Rabbits can make charming pets. They are gentle, intelligent and relatively easy to care for. Follow these principles to help your pet rabbit lead a longer, healthier life.

Cages should be approximately 3 times as long, 2 times as wide, and 2 times as tall as the length of a full-grown rabbit. A smooth, flat floor is best. Wire bottom cages can injure rabbits' feet and cause serious infection, especially in sedentary or overweight rabbits.

Many choices for bedding are available. Avoid aromatic wood chips such as cedar; they may irritate the airways and lungs of rabbits. Many rabbits will learn to use a litter box. Place the litter box in the part of the cage where the rabbit normally eliminates, and change the litter substrate daily.

Pet rabbits require daily human interaction and playtime outside of their cage in a rabbit-proof house or yard area. Remove electric wires or protruding fence wires, loose carpeting or other potentially hazardous materials that rabbits may chew on or get entangled in.

Digging and chewing are natural rabbit behaviors. Provide a safe outlet for these behaviors, such as chew toys, carrots, and safe places to dig. Rabbits' teeth grow continuously. To avoid overgrown teeth, painful and costly dental work, provide safe chewable items.

Rabbits are grazers with a digestive tract designed to process fiber. The main component of your rabbit's diet should be good quality hay, preferably timothy. Alfalfa is high in calcium, which can contribute to kidney and bladder stones. Hay can be fed in unlimited amounts.

Rabbit pellets can also be fed, but not as a hay substitute. Limit pellets to ¼ - ½ cup daily per adult rabbit.

Offer a variety of fresh, green vegetables (1 cup per rabbit) such as dark leafy greens, cilantro, parsley, carrots and broccoli. Avoid iceberg lettuce, which is primarily water and few nutrients. Small amounts of fruit can be given as treats.

Obesity and heat stroke are common problems for pet rabbits. Rabbits kept outside need shade and water at all times. Frozen milk cartons or plastic bottles of water can be placed in the cage to help rabbits stay cool in summer. Outdoor rabbits are also at risk for fly strike (maggot infestation) if their cages are not cleaned daily or if they do not groom themselves well.

A yearly trip to the veterinarian is important to assess your rabbit's overall health and to check for dental problems and internal and external parasites.

Spaying and neutering will avoid unwanted reproduction as well as protect female rabbits against uterine cancer.

Other common medical problems of rabbits include bladder stones, ear mites, respiratory infections, and digestive tract stasis or obstruction. It is important to see a veterinarian

immediately if your rabbit stops eating, drinking or defecating. Any problem that causes a decreased appetite will be worsened by gastrointestinal stasis.

Treating rabbit illnesses is challenging. Provide a proper environment and diet and watch your pet closely for any signs of a health problem to help your pet live a longer, happier life.

This column is provided by the faculty of the OSU Boren Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital.

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