

Basic Nutrition for Rabbits

Many national commercial feed corporations, as well as local feed companies, prepare rabbit and cavy pellets that meet the National Research Council's minimum requirements for rabbits and cavyes during growth, maintenance, gestation, and lactation. It is imperative that the feed does not contain an excessive amount of dust particles as this is not beneficial to the rabbit or cavy.

Rabbit Nutrition:

The most common mistake that the majority of rabbit breeders make is they overfeed the animals. To eliminate the problems of overfeeding, it is recommended that the owner feed the individual rabbits just the amount of feed that they will consume in twenty to thirty minutes after feeding the animals once a day. The only exception to this general rule is does that have litters nursing should be on "full feed" by the sixth or seventh day post-kindling. Just prior to kindling, just after kindling, and after weaning, the amount of feed given to the doe should be restricted to prevent the "over production" of milk that can predispose the doe to "caked breast" and mastitis.

Most rabbit rations contain approximately fourteen to seventeen percent protein, two to four percent fat, and should contain at least sixteen percent fiber for the best health of the animals. Most commercial pellets contain an adequate amount of salt, vitamins, and minerals to give the rabbits adequate nutrition. However, many pet owners and commercial producers like to supplement the pellet diet with various treats for various reasons. The most common treat for rabbits is some type of fibrous hay given in small quantities. Since rabbits are nocturnal, it is suggested to feed in the evenings. Treats are generally given in the morning. The addition of fresh fruits and vegetables to the rabbits diet can cause severe gastrointestinal problems that will often times lead to fatal diarrheas. Give only dark green vegetable. Light green vegetables should be avoided as it will add an excess amount of fluid to the diet.

Clean fresh drinking water is imperative. The animals must always have a fresh supply of drinking water, particularly during the warmer months and during production to meet their fullest potential. Vitamins can be added to the drinking water to assure adequate vitamin supply. Addition of vitamins to the drinking water is most beneficial during stress periods to the animal and during heavy production.

Animals that will not drink, or are not supplied with an ample amount of water will not eat to their potential; therefore, will not perform to their maximum. A rabbit will not eat if it does not have water.

Rabbits are sensitive to "water taste" and often times will fail to drink "strange" water. Even short durations without adequate fluid intake can cause an increased metabolism of the fur follicle and enhance the possibility of a molt.

Another common method of assessing constant consumption of water is to place substance such as jello, vinegar, or household bleach in the water at home, as well as to the strange water at as shows. This will "cover" the flavor of the foreign water and the animals will consume nearly the same amount of water when traveling as when they are at home.

Record Keeping, Tattooing and Weaning

Records:

Even if you have only a very small backyard rabbitry, record keeping is very important. All breeding, litter sizes, and kindling should be kept accounted for. Hutch cards are a very simple way to do this. It may have the name, ear number and date of birth of the rabbit on it. A portion of the card will have when the doe was bred, to whom, dated checked (palpated), date kindled, litter size, added kits, dead kits, how many bucks/does, and remarks.

You may be a detailed type person and want to have a “Week-at-a-Glance” desk calendar or appointment book. This will enable you to write on days when to palpate, what day to put nest boxes in make notes as to when to breed, etc.

Pedigrees should be kept on every rabbit in the rabbitry. There are two ways of keeping these types of records, manual and computer. The first, hand written pedigrees. These will show three generation of the rabbit or cavy lineage. It will show names, ear numbers, weights, date of birth, sex, color and registration number if any. The second way is computer programs. These have become very detailed over the years. They include records on breeding, show records, sales and production. These can be purchased through rabbit software manufacturers.

Identification/Tattooing of Rabbits

If you are planning on showing your rabbit or cavy, it must have a legible permanent tattoo or ear tag. There are obvious reasons for this. Stop and think if you have 5 Florida Whites, how are you going to distinguish between yours and another exhibitors? The same would go for 5 American Roan cavies.

The system each breeder uses to carry out this identification process is left up to the individual breeder. You may choose to have a simple or as complex as you wish. It may be a basic letter or number as identification, or it may be designed to provide the breeder instant information on the date of birth, parents or sex. Some breeders have their initials in the front of numbers for bucks, behind the numbers for does. You may wish to have odd numbers for bucks and even numbers for does or vice versa. You may even wish to have the parent’s initials in the rabbit’s ear along with the rabbit’s initial of their name. Some breeders tattoo the name of the rabbit in its ear.

The system you use for identification can be as simple or complex as you want to make it. It is best you work out a system before tattooing and use it consistently. A record should be kept of each number to indicate the date of birth, ancestors, etc.

The right equipment and supplies are essential to any job, and that includes tattooing. Depending on your preference, there are options open for the individual breeder.

The identification number is put into the rabbit’s ear using one of three types of equipment. The first would be the most frequently used tattoo pliers and digits that fit into the pliers. Such equipment can be purchased from most rabbit equipment suppliers. Another method used for tattooing by some and for touching up tattoos by others, is the hand held needle. Still a third method is the use of an electric needle or tattoo device. The last two, take a little practice.

Once you have punctured the ear by one of the described methods, you need to apply and rub in some ink that will enter the holes and remain there. Again, there are tattoo inks and/or pastes available at various supply stores. India ink is one of the most wide used ink. You may use a cotton swap, brush

or Q-tip to rub the ink into the holes and a cotton ball or towel to remove the excess. Petroleum jelly can be rubbed of the tattoo thereby sealing the holes.

There are several ways to restrain the rabbit while tattooing. Make sure the rabbit is at a comfortable height for you to work. A towel may be used to “wrap” the rabbit in to restrain it. Some breeders lean over the rabbit thereby restraining it with their chest. And there is also a “restraining box” that can be used. Which ever method you use, it is best to make sure the animal is completely secured.

Now that you have your system figured out and your equipment on hand, it is time to start the actual tattooing. The process is not difficult or threatening as it some people make it out to be. The process can be broken down into seven steps.

1. Restrain the rabbit
2. Place the pliers in a proper position to imprint the inside of the rabbit’s left ear, checking the ear for location of blood vessels and try to avoid them.
3. Give the pliers a firm squeeze.
4. Check the ear to see that all pins punctured the skin.
5. Apply the ink and rub it well.
6. With a cotton ball, wipe out excess ink and check that the ink has been rubbed well into each of the holes.
7. Spread a small amount of petroleum jelly over the tattoo and wipe again with a cotton ball. This will seal the skin until it heals over the tattoo making it permanent.

With the tattooing done, you have one more critical item. You have to record the number and the information about the rabbit!

Breeding, Kits and Weaning Rabbits

Breeding:

The doe should always be taken to the buck’s cage for breeding since many times does are very possessive of their own quarters.

The age for the first mating depends on the breed and their maturity. A general rule is that the giant breeds may be mated from 9 – 12 months of age, the medium breeds from 6 – 8 months of age, and the small breeds 5 – 6 months. of age.

Does usually kindle 31 to 32 days after mating. Dos have been know to kindle on the 30th day and run as long as 35 days; however, most that run over the 33 day mark have trouble kindling and the young are born dead.

Just prior to kindling, just after kindling, and after weaning, the amount of feed given to the doe should be restricted to prevent the “over production” of milk that can predispose the doe to “caked breast” and mastitis.

Kits & Weaning:

Check babies daily while in the nest box. Remove any dead or malformed immediately. At 12 days, start checking their eyes for matting. A warm moist cotton ball can be used to remove caked like substances. Babies will start venturing out of the nest box at approximately 3 weeks of age. They should be able to eat all they wish by the time they are 4 weeks of age. At 6 to 8 weeks, the kits are

ready to be weaned. Weaning any earlier than this may cause “post weaning” stress and may lead to death. If it is a large litter, wean 2-3 kits a day over a few days. Smaller litters of 2-3 can be weaned at one time. Be sure to check the doe in 3-4 days for mastitis.

Kits should be given a full ration of feed and plenty of fresh water until approximately 3 months. Larger breeds may be older before rations are cut back. This can be a very stressful time for young rabbits, so watch them carefully. Gradually start cutting back the feed so by the age of 4 months they are on the same amount as a mature rabbit. You may give kits a mixture of oats, barley, and black oil sunflower seeds. This will help their flesh condition. Also a commercial “Rabbit Starter” is available at your feed stores. Straw may be given also.

Handling of the kits at this age is highly recommended. You will find they will be easier to handle as adults.