

To Wear a Rabbit Harness ... or Not

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Introduction

There is much discussion about how safe it is to walk a rabbit on a harness. If a rabbit owner is told to not use a harness on a rabbit, citing a few examples of why it could harm a rabbit, the owner might just think that's alarmist thinking & use a harness anyway. I think it's best to give details about the hazards of using a harness. Education is key. After considering the hazards along with their probability in the local area & the rabbit's personality, the owner can then make an educated decision. Every situation is different.

But before we start, get your rabbit microchipped. When going for a walk, even if you are diligent, things happen. Your rabbit might escape. Having it microchipped will increase its chances of getting back home.

Other Outside Activities

While this paper directly discusses things to consider when deciding if you should walk your rabbit on a harness, there are other outside activities that this information relates to. Consider the issues discussed in this paper when doing the following activities:

- rabbit in stroller
- rabbit outside in own yard (in exercise pen or not)

rabbit in outside cage
gathering rabbit food from your garden

If you decide a harness will not work for your rabbit, then consider the following activities. They might be a better match. In all cases your rabbit must be visible to you 100% of the time.

rabbit in stroller
rabbit outside in exercise pen (optionally with sheet on ground)
rabbit in your backyard without exercise pen (double check to make sure it cannot escape)

Diseases/Parasites

When your rabbit is outside, there are many diseases it can catch & many parasites it can encounter. In fact, too many to list here. Below are the most common. Do your research to find out if they are in your area. If so, find out what seasons they are active. Or even what time of day (e.g., mosquitos). Use this information to determine when/if you should take your rabbit outside.

RHDV2 (Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease Virus 2)

spread by feces/urine/insects, tracked into other areas on shoes
no cure; very high mortality rate
must vaccinate your rabbit

Myxomatosis

spread by insects & direct contact
no cure; very high mortality rate

bot fly (*Cuterebra* spp)

rabbit picks up eggs from the environment
larva lives under skin
could lead to infection & death
must be removed by vet

fly strike/myiasis

fly lays eggs on moist area on fur or open sore
larva eats flesh
after eggs hatch, rabbit can die in 24 hours from shock

Raccoon Roundworm (*Baylisascaris procyonis*)

eggs passed in raccoon feces
even after visible feces have disappeared, eggs can survive for years
rabbits ingest eggs that are on vegetation
larva infect brain, eyes & other organs

leads to disorientation, seizures & death
fleas, ticks, ear mites, fur mites, pin worms, tapeworms
rabbits pick up these parasites from environment
various symptoms occur

Predators

There are many predators that can attack your rabbit when it's out & about. These include dogs, coyotes, hawks, cats & more. You might think that it wouldn't happen when you are right next to your rabbit, but it happens very quickly. You might have heard about a coyote snatching a small dog that is walking on a leash. You must be vigilant about keeping an eye out for predators. If you see another animal, even at a distance, you must pick up your rabbit immediately.

Skeletal Harm & Too Much Heat

A rabbit's skeleton is very fragile. It can get its mouth or legs caught in the harness & injure itself. That's why you must watch your rabbit at all times. Your rabbit could be frightened by a loud sound like an engine starting or a dog barking, even if you can't see it. In this case, your rabbit might dash without notice & run very fast for cover. If you hold onto the leash, that can break its back or neck. So if your rabbit tries to run away quickly from fear, you have no choice but to let go of the leash. You'll then have to go looking for your rabbit. If you hang on or let go of the leash, your rabbit can get tangled up in the leash or harness & hurt itself. If you hear a loud sound that might startle your rabbit, pick it up before it has time to bolt.

Even in your own backyard, there can be a loud sound that frightens your rabbit, which can cause it to bolt & hurt itself. It all happens in a fraction of a second.

Rabbits are very sensitive to heat. They can die of heatstroke. Don't take it out when it's very hot outside. Even if it's just mildly hot, but sure the ground is not too hot for its delicate paws.

Chemicals Such As Pesticides, Herbicides, Fertilizer

Pesticides, herbicides & fertilizers are harmful to your rabbit. Don't walk it in an area where these have been supplied. Of course, it's hard to know when & where these have been applied, so it could be just the roll of the dice. Even in your own backyard, if your neighbor has applied it, it can drift into your yard.

Poisonous Plants

There is a bewildering array of plants that are poisonous to rabbits, both native & cultivated. Even though a plant is very common in people's yards, it can still be poisonous. Even if it's ok for dogs & cats, it can still be harmful to rabbits. Be sure to do your research on poisonous plants so you know ALL plants that are poisonous to rabbits & how to identify them, before you venture out, even into your own backyard.

Another issue are plants like poison oak. Even if your rabbit does not eat it, your rabbit could rub against it. When you pet your rabbit, you can then be exposed to the chemicals from the plant & get a nasty rash.

Coca mulch contains theobromine & caffeine, which are toxic to rabbits. It has a sweet smell & can attract a curious rabbit. Be sure you can recognize this type of mulch & keep your rabbit away from it.

Rabbit Personality

Rabbits have all different types of personalities. Some enjoy the outdoors, some are frightful. If your rabbit is startled easily, it is not a good candidate for going outside. If it doesn't feel safe in new environments, it's best if it stays inside the house. Any type of stress can lead to GI stasis, which can cause death in 24 hours. Your rabbit could be stressed by wearing the harness, seeing predators, hearing loud noises, going to a new area or having no place to hide. Rabbits can even die from fright immediately. Say an off leash dog runs up & almost grabs your rabbit or there is an exceptionally loud noise. Your rabbit can be so scared that it dies from fright.

If you are thinking about taking your rabbit out for a walk, your rabbit MUST be calm & enjoy new experiences. Do not walk a baby rabbit nor one that has arthritis (the harness can hurt its joints).

Your Personality

You must be a patient type of person & take the time to train your rabbit to wear a harness & walk on a leash. You have to keep calm, think clearly & react quickly, even if your rabbit is stressed or in a dangerous situation. You must constantly be vigilant about your surroundings & aware of what's happening around you. You must think about what you would do if something happens. You must be able to pick up your

rabbit, even if it's stressed. If your personality does not have these traits, it's best if you keep your rabbit in your house.

Going For A Walk, Equipment

You've done your research & decided that you & your rabbit have the right personality & your local area is safe enough for you to take your rabbit on a walk. First you'll need the correct equipment. Get an H style or vest/jacket style harness (search the web for these terms to see what they are). It's best if you can adjust the neck portion & the belly portion separately. Do NOT use a figure 8 style or rope style harness. Do NOT use a collar, not even a breakaway collar (the neck is much too fragile for that).

Be sure the harness fits properly. If it's too loose, your rabbit can get out. If it's too tight, your rabbit will be uncomfortable & it can chafe its delicate skin.

Get a leash that is stretchy. That puts less pressure on your rabbit if there is an unexpected jerk. The leash should be less than 6 feet (2 meters) long. You want to be very close to your rabbit at all times.

Going For A Walk, How To Train

It's not natural for a rabbit to walk on leash so you must train it. Do not force anything. Watch for stress at each step. Be sure your rabbit is comfortable with each step before going to the next. Using healthy treats will show your rabbit that harness time is a good time.

Get your rabbit used to outside sounds, sights & smells. Do this even before you put the harness on. Put it in a secure exercise pen outside. Watch to make sure your rabbit is comfortable. Keep the session short at first. You can optionally put a sheet down.

While inside your house, where your rabbit is very comfortable, put the harness & leash on the floor, put treats around them & let your rabbit sniff the harness & leash. Drape the harness (with no leash) over its back (without attaching the harness). If the harness falls off, repeat this several times for a few minutes. Repeat the process several times a day, for several days. Once your rabbit is comfortable with that, then gently attach the harness. Remember, their skeletons are very fragile. Let your rabbit get used to the feeling of the harness. Keep it on for just a minute then remove it. Repeat several times a day. Extend the amount of time for wearing the harness.

Once your rabbit is comfortable with this, attach the leash & walk with it inside your house.

Going For A Walk, On The Walk

You are finally ready to walk your rabbit outside. Remember, you do not direct the walk, you follow your rabbit. The leash is there in case it is thinking about going to an area it should not. You should only give a gentle tug on the leash. If a bigger correction is needed, pick up your rabbit. In fact, instead of going on a walk with your rabbit, it's more like enjoying the outdoors with your rabbit.

You must keep your eyes on your rabbit at all times. Be vigilant to all the things discussed above. Walk in an area with not many people, no predators, no streets nearby, no broken glass, etc. on the ground. Be patient. Your rabbit might just take a few hops at a time. But if your rabbit decides to run for fun (rather than fear), be prepared to run along with it. Only an adult should hold the leash.

If your rabbit seems stressed, pick it up. It might even be time to go home. You must pick it up BEFORE it bolts.

Start by walking it in your backyard. Supply a hidey box or exercise pen that your rabbit can use to feel safe.

Then walk in other areas. Once you go to another area, continue to go to the same area for awhile so your rabbit can get used to it. Start with short walks. Do longer walks as your rabbit gets used to it. If a dog approaches, pick up your rabbit. If a dog lunges for your rabbit in your arms, use pepper spray on the dog but be sure to keep the spray away from your rabbit.

After the walk, remove the harness, since it should not be kept on all the time. Also check your rabbit for fleas & ticks.

As you go on more walks, your rabbit & you will get more comfortable. However, never let your guard down. Always be vigilant. Every walk is different.