

How to Control A Compulsive Chewer

By Ruth M. Fledermaus

I gazed lovingly at the bunny at my feet. She was shyly nibbling my shoelaces.

“She’s a bit of a chewer.” warned Mirage’s foster mom. “You’ll have to give her plenty of distractions.”

“Sure.” I replied dreamily. I was in love with this bun, and no problem seemed insurmountable. I had a dim idea that I’d give her some paper towel tubes, or wicker baskets. How bad could a chewing problem be?

I soon found out. To my dismay, in the first months we had her Mirage chewed – and ingested – a set of plastic baby keys, a plastic hair barrette, an entire tube of Laxatone, and of course, the de rigeur electrical cords. She cut short a long distance telephone conversation by biting through the phone cord. Her teeth were unstoppable!

Mirage came through these incidents unharmed, but the last straw came when she was diagnosed with lead poisoning from chewing the baseboards in our older house. She recovered, but it was time to get those teeth under control.

So how does one control a compulsive chewer? There are a number of strategies which will help. Of course, the first thing to do is have the bunny spayed or neutered. This will cut down on the chewing urge, especially in female bunnies.

Next, assess the rabbit’s chewing habits. Does she merely chew the substance and then drop it, or is she chewing and eating? If the rabbit is actually ingesting what she chews it is much more serious, and means all rabbit toys must be completely edible.

Does the rabbit have the free run of the house? She may have to be confined to a bunny-proof area until the problem is under control. However, a rabbit confined to a too-small area may be so distressed that she develops compulsive chewing habits out of boredom or anxiety. Rabbits need a good-sized pen with lots of toys to occupy their busy minds.

Are there certain times of the day when the chewing is worse? Rabbits are crepuscular, meaning they are more active at dusk and dawn. I’ve noticed that Mirage’s teeth rev up about five in the morning and go till about eight am. She is restful during the day, getting more active around dinnertime. Then she’s a busy bunny till around nine pm, when it’s time to sack out for the night.

If I can keep her occupied during these “busy times”, Mirage hardly chews the rest of the day. Perhaps the chewer in question can be put in a bunny-proof area during their active hours, and only allowed access to the rest of the house during their quieter time.

Once the chewing habits have been assessed, distract compulsive chewers from what you don't want them to chew. Do this by channeling them toward what is appropriate for chewing.

For example, I feed Mirage during the peak of her busy times to distract her from destructive chewing behavior. I place her veggies all around the room so that she has to keep busy finding them. Even after she has eaten all of them she will usually keep looking – after all, you never know when you might have missed a tasty bit of broccoli!

Mirage's hay is also a useful distraction. It is piled high in her litter box so she can burrow and hide in it as well as chew. I also stuff hay into small cardboard boxes with small openings cut in the sides. The hay is visible, but Mirage has to work a bit to get it out. She loves to chew the openings wider and tease the hay out from the ever-enlarging holes. This keeps her occupied for hours!

The more toys, the better, and everything I give Mirage is edible. Don't forget, this is the bunny who ate a set of hard plastic baby keys! Good toys for a chewer/eater include old telephone books, paper towel tubes, wicker baskets, cardboard boxes, and wooden chew toys. Mirage has "piñatas" made from natural fiber strings and small wicker baskets stuffed with hay, which I hang from the underside of a table.

Engage the bunny's brain as well as her teeth. Remember, a rabbit who chews won't just be looking straight ahead. She'll look up, down and all around! Have things at all levels to keep her busy. And rotate the toys – don't let the bunny get bored with the same old wicker basket!

Along those same lines, remember that such an active mind can get into other sorts of mischief as well. In the first few months we had Mirage, my husband and I puzzled over how she could be getting the objects she was chewing. We certainly didn't give her a plastic barrette to play with! And what about those out of reach electrical cords?

The mystery was solved when one day I went into Mirage's room to find her sitting on the table. She had managed to get onto a low chair, and from there it was a short hop to the table top. We reassessed her brain power and our rabbit proofing, and her mysterious ability to get forbidden objects ceased.

And don't be unrealistic – no amount of distraction is necessarily going to stop a bunny from chewing a Chippendale chair. Don't expose your valuable furniture to a chewer and then get angry when teeth marks appear! Rabbits can't be expected to know the difference between cheap chic and a priceless antique, so it's up to you to make sure that the things you most care about are out of reach of bunny's overzealous teeth.

Personally, I love the fact that Mirage has such an interesting and active brain, even if it sometimes takes her in somewhat destructive directions! Remember, it's up to the rabbit caretaker, not the rabbit, to redirect the rabbit's chewing from a problem to an amusing and interesting activity.