

Raising Rabbits for Meat: Providing Basic Care

*Living on
The Land*

Feed

Commercially produced rabbit feed is formulated to meet rabbits' dietary requirements. Mixing your own feed is not recommended because it is difficult to get the right balance of essential nutrients.

Feeding rates depend on rabbit weight and maturity. A typical range is 3 to 9 ounces of feed per animal per day. Smaller or mature (but not pregnant) animals will require lower amounts of feed than larger breeds, pregnant does, or growing rabbits.

One major concern when feeding a commercial rabbit breed is the level of dietary protein. Protein levels in feed range from 14 to 18 percent. Because the purpose of commercial rabbit breeds is meat production, a 16 to 18 percent protein feed promotes most rapid growth.

Keep feed cool and dry to discourage mold. Although air circulation helps inhibit mold, feed should not be left open and accessible to disease-carrying rodents. Instead, keep feed in sealed, chew-proof containers.

Hay can supplement rabbit diets, keep rabbits occupied, and help them grind their ever-growing teeth. The most commonly used types of hay include timothy, alfalfa, and other grass hay. Choose a hay type based on your rabbits' dietary needs. For example, if you are feeding lower-protein pellets, supplement with high-protein alfalfa hay instead of low-protein grass hay. Grass hays are the most common choices due to their lower cost and greater availability.

Although rabbits enjoy treats such as carrots, treats should be given in small amounts and rarely. Treats do not contain the balanced nutrients rabbits need. Excessive treats will hinder growth in young animals and promote obesity and malnourishment in adults.

Care

Since rabbits are usually kept in enclosed cages, sanitation is essential. Inadequate sanitation can lead to disease and poor meat



Photo: Elli Vanderzanden, © Oregon State University

Figure 1. Avoid the nail quick (containing blood vessels) when trimming nails.

production. As with any animal, you must provide a clean and safe environment with uncontaminated food and water for growth and health.

Rabbits grow long, sharp nails if they are not trimmed or worn down. There are nail trimmers specifically for rabbits, or you can use ones suitable for dogs and cats. Routine nail trimming protects humans and rabbits. Trim claws up to but not beyond the pink "quick," which is where blood vessels are visible in the nail (Figure 1).

Breeding

Littermates may attempt to breed around weaning time, but this should be avoided by separating young does and bucks. The appropriate time to start breeding is at sexual maturity, which is about 4 to 6 months for small breeds, 7 to 9 months for medium breeds, and 9 to 11 months for large breeds. Most meat breeds are medium or large.

Does are nonseasonal polyestrous, meaning they come into heat repeatedly when they are ready to breed. They are also induced ovulators, meaning they ovulate after mating, which nearly guarantees conception. However, does will be more receptive to breeding at certain times. Signals for receptiveness include raised hindquarters, lowered back, and red vulva (instead of normal pink). When a doe is receptive, take her to the buck's cage. The doe

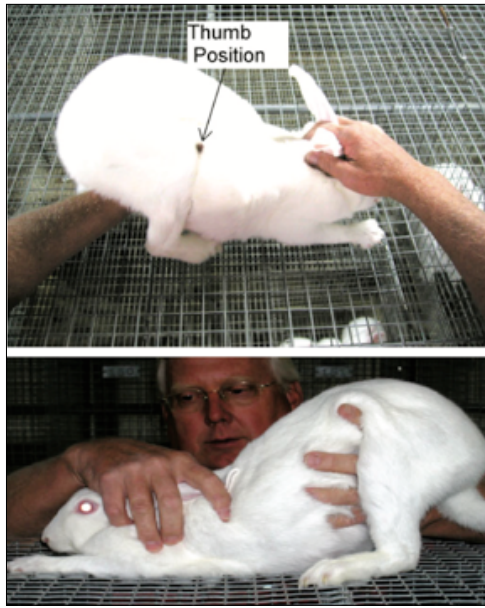


Figure 2. Palpation of a pregnant doe to feel for developing kits

will be less territorial outside her own cage and the buck will be more confident. Mating has occurred if the buck squeals and/or falls to the side or backwards off the doe. To avoid territorial fighting, do not leave the doe in the buck's cage for an extended period. Instead, only leave her there long enough for successful breeding.

Gestation ranges from 28 to 35 days, with a 31-day average. You can palpate does for the presence of developing kits by gently feeling her abdomen while she is posed upright (Figure 2). It is difficult to feel a litter the first 10 days after breeding. At this point, developing kits will be about the size of a blueberry.

Does need a nest box when kindling (giving birth). Without a nest box, does will give birth on a cage's wire mesh floor, which can kill kits. Provide an open plywood box or metal nest box with enough room for the doe to lie down comfortably. Supply extra bedding. The doe will normally pull fur from her belly and dewlap to fill the nest box shortly before kindling. If kits are born during hot weather, remove some fur from the nest box to prevent overheating. Keep the nest box shaded and increase ventilation, if needed, to keep the animals comfortable.



Figure 3. Newborn kits with eyes and ears still shut

Kits are born without fur and with their eyes and ears closed (Figure 3). Reduce disturbances around the doe's cage because stress can cause her to crush or even eat kits. Does may also abandon kits if her kits have been handled too much before she has bonded with them. Unless the doe is extremely familiar with your scent, refrain from handling kits for a few days, except for an initial check on newborns. Until kits are able to see and move on their own, make sure they stay in the nest box. Remove the nest box after 2 to 3 weeks to encourage kit development and lower disease risks.

Weaning should occur at two months of age. If male and female kits attempt to breed before weaning, separate and monitor them for healthy development until they reach appropriate breeding age and size. Not all rabbits should be kept as breeders—select those that are healthiest, most vigorous, and best meet their breed standard.

Learn more

- *Commercial Rabbit Production*. Mississippi State University Extension Service: http://www.poultry.msstate.edu/pdf/extension/rabbit_production.pdf
- *Rabbit Resource Handbook: For Breeding, Market, and Pet Rabbit Projects*. The Ohio State University Extension 4-H Project Guide. <http://estore.osu-extension.org/Rabbit-Resource-Handbook-for-Breeding-Market-and-Pet-Rabbit-Projects-P208.aspx>

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