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11 RABBIT-CARE MISTAKES MY FAMILY MADE (AND YOU MIGHT BE DOING TOO)



Scared bunny being held improperly

It's common for kids to see an adorable baby bunny in a pet store, beg their parents for it, and for the well-meaning parents to relent. After all, rabbits are low-maintenance pets, and surely the children will stay on top of the bunny's care, right? Sadly, rabbits are a surprising amount of work, and many kids quickly grow bored of their new pet. Between the responsibilities of work and parenting, Mom and Dad can't pick up the slack, and the poor bunny sits neglected and lonely in his cage.

Sadly, this is the story of the bunny my family bought when I was a kid. Like most children, my sisters and I mostly ignored the rabbit once the novelty wore off, and the poor thing lived a miserable life alone outside.

I don't mean to cast judgment on my parents or my family with this article. However, I do feel a lot of personal guilt for that rabbit's lack of quality of life, and hope to help prevent the same thing from happening to other bunnies by letting people learn from our mistakes.

1. Impulse bought our bunny

Between owning horses and cows, my family frequented the hay and feed supply store, which happened to sell cute baby bunnies. While our dad shopped, my sisters and I would crowd around the bunny cage and try to pet one by poking our fingers through the bars. When our dad was ready to check-out, we'd beg him to buy us a bunny. Kudos to my dad, he said no for several months. After all, my sisters and I already had five horses, four cats, two cows, a dog, and a few fish to fulfill our animal-loving needs. Unfortunately, one day we somehow managed to convince him to get us a cute, black and white Havana mix rabbit. We named him Percy.

I'm sure my dad's intentions were good (he wanted to spoil his kids with a baby bunny), and I'm also sure my sisters and I pinky promised we would do *all* the rabbit care. Sadly, without doing any research first and relying solely on the store employees for rabbit care info, he didn't know that by buying the bunny, he was resigning him to a lonely life of neglect.

2. Kept our bunny in a wire-bottom cage

Along with relying on employee recommendations for our rabbit care came purchasing a wire-bottom rabbit hutch. [Wire-bottom cages have a bad reputation](#) in the rabbit community for giving bunnies sores on their feet ([sore hocks](#)). Even if your particular bunny's feet are furry or thick enough to protect them from sores, the wire flooring is still not going to be comfortable to stand or sleep on 24/7. I've walked on top of x-pens laying on the floor, and not only are the bars pokey, but they cause the muscles in your feet to strain differently than walking across a solid surface does. I certainly wouldn't want to have to stand or lay on wire flooring for most of my life!

3. Fed nothing but pellets

My family didn't do any research beforehand, so when we got the bunny, we just purchased a 50-lb bag of rabbit pellets from the feed store and thought we were good to go. Of course, once we had the bunny home, nothing was stopping us from Googling "[rabbit diet](#)." Unfortunately, being 10 years old and younger at the time, my sisters and I weren't allowed to use the internet, and our dad was probably too busy taking care of the other animals and his six children to give it much thought.

In reality, a rabbit's diet should be [80 to 90 percent grass hay](#), include leafy greens, and pellets should only be fed in limited amounts (around a [quarter cup or less per three lbs of body weight](#)). Our poor bunny got nothing but unlimited pellets all day long, which put him at risk for a deadly condition called [GI stasis](#), overgrown teeth, and obesity. Luckily, our bunny didn't develop any of these health issues, but he probably didn't feel healthy and happy.

4. Used a water bottle

A rabbit can drink [as much water as a large dog](#), but most bottles only release water one drop at a time. This can leave your poor bunny dehydrated. Additionally, water bottles force rabbits to tilt their head up in an [unnatural position](#) to drink, which can be uncomfortable for some. Because of this, bunnies almost always prefer a water bowl.

Another drawback of water bottles is that they're harder to clean than water bowls and are prone to bacteria build-up in the nozzle. They can even become completely blocked by the gunk, putting your rabbit at risk for serious dehydration. Sadly, my sisters and I, being your average forgetful and unreliable children, weren't nearly diligent enough about cleaning the water bottle, and it definitely got gross and could have made our poor rabbit sick.

5. Housed the bunny alone in the garage

Rabbits are highly social creatures, and do best with [another bunny friend](#) and being kept inside where they can be part of the family. Bunnies also thrive on human affection and company, and a study accidentally found that they're less at risk of [heart attack and stroke](#) if petted and talked to regularly. Unfortunately, we thought it was okay to keep our bunny in a hutch in the garage with no friends, even though he was a very social rabbit who loved the company of humans, other bunnies, and even gentle dogs. The poor baby was probably very lonely.

6. Didn't provide toys/enrichment

In addition to being lonely in the garage, our bunny didn't have anything to do. Rabbits are smart, curious, and playful, and require lots of mental stimulation in the form of toys. Toys not only keep bunnies entertained, but chew toys made from cardboard and wood help wear their constantly growing teeth down.

Without toys, our poor bunny definitely showed signs of boredom and stress because he completely chewed up his plastic litter box. Most rabbits won't [chew plastic](#) (beyond maybe giving it one curious nibble) unless they're seriously bored or stressed, and would much rather munch tasty sticks, wood, or cardboard. Without any of these, however, our bunny was forced to take out his gnawing instincts on his plastic litter box, which definitely wasn't good for him.

7. Didn't give the rabbit enough exercise

The first few weeks of having the bunny, my sisters and I did a good job of taking him to the backyard to run around and play. But we quickly grew bored of him, and he started to spend most of his days cooped up in his hutch.

Rabbits need a [minimum of 24 square feet](#) of space to exercise in at least five hours a day, and our bunny's hutch, while big enough for him to squeeze in a few hops and stretch out in, just didn't cut it. Even when we did take him out to the yard for exercise, he certainly wasn't out there for five hours.

8. Moved the rabbit outside

My dad noticed that our poor bunny was cooped up in his hutch all day and decided to fix it. Unfortunately, “fixing” it meant moving him from the safety of the garage to a chicken-wire run outside with a non-insulated, wooden dog house for shelter. Keeping rabbits outdoors tends to [halve their lifespan](#), which ended up being the case for our bunny.

Now, my family lived out in the country, and it wasn't uncommon for us to see coyotes, foxes, hawks, and feral cats on our property. While the chicken-wire run gave the bunny some protection, a fox could have easily dug under the fencing, and determined predators could have even bent the chicken wire to get in. The rabbit himself managed to dig himself out of his pen numerous times, so it was hardly secure (luckily he didn't run away). Even if a predator didn't succeed in breaking into the run, a fox or coyote merely harassing the bunny could have made him [die from fear](#).

Rabbits are also sensitive to weather, especially heat. Temperatures as low as [80° can give bunnies heat stroke](#), and our summers usually went into the 100's. They can also be [afraid of thunder](#) and are at risk of [hypothermia if they get wet](#).

9. Blamed the bunny for not being cuddly enough

Now that I know more about rabbits, I remember Percy as a very friendly and sweet bunny. During playtimes in the yard, he liked to stick close to his humans and enjoyed being stroked. He even liked to take naps with our elderly golden retriever (supervised of course). The one thing he didn't like was being insecurely held by small children who didn't know how to support him and make him feel safe. So, when we picked him up, he'd try to run away and would accidentally scratch our arms in the process.

Instead of realizing that the fault lay with us picking him up improperly, we blamed him for not being cuddly enough... and decided to get *another* bunny, hoping that she would be more snuggly (because obviously my sisters and I were doing so well with the one we already had).

We bought a baby Holland Lop from a breeder (we named her Ivy). Sadly, we *still* didn't do any research about rabbits, and like Percy, she ended up spending most of her time alone in her outdoor run (we housed her separately from Percy), eating an unhealthy diet, and drinking out of a water bottle.

10. Didn't spay or neuter our rabbits

Along with preventing unwanted pregnancies (which was a possibility in our case since we had two bunnies capable of digging themselves out of their runs), spaying keeps female bunnies from getting uterine cancer. Without being spayed, Ivy had an [85 percent chance](#) of getting uterine cancer by age three, and ultimately, she might have died of this.

Neutering Percy also would have kept him from doing annoying things like humping our legs, and spaying/neutering helps minimize territorial or aggressive behaviors in rabbits and improves litter box habits. It also helps their pee smell less! Neither of our bunnies were territorial or aggressive, and since they were outside they didn't have litter boxes, but all of those behavior changes are very important for people with indoor bunnies.

If we had spayed/neutered our bunnies, we also would have been able to house them together, which would have helped them be much happier and less lonely.

11. Didn't check for GI stasis or other health issues

Aside from fish, bunnies might be one of the most delicate pets you can have. Even going a [day without eating](#) can mean death for the fluffy little creatures. And when a bunny isn't feeling well, whether it's their paw hurting or serious illness, the first thing they'll do is stop eating.

Without fiber constantly moving through their digestive systems, rabbits will develop a potentially fatal condition called [GI stasis](#) where the gut shuts down, which can lead to blockages, painful gas, toxic overgrowth of bacteria, and death. Because GI stasis can grow extremely serious very quickly, it's important to regularly check that your bunny is eating, pooping, and behaving normally.

Aside from being completely unaware that GI stasis existed, we fed our bunnies unlimited pellets out of large feeders, so would never have noticed if one of them had gone a day without eating. We also didn't know to watch for behaviors like lethargy or tooth grinding, and we didn't spend much time around our bunnies either, so might not have seen if something was wrong.

Another mistake we made was letting our rabbits dig complex burrows under their dog houses. If they had gotten GI stasis, they could have curled up in an impossible-to-reach corner and died. I've had two bunnies experience an extreme loss of appetite, and being able to catch them and rush them to the vet was critical in keeping their guts from shutting down; the thought of my bunnies having a place that's completely inaccessible to me gives me anxiety.

Our last crime was that we didn't take our bunnies to the vet for yearly check-ups to look for problems like [tooth overgrowth](#) or cancer, which were both conditions our bunnies were seriously at risk for. Maybe if we'd taken our bunnies to the vet, we would have learned about the importance of hay, along with other essential rabbit care info, and our bunnies would have had better lives.

What Happened to Our Bunnies?

True to outdoor bunny lifespan statistics, Ivy disappeared at around age three ([Holland Lops usually live 7-14 years](#)) and Percy disappeared when he was four ([Havana rabbits typically live 5-10 years](#)).

Percy had a habit of digging himself out of his run, and while he'd always come back, I suspect that one of the many predators in our area got him on his last excursion.

Ivy also could have dug herself out of her pen. There weren't any holes leading out of her run, but because rabbits have collapsible skeletons, she could have squeezed out of one too small for us to notice. However, I would guess she got uterine cancer or GI stasis and died hunched up inside her burrow complex. She also could have been carried away by a hawk.

So, if you want your bunny to live a long and happy life, don't let your children be their primary caregivers, make sure your rabbit has unlimited hay, and please, please, please do not keep them outside.

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< HOW TO GET YOUR RABBIT TO EAT MORE HAY

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