

## How to Care for Newborn Rabbits at a Shelter (up to 2 months old)

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### Introduction

This paper gives basic information on how to care for newborn rabbits at a shelter (up to 2 months old). It is written specifically for the shelter where I volunteer, but the general information can be used at any shelter. It is intended to supply information about newborns that will be raised at the shelter. If you are doing foster care for newborns in your home, here is a much longer paper describing their care:

[http://curiousbunny.com/newborn\\_rabbits\\_detail.pdf](http://curiousbunny.com/newborn_rabbits_detail.pdf) .

I'll be discussing 3 different types of boxes. Be sure to note the difference.

**Nest Box** = plastic, green, high sided litter box; marked on sides with "Rabbit Nest Box"; kept in closet

**Litter Box** = plastic, low sided litter box usually in cage; used for poop/pee

**Hidey Box** = cardboard box usually in cage; used for hiding

### Furniture & Cleaning

In the Nest Box, put in timothy hay & make a depression near the back. With clean, dry, warm hands, transfer babies & all fur into the nest box. If you can, scoop them all out at once, fur & all. Preserve as much fur as you can. If they are not completely covered in fur, add enough fake fur (see link in longer paper above), or shredded newspaper to cover them. Keep unused fake fur uncontaminated for next time. Put the Nest Box into the cage.

Best not to use a towel in the Nest Box. If staff wants to use a towel, be sure it's not folded. If folded, babies can get inside & not find their way out. Scrunch it up if you need to, but don't fold. Be sure it has no holes or loose threads.

Keep the Litter Box in the cage. Remove the Hidey Box from the cage if there is not enough room.

Attach a towel to the cage door, but be sure some light gets in. This will help to keep the mom undisturbed. Since being in the dark for an extended period is not good, remove the towel after 1 week, with permission from shelter staff.

Attach the black plastic screening (from closet) to the inside of the cage door with zip ties. This prevents the babies from falling on the floor if they get out of the Nest Box. If there is no screening, weave newspaper through the wire on the cage door, up to about 6 inches.

Here's how to clean the cage, assuming that babies are in a Nest Box (not the Litter Box). The cage should be cleaned every day. Leave the Nest Box in the cage while cleaning. Take mom out. Dump Litter Box, clean with water, dry & refill with hay. Remove newspapers. Clean cage with water only, then dry. The normal cleaning solutions could irritate the babies. Replace Litter Box, clean newspaper, mom. Do not clean the Nest Box at this time.

After 5 - 7 days, the Nest Box might get pretty stinky. It can optionally be cleaned at that time. It's essential to keep the babies warm. Get a towel (warmed in the dryer or microwave if possible) & put it in a cardboard carrier box. With clean, dry, warm hands, transfer babies to the box. They can jump unexpectedly so be sure to keep a hand over them at all times. Cover them with the towel. Close top of box. Dump hay but keep as much fur as you can. Clean Nest Box with water & dry. Add timothy hay (make a depression), then babies, then fur. Replenish with fake fur (or shredded newspaper) if needed.

Once the babies are old enough to remove the Nest Box (see below), clean the Nest Box with soap & water. Then spray with 1:10 bleach solution (or Rescue Solution) & let stand for 10 minutes. Then rinse with water & dry. Put back into the closet. When the plastic screening is removed from the door, it should be cleaned the same way.

When the babies are a month old, you can then use the usual cleaning solution in the cage, if needed.

### **Other Information**

Mom eats the afterbirth so there could be some blood around. Also, she might have blood around her private parts. So it's normal to see some blood after the litter is born.

If there are other rabbits in the cage, they should be removed ASAP. If there is more than 1 adult female in the cage & you aren't sure who the mom is, note that the real mom might have blood under her tail or swollen nipples. If in doubt, leave any females you think might be the mom in the cage.

When handling babies that are 0 – 10 days old, your hands should be clean, dry & warm. To do this, find a sink with hot water (might have to go to the public bathroom) & wash your hands with soap & hot water. Take a paper towel with you to open doors on your return to the babies. Keep your hands in your pockets if it's cold out. After the babies are older than 10 days, you should still wash your hands, but you do not have to be so vigilant about warming them.

The mom cannot move her babies. When they are about 11 – 12 days old or YOUNGER, if they get out of the Nest Box, they could get cold & die. The cage should be checked at least 3 times a day to make sure all the babies are in the Nest Box. If any are out, they should be put back in. If they feel cold, they should first be warmed before putting them back in (use body heat or heating pad on low). You should also check the babies once a day in the Nest Box to make sure they are all ok.

When they are about 11 – 12 days old or OLDER, if a baby gets out, then it's time for all babies to be out. The one who is out can't get back in & would miss a feeding. So, at this age, when one baby is out, to make sure all babies are together for a feeding, remove the Nest Box & add a Hidey Box. At 15 days old, remove the Nest Box even if no babies are out.

Put a small towel on the floor of the Hidey Box. The towel should not be folded & have no holes or loose threads. If using a cardboard carrier on its side for a Hidey Box, cut off all flaps to make it easier for ingress & egress. Put 2 carriers on top of the cage, one marked "Mom" & the other marked "Babies" for people to use to remove mom & babies when cleaning the cage.

Mom & babies should have unlimited pellets (alfalfa) & hay (alfalfa if the shelter has it; grass hay is fine too). Mom should also get greens; a handful twice a day, if possible. If she has loose stools, cut down on the greens. Do not give unlimited greens, as that could cause loose stools. Carrots & apples are treats & should be given sparingly. Too much can upset her GI tract. Babies should not get greens until they are 3 weeks old. All should have unlimited water in a water bottle. Babies can get in a water bowl & either drown or get cold very quickly & die.

It's very important for mom to get exercise every day. She needs to be healthy for her babies. There's no problem with her being away from her babies for exercise. In the wild, they stay away most of the time & only come to the nest for 5 minutes (!) a day for nursing.

The babies can get exercise when they are about 2 weeks old. Be sure to put them into an area that is completely baby bunny proof (inside a room, or outside in an xpen with narrow slots). Put down sheets/towels to keep the babies off the floor. Their immune systems are not yet fully developed. Use the sheets/towels until they are 6 weeks old.

When the babies are 2 months old, they should be removed from the mother, as they should stop nursing at that time. At 3 months old, the sexes should be separated.

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