



# Small Animal Behaviour Guide

## Rabbit Litter Box Training



Just like cats, rabbits can be trained to use a litter box! If you have a rabbit and are looking for advice on litter training, here are some tips to encourage your rabbit to use a litter box.

### Litter Box Training

Litter box training is not only useful for cleaning, but it benefits your rabbit because it creates more space for them to explore, once you trust that they are litter box trained! Rabbits typically choose a spot in their living space as their bathroom, so take advantage of this tendency and teach your rabbit to go to the bathroom in a litter box in that preferred space.

### Setting Your Rabbit Up for Success

#### **Choosing a Box**

Type: We recommend a large rectangular litter pan that will have room for a layer of litter pellets and hay. Cat litter boxes, plastic storage boxes and cement mixing tubs can also be used.

When choosing a box, make sure your rabbit can step into it comfortably and that it has a solid bottom (rabbit's feet may get caught in a grate). We recommend using a non-covered box for better ventilation. Make sure the box has high enough walls, since rabbits tend to kick litter around and lift their tails to urinate.

Size: The litter box should be spacious enough for your rabbit to step into, turn around in and sit in. Having enough space to sit, move and nibble away at some hay, will encourage them to use the litter box more.

If you have multiple rabbits who like to sit together, make sure the box is large enough for all of them to comfortably share. While triangle shaped litter boxes (which attach to enclosure corners) are popular choices, we recommend having at least one other option because the corner units often don't have enough space for your rabbit to move around in.

#### **How Many**

If your rabbit has access to multiple areas in your home, each area should have a litter box. The number of boxes should increase based on the enclosure size, how many levels the enclosure has and how many rabbits you have. We recommend at least one box per rabbit in each area.

When you are starting litter box training, we recommend providing multiple boxes in each area. Giving your rabbit many boxes to start with will increase the chances of them using the boxes. As your rabbit gets the hang of using the litter box, you can decrease the number of boxes in a single area.



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### Litter Material

Use litter made of recycled newspaper pellets, compressed sawdust pellets, alfalfa, wheatgrass, paper, or other rabbit-safe materials. Do not use litter made of pine or cedar, clay or clumping litter, wheat scoop litter or corn cob litter because these can be harmful to your rabbit.

How to Layer the Litter: You can start by lining the litter box with a solid layer, like newspaper (making sure the ink is rabbit safe). This will help keep the box cleaner and make cleaning the box itself easier.

Next, spread your chosen litter about inch deep, then place a generous layer of hay on top of the litter or in a nearby hay rack that the rabbit can reach while in the litter box. Rabbits like to munch on hay while going to the bathroom, so having hay in or near the litter box will make it more attractive.

### Where to Put the Box

Place the box where your rabbit already eliminates, and in or near corners where your rabbit is likely to go.

*Tip: You can purchase things like urine guards, cage liners, and towels or mats for under the enclosure to help contain messes and make cleaning easier. Avoid purchasing things made of materials that your rabbit can destroy easily, like plastic.*

### How To Litter Box Train

The general approach to litter box training is to limit your rabbit's space and provide them with plenty of litter boxes because it increases the chances of them using the box. Once your rabbit uses the box more consistently, you can increase the amount of space they have and remove some of the boxes.

Do not punish your rabbit for having accidents by yelling, physically striking them, or withholding food or water; they will not understand why you are doing this and will likely become fearful of you.

Use rewards and give your rabbit a tasty treat when you catch them using the litter box.

- 🐾 Prepare litter boxes your rabbit will want to use. They should be the right size and have hay in or near them, to encourage your rabbit to use them.
- 🐾 Start by only giving your rabbit access to a small portion of their enclosure, and place boxes in the area. If they eliminate outside of the box, try placing fecal pellets in the box to encourage them to go there the next time.
- 🐾 Once your rabbit reliably uses the boxes, give them access to a larger area, placing extra boxes in the newly expanded area.
- 🐾 Eventually your rabbit will have access to their entire area, and you can remove some litter boxes, once they are in the habit of consistently using them.



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Note: Rabbits use urine marking and fecal pellets to communicate with each other. Although rabbits tend to choose an elimination area, they may also defecate throughout their living space to mark their territory. Finding some fecal pellets outside of their litter box should be expected, even after you go through the litter box training process.

### If Your Rabbit Isn't Using the Litter Box

While your rabbit is learning, expect accidents. Make sure you've given your rabbit at least two weeks to learn to use the litter box.

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*Important: If your rabbit's usual litter box habits suddenly change, this may indicate illness. We advise checking with your veterinarian to rule out any medical conditions, like urinary disease (bladder infection or crystals), or an injury or condition like arthritis that causes them to associate pain with the litter box and thus avoid it.*

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Keep in mind, inappropriate urination could be territorial spraying or a sign that your rabbit is ill.

**How do you tell the difference?** Territorial spraying will smell strongly and usually happens on vertical surfaces. If it's from an illness, there won't be a strong odour, and incidents it will likely happen on horizontal surfaces, and/or in smaller quantities.

If medical reasons are ruled out, there are other non-medical reasons why your rabbit might not be using the litter box or might be inconsistent in their use. Some potential reasons may be:

- 🐾 **Not Enough Boxes:** It may be as simple as your rabbit not being able to reach a litter box in time to use it, so try increasing the number of boxes.
- 🐾 **Age:** Your rabbit may be undergoing hormonal changes affecting their litter box use and marking. Rabbits of any age can be house trained, so do not let their age discourage you!
- 🐾 **Marking:** Rabbits defecate and spray urine to communicate with other rabbits, so they may spray outside the designated litter box. It is highly recommended to spay or neuter your rabbit to prevent and reduce these behaviours.
  - 🐾 **Defecation:** Although rabbits tend to choose an area to defecate in, they will also defecate throughout their living space to mark their territory, which is a natural, expected behaviour.
  - 🐾 **Spraying urine:** Intact rabbits are prone to urine spraying to mark territory and court other rabbits. Spaying or neutering helps to reduce marking and other hormonal behaviours.
- 🐾 **Stress:** Rabbits are sensitive to changes, so adjustments to their routine or environment like the introduction of a new pet, new people, the re-arrangement of their living space or new feeding times can trigger marking. If you want to change your rabbit's routine or environment, do it in small steps to help reduce stress.



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- 🐾 **Smell:** The litter box's odour can influence if they'll use it or not. It may smell like another rabbit, a cleaner or like something else that is unpleasant to them. Consider using neutral smelling litter box materials and cleaners, replacing hay more frequently and cleaning boxes more frequently.

Your rabbit may also not understand that the litter box is where they should go because it doesn't smell like a litter box. If this is the case, try returning some used litter to their litter box after cleaning, to help them learn where to go to the bathroom.

### Other Things to Try

Experiment with changes to their litter box to make it more appealing to your rabbit. This could include:

- 🐾 A larger and/or deeper litter box
- 🐾 A more mobility-friendly litter box, like one with a lowered portion to step into
- 🐾 Different litter material – they may prefer a neutral smelling litter or one less slippery to their feet
- 🐾 Changing the litter box location
  - 🐾 If your rabbit is consistently using a specific spot, you may need to compromise and place a litter box there
  - 🐾 They may prefer areas that feel safer, like corners or partially covered spots
- 🐾 Replace the hay – Rabbits like to chew on hay, so try replacing it more frequently to attract them to the litter box

Getting a new rabbit is exciting and setting them up for successful litter box training is beneficial to both you and your pet! By choosing an appropriately sized box, ensuring their comfort and safety when selecting litter box materials and following a training plan, you will increase the likelihood of successful litter box training. Remember to consult with your rabbit's veterinarian if you are having additional issues related to health or behaviour.

### Looking For More Great Resources?

For more information and supports for pets and pet guardians, visit our website:

<https://www.edmontonhumanesociety.com/>

#### Did You Know?

You can also ask us general behaviour questions by emailing:

[askthespecialist@edmontonhumanesociety.com](mailto:askthespecialist@edmontonhumanesociety.com)

It takes approximately \$7 million to keep the Edmonton Humane Society operational for one year and 40% of these funds come from generous donations made by supporters like you. Please [Donate](#).