

## Containments for Rabbits and Ferrets

Our topics for this week are:

- Containments for Pet Rabbits
- Containments for European Ferrets

### Rabbits

Rabbits are social and should be housed in groups of two or more, but bucks should not be housed together due to risk of fighting. Adult males will try to castrate each other. Allowing pet rabbits to run free in a house can be expensive and dangerous. Rabbits will eat carpet, gnaw on furniture, destroy houseplants, and bite electric cords. They can be harassed, injured, or killed by predatory pets (dogs, cats, ferrets). Just the smell of predators nearby can be stressful to rabbits. They should be confined to a rabbit proof play enclosure, under immediate supervision, or kept in their hutch (rabbit cage).

Rabbits should be housed in wire cages to provide adequate ventilation, but they also need protection from drafts, sunlight, and dampness. The minimum size of the cage needed depends on the breed of rabbit. Medium-sized rabbits require a minimum of 24 X 30 inches/rabbit with 18 inches of height. Giant breeds should have a minimum floor space of 30 X 36 inches/rabbit, and small-sized breeds should have a minimum of 18 X 24 inches/rabbit.

Optimal size cages should be tall enough to permit rabbits to stand on their hindquarters to inspect their surroundings, and an opportunity to climb on elevated platforms. The length of the cage should be four times that of an adult rabbit with a total square footage of at least eight sq. ft. Improperly constructed or excessively confining containment can lead to stereotypic behaviors such as self-mutilation from over-grooming as well as repetitive cage biting and pawing at cage corners.

Wire cages can be somewhat self-cleaning, provide good ventilation, handler visibility, and parasite control. Cages with wood frames in direct contact with rabbits will be gnawed and soaked with urine and feces making them incapable of being adequately cleaned. The floor should be ½ by 1 inch mesh and at least 16 gauge. The sides and roof can be one by two inch mesh and at least 12-gauge. Unlike front opening doors, top hinged doors will remain closed even if accidentally left unlatched. In addition, open top hinged hutch doors are not an obstruction to a handler's movement around the outside of the cage.

Outdoor hutches should be surrounded by a tall, mesh or solid fence to prevent access by predators, especially roaming dogs. To keep walls free of urine, fur, and feces, aisles three foot wide should be created between hutches and wooden walls of a shelter. Hanging hutches from the ceiling of enclosures facilitates removing manure and eliminates the rotting of wood or rusting of metal hutch legs. Some solid bottom area should be provided in an otherwise wire-bottomed cage to allow the rabbit to rest its feet from the pressure of wire which does not distribute the pressure of the rabbit's bodyweight in a normal manner and can cause chronic foot problems. Cages should be waterproof and draft-free. Two sides of the hutches should have

visual barriers, such as scrubs or buildings, for partial relief of predator surveillance by the rabbits, and to block the wind.

Household pet rabbits can be offered outdoor exercise for environmental enrichment, if an outdoor enclosure is escape-proof, predator-proof, and the rabbit's time outdoor is closely supervised. Portable pens made for dogs can be used on concrete surfaces to temporarily contain rabbits for exercise. If the pen is placed on a grassy area, the rabbit must be more closely monitored to keep it from burrowing under the fence.

Rabbits evolved to survive in the safety of burrows. All hutches should contain a hide box or other burrow-like shelter to relieve stress. Loose straw or hay can also provide a chance to burrow as well as to eat straw or hay. Alternatively, paper products, towels and newspaper, should be used as substrate. Hide boxes or shelters within an enclosure should be strong enough to support a rabbit if it decides to perch on top of it. A feeding and exercise area and a separate resting area should be provided.

Enclosure enrichments can include cardboard boxes, vegetable treats, untreated wood, paper bags, blankets, cat tunnels, and large breed dog toys that cannot be gnawed into pieces. Since interest in specific enrichment objects will gradually wane, different enrichments should be regularly rotated in and out of the enclosure.

Nest boxes are needed for pregnant does (female rabbits) and does with litters. Nest boxes should be made of ½ by 1 inch mesh wire, 18 inches long, 10 inches wide, and 10 inches tall for average sized breeds. The top should be open to aid with ventilation and control of moisture in the nest. In cold weather, cardboard liners can be used outside the box to provide additional insulation. The cage or box should be spot cleaned daily and all litter removed weekly. Pens should have a non-slip surface. Pine and cedar as substrate should be avoided. Aromatic oils can irritate skin and respiratory tracts. Clay or corncob litter which can lead to digestive impaction should not be used. Pen walls should be at least 4 feet tall to prevent rabbits from jumping out.

Exposure to environmental temperatures of less than 40°F and more than 85°F should be avoided. Colder temperatures are tolerated better than hotter temperatures since rabbits do not sweat. They dissipate heat primarily, but inefficiently, from their ears, and pant just when in desperation. Good ventilation is needed to control odors and assist cooling during warm weather, but not to the extent of creating drafts that could cause stress. Pet rabbits should be trained to tolerate a travel crate and short car rides prior to the need to transport them for veterinary care.

## **Ferrets**

Ferrets are nearsighted ground dwellers that live in burrows. Their enclosure should be a solid bottomed wire cage with 0.5 X 1.0 mesh and a hiding box. A cage for two adult ferrets should be at least 3 X 3 feet and 2 feet high. Ferrets should be kept in wire or sheet metal cages with adequate play time outside the cage, i.e., at least one hour twice per day of supervised activity out of the cage. Aquariums should not be used because of inadequate ventilation. Solid sided cages prevent them from seeing their surroundings, which is stressful to ferrets because they cannot satisfy their curiosity in what is going on around them. Wood construction should be avoided

because of ferret chewing and wood absorption of urine. Multi-level cages with ramps and ledges pose a risk of falling injuries.

Ferrets will learn to use a litter pan, but it must be cleaned daily. Substrates that produce dust should be avoided. Water should be provided in heavy, wide bottomed, tip over resistant bowls made of dense materials. Soft plastic bowls that can be gnawed and ingested should not be used. Sipper bottles should not be used because they do not permit ferrets to fulfill their natural desire to wash.

Ferrets are very energetic and quickly bored. Cage accessories for hiding, burrowing, and exploring should be provided. Towels and blankets can be used for hiding and burrowing, but ferret nails may catch in looped fabrics so these should be avoided. Ferrets toys need to be gnaw-proof and too large to be swallowed and cause choke. Flexible clothes' dryer vent tubing or rigid PVC tubes can be used as simulated burrows for exploration and exercise. Cages should be placed in areas of early morning and early evening human traffic to provide mental stimulation. The best temperatures for ferrets are between 59-64°F with 40-65% relative humidity.

Now, let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- Rabbits should be contained in wire cages with thick substrate in a portion of the enclosure that is conducive to burrowing.
- Ferrets have high energy and are quickly bored. Multiple enclosure enrichments and other forms of exploration and exercise are needed.

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at [www.betteranimalhandling.com](http://www.betteranimalhandling.com)

Don't forget serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.