

RABBIT - HOUSING & HANDLING

HANDLING - RESTRAINT

This is a very important subject because when improperly executed, rabbits often receive serious, life-threatening injuries. Fractures and dislocations of the back, most often resulting in flaccid paralysis of both rear legs, are the most common injuries incurred. These injuries also do occur when rabbits are frightened and suddenly attempt escape from a small enclosure. A rabbit's vertebral skeleton is relatively lightweight and fragile. When a rabbit becomes frightened, it will violently struggle by powerfully kicking its back legs. The lightning-fast hyperflexion and hyperextension of the rear legs causes overextension of the lumbosacral region (lower back) of the spine which frequently results in fractures or dislocations. One should never try to overpower a struggling rabbit. If a rabbit violently resists physical restraint, it should be immediately released and re-approached when it has calmed down. Rabbits should never be picked up by their ears. If the handler is concerned about being scratched by the claws, a towel can be gently placed over the rabbit's back and it can then be pushed under the four feet as the rabbit is picked up. An alternate method of picking up a rabbit involves sliding one hand under its sternum and grasping both front legs between the fingers of this hand. The other hand is then gently worked under the rear quarters to fully support them as the rabbit is lifted upwards.



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HOUSING CONSIDERATIONS

Rabbits should be confined to a suitable enclosure when their activity cannot be adequately supervised. A roomy wire cage with at least one half of the floor's surface area covered with plexiglass or washable towels is recommended. Relief from continual contact with the wire floor afforded by the plexiglass or towels helps to prevent hutch sores to the feet (see section on Hutch Sores - Sore Hocks). A water bottle or ceramic crock, food dish, and a litter box should be provided for the rabbit inside this enclosure. Under no circumstances should rabbits be allowed total freedom within the home when it has not been adequately "rabbit-proofed." Rabbits love to chew and can be very destructive to household furnishings. Furthermore, they can be seriously injured by biting into electrical cords. Like cats, rabbits can be easily trained to use a litter box in the home. If the rabbit has already exhibited an acceptable location preference for its bathrooming activities, then the litter box should be placed in this location. It helps to place some of the rabbit's fecal pellets in the litter box to encourage its prompt usage.

Rabbits housed outdoors, in the warmer months, should be confined in roomy wire cages with plexiglass covering approximately one half of the floor's surface area. The wire mesh should be just large enough to allow fecal pellets to drop through. A water bottle or ceramic crock and an equally weighted food dish should be provided. It is imperative that visual security and adequate shade be provided as well. Rabbits are typically anxious, wary animals and are easily frightened. This is especially true of newly acquired pet rabbits and rabbits kept for reasons other than as pets. A concealed area into which these rabbits can retreat when they feel threatened is necessary in order to prevent injury that would result from excessive and futile efforts to escape from the cage. Hiding provides a safe alternative to useless and often injurious escape efforts. Shade must be provided in order to prevent heat stress and heat stroke. Adequate shelter must also be provided against the elements (wind, rain, snow, ice, etc.) Rabbits require regular exercise and their owners must provide this necessity whether their pets live indoors or outdoors. Continuous confinement leads to poor physical and mental health. Rabbits that live indoors should be allowed out of their enclosures for supervised "hopping time" every day. A puppy/dog exercise pen is a suitable alternative to an indoor cage and, in fact, provides more space than most cages allow. Outdoor rabbits should be allowed regular "hopping time" in an escape-proof yard. If you choose to provide an exercise pen for your outdoor rabbit, it should be covered and have flooring through which your rabbit cannot dig.

CARE OF ORPHANED BUNNIES

Assuming the maternal rearing responsibilities for domestic does (mothers) or those of wild rabbit species (cottontails, hares, etc.) is rarely a rewarding venture. Orphaned bunnies often result when man unknowingly intervenes and interferes. Lactating does nurse their young for only three to five minutes in the early morning hours of each day, giving the uninformed observer the impression that the new mother is neglecting her litter or that she has abandoned it altogether. It is at this junction that man usually interferes, making orphans out of rabbits that are, in fact, being well and properly cared for. Causes for abandonment of the nest include agalactia (doe with no milk), mastitis (doe with infection of the mammary gland(s)), hypothermia (chilling) of the young, and physical disturbance of the nest itself. Whenever possible, orphaned bunnies should be foster parented by a nursing doe. Success is most likely if the orphans are less than two weeks of age and within two days of the age of the litter belonging to the foster doe. A drop of perfume or a pine oil-type scent applied to the nose of the foster doe will help to prevent rejection of the orphaned bunnies. Orphaned bunnies under three weeks of age can be fed warmed KMR (Kitten Milk Replacer; Pet-Ag, Inc., 201 Keys Ave., Hampshire, IL, 60140). Powdered KMR is preferable to the liquid form of the product because it is far less perishable. In fact, that portion of the powdered product that may not be used right away can be frozen with no compromise to its quality. The substitute milk formula should be administered slowly two or three times daily. Up to five cc's (one teaspoon) can be given the first few days; the volume is increased slowly to 15 cc's (one tablespoon) the second week; and to 25 cc's (nearly one ounce) by the third week. The volumes listed are suggested amounts to be given over a 24 hour period. The anal area should be gently swabbed with a warm water-soaked cotton ball to stimulate defecation and urination. Aspiration pneumonia, hypothermia, and diarrhea are frequent consequences of hand-feeding orphaned bunnies.