

# Why Does My Rabbit...?

## *House Rabbit Behavior: Common Questions Answered*

In many instances, rabbits kept in hutches, pet stores, or laboratories do not receive enough stimulation or physical space to demonstrate their full behavioral repertoire. Owners of house rabbits know these are intelligent creatures with distinct personalities and a range of behaviors. Few individuals conform to the stereotypical “cute and cuddly” or passive and timid expectations of many. Thinking of acquiring a pet rabbit? Explore these common questions related to house rabbit behavior.

### **Husbandry-Related: *Is this normal?!***

#### **My rabbit wants to chew—on everything! Is this normal?**

Chewing is a normal rabbit behavior. “Bunny proofing” your home is necessary to prevent destruction of property and to protect your house rabbit from harm. Provide your bunny with safe, fun chewing alternatives to keep her occupied and relieve boredom.

#### **What about digging?**

Digging is another normal behavior that makes “bunny proofing” very necessary. In fact, the scientific name of the domestic rabbit is *Oryctolagus cuniculus*, which translates as “hare-like digger of underground passages”. Provision of items like “digging boxes” and long cardboard tubes can help to meet your rabbit’s instinctive need to dig.

#### **Why did my rabbit just eat her feces?**

All small herbivores, including the rabbit, practice coprophagy or ingestion of feces. In many instances, you may not realize your rabbit is doing this as she may bend her head to access these nutrient-dense stools or “cecotropes” as they exit the anus. Rabbits must ingest their cecotropes or “night feces” to maintain adequate dietary protein and vitamin levels. Rabbits may also occasionally munch on dry fecal balls.

#### **Why does my rabbit defecate outside of the litter pan?**

All rabbits will normally drop some fecal balls outside of the litter pan and around their cage to mark their territory. This is not failure to be litter-trained! This behavior is most intensely practiced by adult intact males, however even neutered rabbits mark new areas in this manner.

#### **Why did my rabbit start urinating outside of her litter pan?!**

Loss of litter box training can indicate urinary tract disease so a small mammal veterinarian should evaluate your pet.

Your rabbit may also feel the need to mark her territory by urinating outside of the pan after a stressful event. Anything that may make your house rabbit feel “insecure” like a new pet, houseguests, or change in cage location can cause her to mark territory more “enthusiastically”.

When rabbits reach 4-6 months of age, their reproductive hormones become active and they usually begin marking their territory. Spaying and neutering improves litter box habits and reduces territorial spraying.

## **Age and Sex-related**

### **Our young bunny is so hyper! Will she ever slow down?**

Young rabbits are energetic and very curious. After 1 year of age most individuals become more sedate and predictable.

### **How long will it take for reproductive behavior to cease after my rabbit is spayed or neutered?**

Spaying and neutering improves litter box habits and reduces territorial aggression, mounting, and spraying. Many intact rabbits will also masturbate on inanimate, and animate, objects frequently and vigorously.

After your pet is spayed or neutered, it usually takes about 2 weeks for sexual activity to begin to decrease. It generally takes 2 months for sexual activity to cease completely in most male rabbits. The time frame may be as short as 2 weeks in females. (The end of sexual activity may take up to 4 months, and in rare instances up to 8 months, in large breed rabbits).

## **Normal Sounds and Actions**

### **My rabbit is grinding her teeth? What does this mean?**

Rabbits may grind their teeth for two very different reasons, however body language and circumstance usually makes distinguishing these two situations fairly easy. First, painful rabbits may grind their teeth in a slow, crunching fashion. Other signs of pain may include a loss of appetite, reluctance to move, a lack of interest in her environment, and/or a hunched posture.

“Purring” is a sound of contentment sometimes made when the rabbit is receiving a good petting or something else pleasurable. The teeth will click softly, the whiskers quiver, and the head trembles.

### **I thought rabbits were quiet! What do these sounds mean?**

“Honking” or “oinking” sounds are made in courtship or to gain food or attention. Whimpering or low squeals are fretful noises. For instance a rabbit that does not want to be picked up may whimper.

### **Why does my rabbit stamp her feet?**

Rabbits are prey species with a keen sense of smell and hearing. When exposed to potential danger, they may instinctively display a host of behaviors, which may include warning others of perceived danger. Although some individuals may vocalize, most rabbits “thump” the ground with their hind feet before seeking a hiding place.

### **Why is my pet rabbit so active early in the morning?**

In the wild, rabbits spend much of their day in burrows, coming out at dusk and dawn to forage for food. In our homes, it is not uncommon for house rabbits to madly dash around a room in circles for about 5 minutes during the early evening or morning hours.

### **Why does my rabbit nudge me with her chin?**

When a rabbit nubs its chin on items or people this is called “chinning”. Chinning is a sign of possessiveness. Many rabbits also bump their human’s feet and ankles with their noses to get their attention or just to say “hello”.

### **Why did my rabbit just jump off the ground with all four feet?!**

Interaction with the house rabbit generally makes one adept in non-verbal communication, however one of their least subtle behaviors is the “happy hop” or “binky”. The rabbit jumps into the air with the head going in one direction and the rest of the body in another direction. Happy hops are believed to denote pure joy, and their observance should warm the heart of any house rabbit owner.

## **Multi-Rabbit Households**

### **Why are my rabbits fighting?!**

More often than not, when house rabbits are introduced without proper preparation, a fight will ensue. The fight itself is often a blur of feet kicking and fur flying, but is often preceded by circling (sometimes followed by humping), chasing, boxing, lunging, and jaw snapping.

In the wild, rabbits fight to establish dominance, to keep newcomers out, or to protect young. The fight will usually continue until one rabbit runs away. Domestic rabbits seem to fight for the same reasons. They may fight over resources like snacks, changes in status, or if one rabbit develops a strange smell, as would occur after a veterinary visit.

To minimize the risk of fighting begin introductions slowly in a neutral territory. Household members should try not to interfere with the process, but monitor the rabbits for signs of acceptance. Signs of acceptance include:

- The rabbits retreat to separate corners, but don’t attack each other!
- The rabbits may chase each other but stop short of physical contact or at least damage.
- Flop out near (but not touching)
- Tentative nose sniffing and licking

To break up a rabbit fight, squirt water, or shout and clap loudly. Never insert a hand!

Introducing a second rabbit can be challenging. Lots of patience and calm are needed. Consult your small mammal veterinarian for more advice on rabbit introductions.

### **If fighting is such a common problem, why should I bring a second rabbit into my home?**

Rabbits are communal animals. Wild rabbits live in large groups or warrens numbering anywhere from 6 to 8 individuals up to several hundred animals. Many experts agree that the need for companionship can only be partially met by humans, and that rabbits are not meant to live in solitude away from members of their own kind.

Each rabbit is a unique individual and there are some exceptions to this multi-rabbit household “rule”, however many house rabbits live as bonded trios or quartets. These bunnies appear to thrive on social contact with their own kind. Bonded rabbits will eat together, sleep together, groom together, play together, and even hop in the litter box at the same time together!

A “lonely” rabbit may show signs of boredom, depression, and withdrawal. Destructiveness and extreme hyperactivity are seen in some small breed rabbits housed alone.

## **References and Recommended Reading**

Bays TB. Rabbit behavior. In: Bays TB, Lightfoot T, Mayer J (eds). Exotic Pet Behavior. St. Louis, MO: Saunders; 2006. Pp. 1-49.

Cecchi MJ. Are You the Pet for Me?: Choosing the Right Pet for Your Family. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

Davis SE, Demello M. Stories Rabbits Tell: A Natural and Cultural History of a Misunderstood Creature. New York: Lantern Books, 2006.

Harriman M. House Rabbit Handbook: How to Live with an Urban Rabbit, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Alameda: Drollery Press; 2005.

House Rabbit Society at <http://www.rabbit.org/index.html> accessed on Mar 30, 2011.

McBride A. Why Does My Rabbit...?, revised ed. London: Souvenir Press; 2003.

Quesenberry KE, Carpenter JW (eds). Ferrets, Rabbits and Rodents: Clinical Medicine and Surgery, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. St. Louis, MO: Saunders; 2005.