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BUNNIES ARE SWELL PETS, BUT DON'T MAKE THEM BASKET CASES

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With their twinkling eyes, twitching noses and those adorable floppy ears, bunnies look like the perfect addition to a child's Easter basket. But don't stock up on carrots just yet. Experts from local vets and pet rescue groups warn that after the novelty wears off, bunnies given as Easter gifts often end up in animal shelters or worse, set free in the wild to fend for themselves.

When it comes to rabbit ownership, misconceptions run rampant. Dr. Shann Ikezawa, a veterinarian with **Bishop Ranch Veterinary Center** and Urgent Care in San Ramon, is trying to educate people about the realities of bunny ownership before families bring that bundle of fur home. "Bunnies are great family pets, however they require special care that isn't always taken into consideration when the impulse to adopt a bunny is made - especially during the Easter holiday," says Ikezawa.

The most common misconception is that rabbits are good first pets for young children. Ikezawa says that rabbits rarely conform to the cute and cuddly stereotype. They are very delicate and can be easily hurt by children when picked up.

Rabbits also feel frightened when held, leading to kicking and scratching. They may also run away or bite when approached too quickly, often frustrating a child who might quickly lose interest in the new pet. Children age 8 and older are probably better suited than younger children to handle the often erratic behavior of rabbits.

Marisa Price, rabbit foster coordinator for Tri-Valley Animal Rescue, says that bunnies can make wonderful family pets and encourages those interested in adopting a rabbit to do their homework first.

"There are so many things we know now that have really changed the way people interact with rabbits," Price says. "My rabbits live in the house and are only in the cage when I'm not home. They are litter-box trained, sleep under the bed and are just like having a dog or cat." The rescue group places rabbits in indoor homes only and discourages people from keeping bunnies in outdoor hutches. Price says that outdoor hutches are not healthy or safe and that many rabbits die of heat stroke each summer because the rabbits can't handle temperatures higher than 80 degrees.

The group receives about 50 unwanted rabbits each year with peaks after Easter and after the Alameda County Fair in the summer. Price says that the cute little bunnies taken home hit puberty at four months causing unwanted, and unexpected, bunny behavior. Spaying or neutering the animal returns it to its original habits, but many rabbits are given up instead being neutered, which costs \$100 to \$200.

Rescue groups, including those in the Tri-Valley, have joined a nationwide publicity effort to discourage the giving of rabbits for Easter. The effort, appropriately dubbed "Make Mine Chocolate," stresses that rabbits are not toys and require a commitment for the life of the rabbit, often about 10 years.

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