

Seven Common Behavior Problems In Rabbits

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Important Note:

Most "inappropriate" behavior is absolutely normal behavior, and is related to hormones, handling, or the circumstances of the rabbits life. Rabbits are prey animals; once owners/handlers learn to see the world from the viewpoint of a prey animal, and to see the relationship between handling and behavior, most "inappropriate" behavior can be quickly resolved. Difficulty in handling in the clinic is almost always related to either improper restraint or over-restraint. A secure, relaxed rabbit is a well-behaved rabbit.

1) Problem :

Rabbit sprays urine, circles owner's feet, humps owner, other rabbits, or foreign objects, pulls out fur to build nests.

SOLUTION:

Spaying or neutering

2) Problem:

Rabbit lunges, boxes, swats at owner, or nips when approached

SOLUTION:

Part of this behavior may be territoriality related to "raging hormones" and will therefore be eliminated, or at least reduced, by spaying/neutering. However, this kind of behavior is also often seen even in spayed/neutered rabbits who are approached in the wrong way. Try approaching the rabbit from the side (rabbits cannot see directly in front of themselves close-up); pause with fingers slightly curled over the rabbit's head; in between the rabbit's efforts to lunge or box, quickly lower curled hand to rabbit's head and stroke rabbit gently but firmly between the eyes, using just the back of you knuckles. Put gentle pressure on the head, and wait for rabbit to relax and hunker down before attempting to pick him up. When changing food or water, stroke or put pressure on the rabbit's head with one hand, while removing food and water bowls with the other hand. This will prevent boxing. Many rabbits remain somewhat territorial even after spaying/neutering -- especially if cage door is in front and owner is forced to reach arms in directly toward rabbit. Contact your local HRS representative for further help, or for demonstrations of handling.

3) Problem:

Rabbit nips or scratches when carried.

SOLUTION:

Try alternate methods for lifting and carrying. An insecure rabbit is a nippy rabbit. Respect the rabbit's physical integrity by not over-handling, or by interacting with rabbit primarily on the floor. Rabbits are prey animals; too-tight a grip can feel predatory to them, and can be just as bad as too loose a grip. Over-restraint in the clinic can induce fear and panicky behavior very quickly.

4) Problem:

Rabbit runs away when approached, or tries to avoid human hands. Sometimes lunges or boxes when approached -- even out of cage.

SOLUTION:

Owner must permit the rabbit to learn that hands are not the enemy. "Predatory" moves toward the rabbit (quick, grabbing motions) should be avoided. Sit on floor in a restricted area (bathroom, hallway or other similar-sized area), and read a book or magazine. Permit the rabbit to approach and sniff, but do not reach for the rabbit. After several (sometimes weeks!), or whenever it is clear that the rabbit approaches freely and without fear, hold out a hand to the rabbit. Do not touch the rabbit unless he stays in place. If the rabbit stays near the hand, touch/stroke rabbit lightly between the eyes very briefly, and remove the hand immediately, but keep it on the floor near the rabbit's head. If the rabbit does not run away, and orients even slightly toward the hand (by turning the head), touch the rabbit lightly between the eyes, and remove the hand again. The idea is to wait for the rabbit to "ask" to be touched -- i.e., to wait for him to orient toward the hand. Contact HRS for further help/details.

5) Problem:

A spayed/neutered rabbit suddenly starts urinating outside litterbox

SOLUTION:

Check the rabbit for bladder/kidney problems. This is often the primary cause of inappropriate urination after a rabbit is litterbox-trained.

Inappropriate urination can also occur when a new rabbit is brought into the territory of a resident rabbit. Border wars are common -- i.e. each rabbit will urinate at the edge of the territory of the other. Here, the rabbits should be separated until thoroughly bonded. Contact HRS for help with bonding.

6) Problem:

Chewing furniture, wires, etc.

SOLUTION:

Rabbits love "projects," and are natural chewers and diggers. There is no difference to a rabbit between a piece of furniture and any other piece of wood. Therefore, keep the rabbit in well-rabbit-proofed environment -- paying special attention to covering electrical wires or making them inaccessible (contact HRS for help with this), and provide him with toys to chew and toss. Corrugated cardboard boxes and hunks of untreated wood are great favorites.

7) Problem:

Sudden change of behavior in rabbit -- e.g.: an active rabbit becomes passive, a friendly rabbit becomes aggressive, an outgoing rabbit becomes withdrawn.

SOLUTION:

Any sudden change of behavior that does not resolve itself fairly quickly is cause for concern. Noticeable changes of behavior are often associated with pain or illness. Owner should bring the rabbit in for a veterinary checkup.