



FOSTER CARE MANUAL FOR RABBITS

©Mark Schnerle, SPCA Serving Erie County Rabbit Coordinator
Updated in 2018 by Stephanie Pepper and Hilary Lemperle, SPCA Serving Erie County
Foster Care Department



YourSPCA.org || 300 Harlem Road
716.875.7360 || West Seneca, NY 14224



YourSPCA.org || 300 Harlem Road
716.875.7360 || West Seneca, NY 14224

CONTENTS

Basic Facts.....	Page 3
Home Set Up.....	Page 3
Caring for the Nursing Rabbit.....	Page 4
Trouble Shooting.....	Page 6
Nutrition.....	Page 8
Handling and Care.....	Page 10
What to Watch for.....	Page 12
Unsafe Rabbit Food and Safe Alternatives.....	Page 13
Understanding Rabbit Behavior.....	Page 14
Approved Rabbit Plant Guide.....	Page 15

This manual has been created and made available by the SPCA Serving Erie County. Animal welfare organizations are permitted to reprint and edit the content as appropriate to their needs.

Basic Facts

- Rabbits can be litterbox trained.
- They can live to be 7-10 years old.
- Rabbits are inquisitive, sociable animals.
- They make wonderful indoor companions.
- Rabbits can purr when contented.
- Like cats and dogs, rabbits need to be spayed or neutered to improve health and behavior.
- Unlike other pets, most rabbits do not like to be held. They prefer to sit beside you.
- Rabbits like to play with toys, such as cardboard boxes, wire cat balls, hard plastic baby keys, and untreated willow baskets.
- Rabbits need to have things of their own to chew on (or they might nibble on your things.)
- Rabbits need to be protected from predators, poisons, temperature extremes, electrical cords, and rough handling.

Home Set Up for your Foster Rabbit(s)

To set up the rabbit, we recommend utilizing a small area or roomy cage (or both.) Use a laundry room, bathroom, hallway blocked off with baby gates, or part of a larger room sectioned off using furniture, boxes, or other objects he can't scale or knock over. Choose a spot that gets some regular, not-too-noisy traffic, where he can see and hear but not be trampled by your daily routines. Start house training by providing at least one or two litterboxes. A fresh layer of grass hay on top will both encourage and reward him for hopping in. If you know what brand of chow he was eating, keep him on it for a while to minimize risk of digestive upset (unless it was rabbit junk-food that contained corn, seeds, and other unhealthy additions.) Fresh water in a bowl or bottle, or both, should be available at all times. Give him at least one cardboard box with two bunny-size doors cut, and a towel draped across one area of his cage, as hiding places. Start him on the road to good chewing habits by removing forbidden and dangerous temptations such as house plants, electric cords, and books.

- Provide permitted alternatives such as untreated straw, wicker, or sea-grass baskets and mats, cardboard tubes and boxes, plastic baby-toys for tossing, fruit-tree branches, and plenty of fresh hay.

Domestic Baby Rabbits and Their Mom

The first thing to do is to remove the father, or any male, if he is with the mother. Males will probably not hurt the babies, but he can impregnate the female again, even on the day she gives birth. Not only can he impregnate the mother rabbit, he will also impregnate the female offspring as soon as they mature.

Creating a Nest

Place the mother and the babies in a small, warm, quiet room. If she is indoors, give the mother a litterbox in the opposite corner of the nest. If she is not used to being in the house, this may stress her more than being left in her outdoor cage. The only thing to do in that case is add a proper nest area.



If the babies are scattered, cold and do not have plump tummies, the mother needs help making a proper nest box, and the babies need to be warmed up before anything else is attempted. No baby mammals can successfully digest foods if their body temperature is below normal. This is extremely important to understand.

In this case, warm the babies as follows: Place a hot water bottle, filled with warm water (not hot!) into a small box of any kind. Line it with clean terry cloth towels and place the bottle UNDER the towels. A small plastic container or a leak-proof plastic bag can be used if necessary. Make a small space within the nest and put the babies in the temporary warming nest.

Be sure the babies are not in direct contact with the warm water (it may become too hot for them.) Be sure that the towels do not have holes in them and are not frayed, because the fine threads could cut their delicate skin and holes could strangle them should they squirm through one.

In the meantime, prepare a proper box and nest for the mother, so she will feel secure when the babies are returned to her. Get a cardboard box which is just slightly larger than the mother rabbit. It should not be too big, or the babies may scatter again and miss an important feeding. A doorway should be cut in the center of one side, which is just large

enough for the mother to fit through. The doorway should have a lip of about 1 inch above the floor to help keep the babies in the box.

Place a large handful of straw, grass or hay in the box and place it in a corner of the rabbit cage. Be sure it is not in the corner that the mother rabbit uses as a bathroom! Make sure that grass clippings do not contain any pesticides or fertilizers. Do not use fabric scraps, burlap, gauze or anything else with fine threads or holes in it. The straw/hay should be replaced every three or four days as it will become soaked in urine. You can just take the babies out of the box, and remove and replace most of the clean fur, and change the rest of the bedding and line the box with clean bedding.

The babies can be placed into the new nest as soon as their body temperature feels warm to the touch. (Only warm the babies if they have been scattered on the cage floor. If they were huddled together in a good nest site, leave them alone, except to check whether they have been fed.)



Are They Getting Fed?

A well-fed baby will have a very, round and plump tummy. If the babies' tummies are full, the mother is feeding them and the caretaker can rest assured that things are going as they should. The babies can be examined every day if that will make the caretaker feel more assured.

If the babies have not been fed, they will have sunken tummies, their skin will be wrinkled from dehydration and they will be weak (their response to being handled will be weak or non-existent, although they will hopefully be breathing.) Scattered babies are more likely not to have been fed, so make sure that they are warm first.

If the babies are weak or dehydrated, veterinary intervention is advised, so please contact the Foster Care Department sooner than later. Placing a drop of honey or fruit jam into their mouths sometimes helps elevate their blood sugar level until veterinary help and/or mother's milk is available.

If you feel it is necessary to examine the babies every day to verify that they have been fed, pet the mother rabbit first, to help cover human scents, and avoid wearing heavy perfumes. It is best to handle the babies as little as possible until they are old enough to leave the nest box on their own.

If it has been close to two days and you are positive that the babies have not been fed, call foster care immediately at 716-875-7360 Ext. 216. Try allowing the babies to nurse, as suckling sometimes stimulates the milk glands. If that happens, monitoring the babies' growth is the only thing that needs to be done. Mother rabbits stand upright while nursing and the babies lie upside down beneath her. Hold the rabbits in this natural position.

Is There a Problem?

Oftentimes people are concerned that the mother rabbit "is not feeding the babies," because she is rarely seen with them. This is normal behavior for a domestic (or wild) rabbit and that mother rabbits do not "lay" with their offspring in the same manner as dogs and cats do.

Domestic rabbits retain some of the genetic imprints of their wild European ancestors, that are preyed upon by others in nature. Mother rabbits instinctually sense that staying with their offspring will call a predator's attention to the nest. Adult rabbits have a scent, while babies do not yet have a scent. Most mother rabbits will not hop into the nest (or box) to check on their babies during the day, although she is usually watching from a safe distance. This is normal behavior.

A mature female will often pull fur to make a nest, with or without a male present and regardless of whether actual mating has occurred. This hormonal behavior is known as a "false pregnancy."

If the mother has pulled fur in an attempt to make a nest, she will probably be all right if her nest is appropriate. It is safe to examine the babies and move them, with the mother, to a more proper place, if necessary.

Rabbits feed their babies only once or twice per day and will only do so when they feel safe, usually just before dawn and/or just after dusk. If humans and children are continually gathered around the cage, the mother may become too stressed to nurse the babies.

There is a way to determine if the mother is feeding her offspring. Did the mother rabbit pull some of her fur out? Did she shred papers, or gather hay or rip up carpeting (if housed indoors) in an attempt to “make a nest?” Mother rabbits usually make a nest any time between a few days prior to the birth up to the day of birth itself. She may also do so without an actual pregnancy.

Are the Babies in Danger?

If you think that the mother is injuring the babies while kindling (giving birth,) while feeding, or has eaten any of the babies, several issues should be explored. Sometimes a mother rabbit will accidentally injure the babies because her nails have never been clipped, the nest box is not proper, or she is stressed and skittish as a result of too much activity going on around her. Some rabbits are highly skittish by nature. Very young mothers, especially those under six months of age, may not understand what has happened to them and veterinary intervention is imperative. Nervous and young mothers sometimes abandon their babies for unknown reasons, which may include having produced unhealthy babies. Sometimes the nutritional status of the mother is highly inadequate.

If the mother seems to be eating her babies, nutritional deficiencies are one of the possible scenarios. It is normal for these vegetarian animals to eat the afterbirth. It prevents predators from discovering the nest and provides the mother with some much-needed nutrients.

If the mother rabbit has died, cannot or is not feeding the babies, you should contact foster care immediately at 716-875-7360 Ext 216. Sadly, bottle-feeding baby rabbits usually culminates in the babies’ death within a few days to weeks. Bottle feeding is terribly unsuccessful because there is no milk replacement formula that is 100% adapted for baby rabbits.

Nutrition

What are the basics of a good foster rabbit diet?

A rabbit's diet should be made up of good quality pellets, fresh hay (alfalfa, timothy or oat), water and fresh vegetables. Anything beyond that is a "treat" and should be given in limited quantities.

The SPCA will provide the hay and pellets for rabbits placed into a foster home.

What kinds of veggies should I feed my foster rabbit?

When shopping for vegetables, look for a selection of different veggies--look for both dark leafy veggies and root vegetables, and try to get different colors. Stay away from beans and rhubarb. Here's a suggested veggie list.



- Alfalfa, radish & clover sprouts
- Basil
- Beet greens
- Bok choy
- Broccoli (mostly leaves/stems)
- Brussels sprouts
- Carrot & carrot tops
- Celery
- Cilantro
- Clover
- Collard greens
- Dandelion greens and flowers (no pesticides)
- Endive
- Escarole
- Green peppers
- Kale
- Lettuce: Romaine, Red or Green leaf (no iceberg or light colored leaf)
- Mint Mustard greens
- Parsley
- Pea pods (the flat edible kind)
- Peppermint leaves
- Radicchio
- Radish tops
- Raspberry leaves
- Spinach

Use sparingly or rotate. Vegetables high in either oxalates or goitrogens may be toxic in accumulated quantities over a period.

What kinds of treats should I feed my foster rabbit?

Fruits:

Apple
Blueberries
Melon
Orange
Papaya
Peach
Pea
Pineapple
Plums
Raspberries
Strawberries

Is feeding hay important?

Hay is essential to a rabbit's good health, providing roughage which reduces the danger of hairballs and other blockages. Apple tree twigs also provide good roughage.

What quantities of food should be fed to babies and "teenagers"?

- Birth to 3 weeks--mother's milk
- 3 to 4 weeks--mother's milk, nibbles of alfalfa and pellets
- 4 to 7 weeks--mother's milk, access to alfalfa and pellets
- 7 weeks to 7 months--unlimited pellets, unlimited hay (plus see 12 weeks below)
- 12 weeks--introduce vegetables (one at a time, quantities under 1/2 oz.)

What quantities of food should be fed to young adults? (7 months to 1 year)

- introduce timothy hay, grass hay, and oat hays, decrease alfalfa
- decrease pellets to 1/2 cup per 6 lbs. body weight
- increase daily vegetables gradually
- Fruit daily ration no more than 1 oz. to 2 oz. per 6 lbs. body weight (because of calories)

What quantities of food should be fed to mature adults? (1 to 5 years)

- Unlimited timothy, grass hay, oat hay, straw
- 1/4 to 1/2 cup pellets per 6 lbs. body weight (depending on metabolism and/or proportionate to veggies)
- Minimum 2 cups chopped vegetables per 6 lbs. body weight
- Fruit daily ration no more than 2 oz. (2 TBL) per 6 lbs. body weight.

What quantities of food should be fed to senior rabbits? (Over 6 years)

- If sufficient weight is maintained, continue adult diet
- Frail, older rabbits may need unrestricted pellets to keep weight up. Alfalfa can be given to underweight rabbits, only if calcium levels are normal. Annual blood workups are highly recommended for geriatric rabbits.

Absolutely NO chocolate (poisonous!), cookies, crackers, breakfast cereals, bread, pasta, yogurt drops or other “human treats.” There is research to suggest these items may contribute to fatal cases of enterotoxemia, a toxic overgrowth of “bad” bacteria in the intestinal tract.

Should I give the rabbit items to chew?

Yes, here are some items that are OK for rabbits to chew on:

- Apples
- Willow and aspen branches
- Hay
- Pine firewood
- Untreated fresh pine lumber attached to cage so it doesn't move
- A basket with hay in it—let the bun chew the basket as well as the hay
- Compressed alfalfa cubes

Handling

Approaching a Rabbit

The safest approach with rabbits is to begin by stroking the top of their heads. Do not offer your hand for a rabbit to sniff the way you would to a dog, because most seem to find this gesture offensive and may attack (lightning fast lunge with a snort.) Most rabbits do not like having the tips of their noses or chins touched. Their feet also tend to be ticklish.

Lifting

Rabbits should not be lifted by the ears or scruff. Instead, lift the rabbit by placing one hand under the chest of the rabbit and place the other hand beneath the rabbit's rear end, slowly lift and bring rabbit snug to your body. If the rabbit begins to flail then stop and allow the rabbit to calm down before proceeding again. A rabbit's back is very fragile and they can injure themselves easily if they are allowed to thrash when being picked up.

Grooming

Rabbits can act as if they're hardy creatures, but they are in fact, extremely delicate. Care must be taken to maintain their good health. The following basics are necessary to know in order to groom rabbits safely and to help keep them healthy.

Shedding

Rabbits are fastidious groomers. They insist on being clean and tidy and will lick themselves like cats, and like cats, they can get hairballs if they ingest too much hair. Unlike cats however, rabbits cannot vomit.



Rabbits need to be brushed at least weekly. In addition to removing any loose hair, this weekly brushing session helps prepare them for the multiple daily brushings that they must undergo when their heavy shedding begins.

Baths

The vast majority of rabbits, like their ancestors, do not relish getting wet. Even an occasional bath is quite stressful to the average rabbit and is not recommended. **NEVER**, unless an SPCA veterinarian advises it to bring down a fever, should you give a sick rabbit a bath. Because seemingly healthy rabbits can have undiagnosed problems, it's best not to subject them to the stress of a bath.

Nails

Rabbit nails can grow to be very long and sharp and will be uncomfortable for the rabbit. If the rabbit has light colored nails they are very easy to trim. You can see the blood inside the nail and you clip just before that point. The dark colored nails are harder to see where they should be clipped but it is still visible. You can schedule to have the nails clipped with the foster department if you aren't comfortable doing them yourself.

Eyes

Watery eyes or and eye discharge needs to be diagnosed by a veterinarian. If the rabbit's eyes are watery call the foster department to schedule an appointment to be seen.

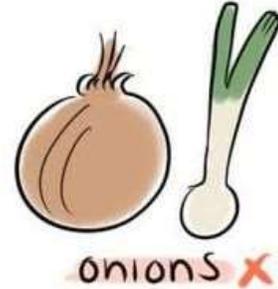
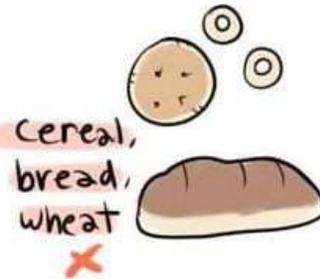
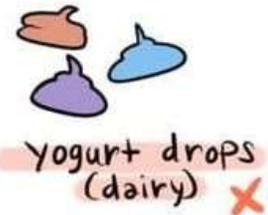
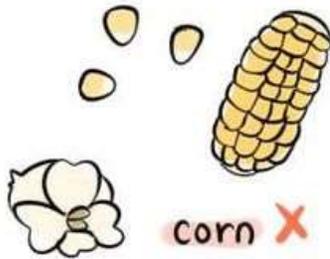
How to tell if your Foster Rabbit is Sick

CONTACT THE SPCA IMMEDIATELY IF YOU NOTICE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING:

- Diarrhea with listlessness
- Sudden loss of appetite with bloat and abdominal gurgling
- Loss of appetite with labored breathing
- Loss of appetite with runny nose
- Head tilt
- Incontinence (urine-soaked rear legs)
- Abscesses, lumps or swellings anywhere
- Any sudden behavior changes

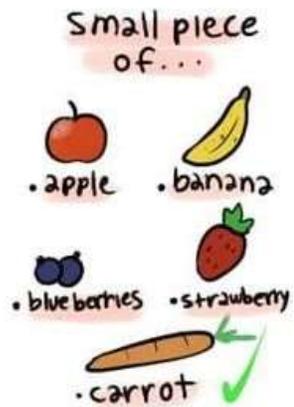
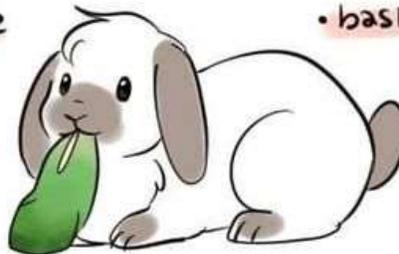
Unsafe Rabbit Food

unhealthy - even deadly



KIAROTONE

SAFE ALTERNATIVES





Understanding rabbit behaviour

YOUR RABBIT'S BODY LANGUAGE CAN HELP YOU TO UNDERSTAND HOW THEY ARE FEELING

A happy rabbit

These rabbits are relaxed and happy.

Rabbits 1-3 show ears close together, facing slightly backwards and pointing outwards. Eyes may be partially closed.



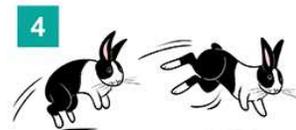
Rabbit is lying down, with a relaxed body posture and legs tucked under the body.



Rabbit is lying down, with front paws pointing forward and rear legs stuck out sideways. Body is relaxed and extended.



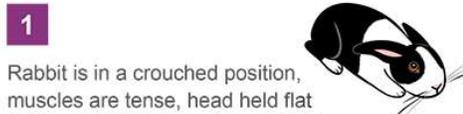
Rabbit is lying down with a fully extended, relaxed body. Back legs are stretched out behind the body and the front paws are pointing forward.



Rabbit jumps into the air with all four paws off the ground and twists in mid-air before landing.

A worried rabbit

These rabbits are telling you that they are uncomfortable and don't want you near them.



Rabbit is in a crouched position, muscles are tense, head held flat to the ground, ears wide apart and flattened against the back, pupils dilated.



Rabbits who are worried or anxious may hide.

An angry or very unhappy rabbit

These rabbits are not happy and want you to stay away or go away.



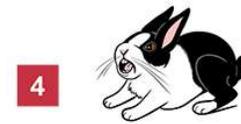
Rabbit turns and moves away flicking the back feet. Ears may be held against the back.



Rabbit is sitting up on back legs with front paws raised displaying boxing behaviour. Ears pointed upwards and facing outwards, rabbit may be growling.



Rabbit is standing tense, with back legs thumping on the ground. Tail raised, ears pointing upwards and slightly turned outwards, facial muscles are tense and pupils dilated.



Rabbit is standing tense with body down and weight towards the back, head tilted upwards, mouth open and teeth visible. Ears held back and lowered, tail raised, pupils dilated.

Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

Wilberforce Way, Southwater, Horsham, West Sussex RH13 9RS
www.rspca.org.uk facebook.com/RSPCA twitter.com/RSPCA_official

The RSPCA helps animals in England and Wales. Registered charity no: 219099 The RSPCA only exists with the support of public donations.

Illustrations: Lili Chin, © 2015. All rights reserved. With thanks to Julie Bedford, certified clinical animal behaviourist.



APPROVED RABBIT PLANT GUIDE

DIET DAILY NEEDS:

80%	fresh hay
10%	veggies/herbs
5%	food pellets
5%	flowers/fruit

Always introduce new foods sparingly to see how your rabbit responds before giving in larger amounts. Droppings are a good indicator of digestion abnormalities. It is always preferable to buy organic produce if possible. If collecting wild plants, make sure they are from a pesticide-free area. All approved plants should be washed or scrubbed before serving them to your rabbit. If you don't see a plant on this list, it's best to not chance giving it to your rabbit, as many plants can be poisonous!

LEAFY PLANT GREENS

Leafy Greens 1 (High in oxalic acid)

(Only 1 out of these varieties should be given daily)

Beet greens
Mustard greens
Radish tops
Spinach
Sprouts
Swiss chard

Leafy Greens 2 (Low in oxalic acid)

Arugula
Bok Choy
Carrot tops
Chicory
Cucumber leaves
Dandelion greens
Endive (Escarole)
Fennel (leafy tops & base)
Frisee Lettuce
Kale (all variety)
Mache
Radicchio
Raspberry leaves
Red or green lettuce
Romaine lettuce
Spring greens
Turnip greens
Watercress
Wheatgrass
Yu choy

NON-LEAFY VEGETABLE PLANTS

Bell peppers (any color)
Broccoli (leaves and stems, sparingly, can cause gas)
Broccolini (sparingly, can cause gas)
Brussel sprouts (sparingly, can cause gas)
Cabbage (any type, sparingly, can cause gas)
Carrots (good if your rabbit needs to gain weight, otherwise sparingly)
Celery (small pieces, sparingly)
Chinese pea pods (the flat kind without large peas)
Kohlrabi (sparingly)
Pumpkin (good if your rabbit needs to gain weight, otherwise sparingly)
Summer squash
Zucchini squash

HERB PLANTS

Basil (any variety)
Cilantro
Coriander
Dill leaves
Lemon Balm
Mint (any variety)
Nettle (only dried)
Oregano
Parsley
Rosemary
Sage
Tarragon
Thyme

FLOWERING PLANTS

Borage
Caraway
Chamomile
Chervil
Clover (limited, check source for pesticide use)
Comfrey
Hibiscus
Lady's Smock
Lavender
Lovage
Nasturtiums
Pansies
Roses
Salad Burnet

FRUIT BEARING PLANTS

Apple (any variety; remove stem, core & seeds)
Apricot (remove pit)
Banana (remove peel, small pieces)
Berries (any type, uncooked)
Cherries (any variety, without the pits)
Currants
Kiwi
Papaya
Pear
Peach (remove pit)
Pineapple (remove skin)
Plum (remove pit)
Mango
Melons (any – can include peel and seeds)
Nectarine (remove pit)
Star Fruit



friendsofwillow.org

info@friendsofwillow.org

facebook.com/friendsofwillow