive problems.

## Treats

Everybody loves a treat now and then, but to ensure your rabbits health they should be given only occasionally. Do not feed your rabbit items high in carbohydrates like breads, crackers, pasta, pretzels, cookies, chips, or cereal. Although branded for rabbits, many commercially-sold bunny treats are high in fat and sugar, such as yogurt chips, and should not be given. Never give chocolate as it is toxic to rabbits.

Fruit is the best option for a treat, but again you should give it only in small amounts because of the sugar content. We try to purchase organic fruits that we know are free of pesticides. Like vegetables, be sure that they are thoroughly washed. Some fruits that rabbits enjoy include: strawberries, raspberries, bananas, pineapple and apples (no seeds.)

For more information about the types and amounts of food you should provide your bunny as he/she matures from birth into old age, see the House Rabbit Society's article, [FAQ: Diet](#) (*on website.*)

## Further Information

- Harriman, Marinell, "FAQ: Diet," <http://rabbit.org/faq-diet/>
- Fisher, Cindy, "Plants Poisonous to Rabbits," <http://www.alleasac.org/badplants.html>

## **Binkies, Nose Bonks and Flops: Rabbit Behavior Explained**



Rabbits are relatively quiet creatures. As prey animals, it's in their best interest to not draw too much attention to themselves. That said, they do have a unique way of communicating, from binkying to nose bonking to flopping. We'll explore rabbit behavior here.

### **Binkying**

People unfamiliar to pet rabbits may not know that bunnies have a very dramatic way of expressing excitement and joy. They dance! Leaping in the air, contorting and twisting their bodies, and kicking their feet out, binkying rabbits are quite the spectacle. Sometimes rabbits lead up to a binky by taking a running start. Other times, a binky is a sudden burst to the side. What's really fun is when the binkies occur in succession, creating a grand acrobatic display. I'll submit that anyone who thinks rabbits are dull has not seen a bunny in the act of binkying.

### **The Bunny 500**

When rabbits zip around the room in a blur, they're performing Bunny 500s. Their bursts of speed are sometimes accompanied by fantastic binkies and demonstrate extreme excitement. Expect a Bunny 500 whenever you're about to give your bunny a treat.

### **Flopping**



A bunny at ease will often flop in contentment. Sometimes there's a buildup to the flop as a bunny turns his/her head a few times before finally rolling over completely onto his/her side.

### **Licking**

Bunnies show affection by licking (grooming). You'll often see pairs of rabbits grooming each other, which demonstrates they have a strong bond.

### **Buzzing / Honking**

An excited rabbit may make honking / buzzing sounds while circling. This signifies happiness, or when done around another rabbit, it could also signify sexual excitement.

### **Purring / Teeth Grinding**

Bunnies sometimes show their enjoyment if you're petting them by grinding their teeth. This is a rabbit's way of purring. But teeth grinding can also signify discomfort or pain. Grinding due to pain is often louder and more frequent than grinding due to contentment. You'll be able to tell the difference by observing other behavior in conjunction with the teeth grinding. For example, if the rabbit is lying down with his/her feet stretched out in a relaxed way, then the grinding demonstrates contentment. But if the rabbit is hunched and tense, doesn't show an interest in moving or eating, or shows aggression, then the grinding signifies pain.

### **Growling**

Grunting or growling is a sign your rabbit is angry or stressed. You may be invading their territory, and they're telling you to back off. Aggressive behavior will most likely ensue, so watch out.

### **Screaming**

Rabbits generally only scream when dying or in extreme pain. Seek veterinary assistance immediately if this occurs.

### **Kicking "Dirt" Up**

Displeased rabbits may deliberately kick their feet up as they hop away from you. In a wild setting, this translates to kicking dirt into another animal's face. Expect to get imaginary dirt kicked up at you after a nail trimming session.

### **Chinning**

Chinning is a rabbit's way of saying, "Mine!" They rub their chin, which has special scent glands, on objects to mark their territory.



### **Nose Bonking / Nudging**

Rabbits explore their environment by sniffing and nudging. It may be a greeting or their first line of investigation. But nudging can also indicate a level of bossiness. Your rabbit might be telling you, "You're in my way!" They may also be trying to get your attention because you're not petting them. Sometimes if the nudge is ignored, they follow up with a nip.

### **Digging**

Digging on your legs or feet is another way rabbits try to get your attention. "Petting me takes precedence over that important phone call!" they're saying.

### **Nipping**

Rabbits often nip in order to get attention. In this case, they don't mean to cause you harm, but nips are at the very least annoying. So to discourage this behavior, shriek every time it happens. The nips will become softer and less frequent, and eventually the behavior will be discontinued completely. But sometimes rabbits nip in an aggressive way. Perhaps you've put your hand into your rabbit's space, and he/she's feeling territorial. Aggressive behavior can be diminished by spaying or neutering your bunny.

### **Thumping**

Rabbits thump their hind legs when they sense danger. It serves as a warning signal for others in the area to watch out. Although rabbits may not have a signature sound like a bark or meow, they do express themselves in their own unique way. It's just up to you to listen properly!

### **Spaying or Neutering Your Pet Bunny**

As a pet owner, it is important that you know the facts about spaying or neutering your house rabbit. This article covers some of the benefits to having the procedure done (if performed at the right time by a rabbit-savvy veterinarian), and it also includes a few notes on what to expect during and after the surgery.

#### **Benefits to Spaying or Neutering Your Bunny**

There are many benefits to spaying or neutering a rabbit. First and foremost, a fixed rabbit can live a longer, healthier life as the risk of cancer and urinary tract infections are greatly reduced.

Second, a rabbit that is spayed/neutered becomes calmer and easier to manage. Their destructive habits subside a bit, yet they don't lose their charmingly mischievous nature. Altered rabbits are also easier to litter train and have less of an urge to spray.

Spayed and neutered house rabbits are easier to bond because of their calmer demeanor. And of course, an altered couple will not end up with a litter of baby buns. While baby bunnies are adorable, there is an issue with overpopulation. Most rabbit shelters are consistently full.

#### **When Should You Spay or Neuter Your Pet Rabbit?**

When male rabbits are between 3 and 5 months old, they are old enough to be neutered. Female rabbits are generally old enough to be spayed between 4 and 6 months; this is when they first reach sexual maturity. When rabbits have reached middle age (5-6 years old) they can be considered too old to be altered. Rabbits that are too young or too old are at higher risk for complications from surgery.

## **What to Expect from the Spay/Neuter Surgery**

Spaying is the procedure performed on female rabbits to remove the reproductive organs. The procedure takes place through the abdomen. Blood vessels that lead to the reproductive tract are tied and the reproductive tract is removed. The rabbit then receives several sets of sutures to close her back up.

Neutering is performed on male rabbits to remove the testes. The veterinarian will make an incision in the scrotum and remove the testicles through it. Up to three weeks after the surgery a male rabbit can still have semen stored in his body. For this reason a recently altered male should be kept away from unaltered female rabbits during this time period.

In order to provide a safe spay/neuter experience for your rabbit you need to find an experienced veterinarian. When looking for a veterinarian, be sure to ask if he/she has had experience working with rabbits. If there is a local rabbit shelter in your area, they may be able to recommend a vet to you.

If you have adopted your rabbit from shelter or rescue, the rabbit may already be altered. Be sure to ask. Talk to your qualified vet about what to do to prepare your rabbit for surgery and how to provide care post-surgery. Also ask your veterinarian to explain the procedure thoroughly as it may ease your own anxieties to know what will happen.

Be sure to monitor your rabbit after the procedure for changes in behavior, failure to eat, pulling at stitches or signs of infection.

## **GI Stasis in Rabbits: A Deadly Condition**

When considering rabbit health, it is important to note that rabbits tend to hide signs of ailing health because they are prey animals. In the wild, sick animals are pinpointed by predators first. This self-preserving instinct to hide illness lives on in domesticated rabbits, so it is critical to continually monitor your rabbit for any changes in behavior.

One very serious, fairly common health issue pet rabbits face is gastrointestinal stasis. GI (or gut) stasis is a potentially deadly condition in which the digestive system slows down or stops completely.

Bad bacteria then builds up in the intestines and releases gas into the system, causing very painful bloating and further decreasing a rabbit's motivation to eat or drink. This compounds the problem because the rabbit will become more dehydrated and starved of essential nutrients and roughage.

The contents of the digestive tract will become more compact, and the rabbit will have an even more difficult time passing it through. The bacteria can also release toxins into the system which overtax the liver and can cause the organ to ultimately fail.

## **Causes of GI Stasis in Rabbits**

The slowdown of the digestive system can be caused by:

- A high starch, low fiber diet
- Stress (from losing a bonded mate, a change in environment, etc.)
- Pain from underlying issues (dental problems like molar spurs, urinary tract infections, gas)
- Lack of exercise

## Signs of GI Stasis

If your rabbit is demonstrating any of these symptoms of GI stasis, **bring him/her to a rabbit-savvy vet immediately**:

- Small and/or malformed fecal pellets
- No fecal pellets
- Loss of appetite
- Lethargy / hunched posture

## Treatment of GI Stasis

When you bring your rabbit to the vet, he/she will try to determine the cause of the slowdown. If there is an underlying condition, it is imperative to address it. The vet may take x-rays to assess the blockage and the presence of gas. If the vet has determined that the best course of treatment is to stimulate motility in the gut, he/she may administer the following:

- Motility drugs (like cisapride) which help stimulate movement in the digestive system
- IV fluids which help soften the mass in the intestines
- Pain medication to alleviate discomfort due to gas buildup
- Syringe feeding of Critical Care to ensure the rabbit continues to get essential nutrients
- Antibiotics to combat the overgrowth of harmful bacteria (used with caution because antibiotics can also disrupt the presence of good, essential bacteria in the digestive system)

It is also important to provide plenty of fresh hay and greens for the rabbit should he/she get the urge to eat. Providing particularly fragrant greens, like cilantro, may help entice a rabbit who is not overly eager to eat.

With these treatments, time, and patience, a rabbit suffering from GI stasis can make a full recovery. But it is important to recognize the symptoms early and take your rabbit to a rabbit-savvy vet immediately for these treatments.

## How to Prevent GI Stasis

There are several measures you can take to help prevent the occurrence of GI stasis. First, ensure your rabbit is getting a proper, hay-based diet. Consult our article [What to Feed Your Pet Rabbit](#) for a full list of appropriate foods. A hay-based diet is essential not only because it provides the fiber necessary to keep the digestive system moving, it also helps wear down a rabbit's teeth which paves the way for better dental health. Read more about the importance of hay in our article, [Hay for Rabbits: The Basis for a Healthy Diet](#).

Another way to prevent this condition is to bring your rabbit in for regular veterinary checkups. After examining your rabbit, a vet may be able to detect underlying health issues that your rabbit has so far successfully hidden from you, such as infections or dental problems.

Third, evaluate your rabbit's living space. Rabbits need plenty of room to exercise in a bunny-proofed or supervised area. They do best when they are included in family life, but they are prone to high stress levels when there are major changes to their environment and routine, such as the loss of a bonded partner or an influx of household visitors. So do your best to create a happy, healthy environment for your bunny.

## **Author's Note**

In no means should this article be considered a substitute for veterinary advice. The purpose of this article is to spread awareness of a very serious health issue pet rabbits can face. It doesn't take much time from when you notice changes in diet or behavior for a rabbit's condition to deteriorate dramatically.

In March 2010, our rabbit Cosette suffered from a serious bout of GI stasis. After a few days of in-house treatments at the vet's office and several days of at-home treatments, Cosette did end up making a full recovery. But there were several points during that time where it looked like she was going to take a turn for the worse.

Many people have contacted us with stories of their rabbits succumbing swiftly to this condition. So it's important to know that once a rabbit's afflicted with GI stasis, there's no guarantee of recovery. The best course of action is to bring your rabbit to a rabbit-savvy vet at the very first sign.

**Do not wait and see if they will get better on their own!**

## **Further Information**

- Krempels, Dana, "Gastrointestinal Stasis: The Silent Killer," <http://www.bio.miami.edu/hare/ileus.html>
- Logsdon, Alexandra, "Nursing Your Rabbit Through Gastrointestinal Stasis," [http://www.mybunny.org/info/gi\\_stasis.htm](http://www.mybunny.org/info/gi_stasis.htm)