

Raising Rabbits for Meat: Managing Animals' Health

Living on
The Land

In this part of the Living on the Land series on raising rabbits for meat, we discuss managing threats to the health and wellbeing of the animal.

Predators

Cages need to be durable and have a top and a strong door latch. With an open-top cage or pen, birds of prey can swoop in and attack rabbits. Dogs, raccoons, and other predators can break into cages by bending wires or unlatching simple doors. Rats, which can harm rabbits and carry diseases, can climb through large wire gaps. Keeping rabbits in an enclosed structure will protect them from most predators.

Extreme temperatures

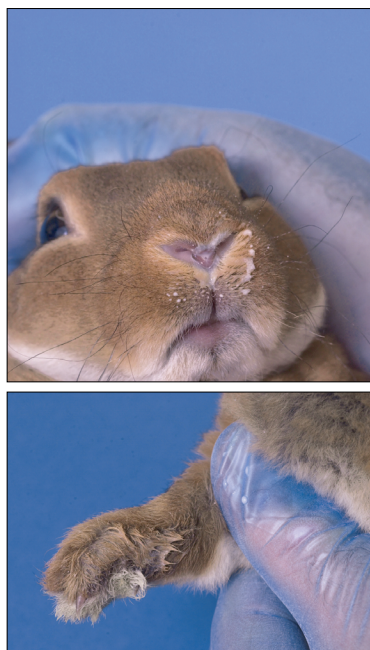
Although rabbits can survive outdoors, they require protection from extreme temperatures. Enclosed facilities provide better temperature control. Air conditioning, fans, and ice bottles in cages can be used in hot weather. In cold weather, heaters, insulation, and nesting boxes work well.

Drafts

Drafts can cause illnesses and diseases, including pneumonia. This is more of a concern for rabbits housed outdoors. If you plan to house them outdoors, install solid panels on the cage sides to reduce drafts. You can also place a box in the cage with the opening facing opposite the draft. Rabbits raised in an enclosed area still need ventilation for fresh, clean air.

Biosecurity

When adding new rabbits to your stock, it is wise to check the health of the breeder's animals. Do they show any signs of illness, such as runny noses, low weight, cloudy or discolored eyes, sores, diarrhea, ear mites, or matted or disheveled fur (Figure 1)? Even if rabbits appear healthy, they may be incubating or carrying disease agents. Put new rabbits in a secluded quarantine area for a month before introducing



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Figure 1. Snuffles is one of many serious contagious disorders of rabbits (A). The paws of animals with Snuffles are often matted from wiping runny noses (B).

them to your stock. This will give most illnesses time to show signs in infected animals.

Keep quarantined rabbits downwind of resident animals and complete quarantined-animal chores last. Do not share equipment between groups of animals, and make sure to change your clothes and wash your hands between your work with groups of animals. If you show rabbits, also use a quarantine area for rabbits returning from a show. Have a separate isolation area for sick animals that need treatment.

You can reduce health concerns by maintaining clean facilities. Clean and disinfect cages and change water daily to prevent the buildup of pathogens. Store food in water-tight containers so mice, mildew, and other damaging organisms can't get in. Don't allow water to pool on floors or other surfaces; pooled water can be a breeding ground for mosquitoes. Contact your local Extension office and veterinarian to learn about local disease concerns.



Figure 2. Wire cage with nest box



Figure 3. Three common types of bedding. Top row is dry; bottom row is wet.

Housing

Rabbits are active animals that require room to exercise. This helps them stay healthy and build muscle. The general standard for minimum space is 0.75 square feet per pound of rabbit. This gives them room to stretch out, hop a few lengths, and stand up on their hind legs. When in doubt, use a cage that provides adequate space for all types of movement.

Cages often have a tray below for collecting waste material; some have a raised wire bottom to keep rabbits out of their excrement. Wire cages are more sanitary and durable than wood ones (Figure 2). Rabbits have fur on the bottom of their feet for protection, so living on a wire surface is acceptable. However, heavier rabbits may develop sore hocks caused by pressure from wire. To prevent this, you can place pads on the wire or add bedding for a cushion. Inspect rabbits' feet regularly to detect and correct any problems quickly.

Equipment

Feeders and a watering system are critical. Metal feeders with a screen on the bottom are the easiest to clean and work well in most cages. In addition to feed pellets, rabbits benefit when given a little hay for roughage and teeth grinding. Keep hay sanitary by using a hay rack instead of putting hay on the cage floor. Water bottles or water lines with nipples are the best system for clean water. If you use water bottles, clean them regularly to avoid algae buildup.

Don't use bowls or crocks for water because they become contaminated easily with feces.

Bedding

Wood pellets, wood shavings, and paper bedding are all good choices for rabbits (Figure 3). Wood pellets work well because they expand when wet, making it easy to tell which bedding is dirty and should be removed. When using wood shavings, avoid cedar or other shavings with a strong odor because they may cause health problems, such as respiratory issues. Also, do not use any type of chemically treated bedding because sometimes rabbits chew their bedding. Pine shavings are readily available and inexpensive. Paper bedding is another option and comes in many forms. Although commercially made shredded-paper bedding is safe and a good option for cleanliness, it is usually more expensive. Homemade shredded bedding should be avoided because it could contain unhealthy chemicals. Use the type of bedding that will best fit your needs and budget.

Learn more

Living on the Land: Raising Rabbits for Meat—Getting Started (EC 1651) <https://catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/ec1651>

Mississippi State University Extension Service: Commercial Rabbit Production http://www.poultry.msstate.edu/pdf/extension/rabbit_production.pdf

For more information on raising rabbits for meat, contact your local OSU Extension Service agent or the American Rabbit Breeders Association (ARBA). The phrase "Living on The Land" is used with permission from Living on The Land Stewardship for Small Acreage, © 2008, UNCE/WSARE.

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