

Rabbit Introductions

Does My Rabbit Really Need a Companion?

Many experts on house rabbit care agree that most individuals are not meant to live in solitude, away from members of their own kind. House rabbits can display affection for their owners, but their need for companionship can only be partially met by human family members.

Signs of loneliness in rabbits can include listlessness and withdrawal. Destructiveness and hyperactivity are also seen in some smaller breed rabbits.

Rabbit Introductions Can Be Challenging

Despite their need for companionship, rabbit introductions can prove challenging. To improve your chances of success, take rabbit age, sex, and breed into consideration.

You will also want to introduce neutered rabbits that ideally have been trained to accept a harness and leash. Neutering reduces territorial aggression, although it can take weeks or even months for the effects of surging hormones to dissipate.

Age:	Strive to match bunny ages as much as possible.
Gender:	Neutered male-female pairs have the best chance for successful introductions. Some individual rabbits are naturally more dominant, while others are more submissive. Two dominant females will inevitably fight. A dominant male is also unlikely to tolerate another male in his presence unless the animal is extremely docile.
Breed:	Mixing breeds can work very well. Placing a high-strung dwarf rabbit with a more relaxed large or giant rabbit can complement general breed predispositions.

How Do I Introduce a Pair of Rabbits?

Start slowly with calm, patient adult supervision. Use brief 20-minute (or less) sessions in a neutral, “rabbit-proofed” room.

- First, allow each rabbit to explore the neutral territory--one at a time.
- Then sit cages or kennel crates holding each rabbit near each other in the neutral room. Do not sit the cages so close that injuries can occur through the wire.
- Eventually the rabbits can meet each other in the neutral area. If both rabbits are trained to wear a harness and leash, this can prove helpful.

Try Not to Interfere!

Newly introduced rabbits must establish a social hierarchy or “pecking order” so expect to see fighting, breeding behavior—or both—particularly when rabbits are intact (not spayed or castrated). Chasing and fur pulling are also commonly observed.

When it is necessary to break up a fight between two rabbits, use a squirt bottle filled with water. Alternatively try shouting or clapping loudly. Fighting rabbits are a whirling blur of strong, kicking feet so you do NOT want to wade into the fray! However have protective gear like a broom, leather gloves, and a long-sleeved jacket at the ready.

Signs of acceptance between an introduced pair are initially subtle.

- Each rabbit may retreat to separate corners of the room—in other words they are not fighting.
- Rabbits may chase each other, but will stop short of physical contact—or at least physical injury.
- Eventually the pair will begin to sit near each other, without actually touching.

Nose sniffing is a stronger sign of acceptance, while mutual grooming is a sign of affection. Rabbits that are strongly bonded will snuggle or lie close together.

Caution: Just as in people, not all rabbits will get along so prepare for this possibility.

Are Three Rabbits Better Than Two?

Not necessarily. Groups of three or more rabbits should be monitored in case one individual becomes a ‘social outcast’. As long as everyone is able to keep their distance and access food and water sources this scenario can work, but the ‘loner rabbit’ can suffer from weight loss and excessive fearfulness.

Non-Rabbit, Non-Human Friends

Some individuals may obtain sufficient companionship from “alternative” friends:

- Calm, well-mannered dogs and cats can make good companions for some house rabbits under ADULT SUPERVISION. Dogs and cats are most likely to accept the presence of a house rabbit when exposed as puppies or kittens. Nevertheless prey and predator species should never be left alone unattended. (Ferrets should NOT be attempted as house rabbit companions).
- For select individuals, pet birds or even stuffed toys can serve as good companions.
- Guinea pigs would make great rabbit companions IF this scenario did not present a health risk. Rabbits can harbor the bacteria *Bordetella bronchiseptica*, which can cause serious respiratory illness and even death in guinea pigs.

References and Further Reading

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