

Choosing a Shampoo For Your Rabbit

Introduction

It's very rare that you need to do a full body wash with shampoo on a rabbit. More often than not, spot cleaning will do the trick. Rabbits will sometime spray each other with urine. Even if the rabbit is covered in urine, if it is just on the fur (has not reached the skin), you can wipe it off with a wet cloth. This will remove the urine but note that the fur will still be stained. The stain cannot be washed off. It will be gone when the rabbit molts.

Sometimes a rabbit will have poopy butt. In this case, you might be able to shave off some of the poop. See end of paper for info on inexpensive shavers. However, if it is close to the skin, do not shave, as you might nick the skin. Do a butt bath by running warm water (no shampoo needed) over the private parts (& feet, only if necessary) & working out the poop with your fingers. After drying, shave the fur to keep it short to make future cleaning easier.

But if most of the rabbit's body is covered in poop, pee, dirt or grease, especially if it has reached the skin, you might have to wash the entire rabbit with shampoo.

If the rabbit got into something filthy (e.g., under a greasy car), this will (hopefully) be a onetime event & you might not have time & get the perfect shampoo. If the rabbit is covered in its own poop or pee, it might have a medical issue & you might have to do this more often, so choosing the correct shampoo is vitally important. In this case, be sure to discuss the situation with a rabbit-savvy veterinarian to determine the cause. Could be a urinary tract infection (causing incontinence), obesity, arthritis or disability (can't reach cecals to eat them), diet, stress or any number of things.

Process

The rabbit will not like the bath so you must be gentle but firm to keep the rabbit calm. Keep water & shampoo out of the eyes, ears & nose. Wash the face with a wet cloth.

The bathroom sink is a good place to wash your rabbit. It's the right size & height. You can also use a clean litter box or get in the shower with the rabbit & use a handheld sprayer. Fill the sink with a few inches (centimeters) of warm water & gently lower the rabbit into it. Using your fingers, spend ample time rubbing the fur underneath to get out as much dirt as you can. Then run fresh water from the faucet over the top of the rabbit & rub the fur with your fingers. When finished, put the rabbit someplace safe & where you don't mind getting wet (e.g., the bathtub), drain the sink & refill. Repeat soaking/rinsing the rabbit. Very little dirt should come out this second time. The more dirt you can get out with plain water, the less time you have to spend shampooing the rabbit.

Put the rabbit back into the now empty sink. You can optionally place a towel in the sink under the rabbit. Then put shampoo (details below) on the upper part of the body & spend a lot of time rubbing it into the fur (but not the head). Put shampoo onto your hands & rub them on the fur underneath the body. If the underside of the rabbit is exceptionally filthy, put the rabbit upside down on your lap. Yes, you will get soaked, & the rabbit does not like it, but you can keep the rabbit still in this position & you can see exactly where you need to rub in the shampoo. Make sure you completely clean all parts, as you do not want to repeat this step. Then in the sink, rinse the rabbit under warm running water. You will have to position the rabbit both right side up & upside down to make sure you get all the shampoo out.

Squeeze out water from the fur with your hands & then towel dry as much as you can. Put a hair dryer on a stand so you can use both hands to handle the rabbit. Rub the fur quickly while drying. Keep your hand near the rabbit where the warm air is blowing so you can make sure it's not too hot. Adjust the distance between the rabbit & hair dryer as needed. You will have to position the rabbit both right side up & upside down to make sure the rabbit is completely dry. Afterwards, keep the rabbit in a warm area in case it is still a bit damp. Offer treats throughout the process.

pH

When choosing a shampoo, consider the pH. pH is measured on a scale of 0-14, where 7 is neutral (e.g., water). A value of < 7 is acidic, (e.g., lemon juice) & a value > 7 is alkaline (e.g., bleach).

It's important to match the pH of the shampoo to the pH of the skin. This maintains moisture & helps to protect it from dryness, infections, fungal spores, viruses, etc. It also helps to maintain the microbiome of the skin, so the "bad" bacteria don't take over. Rabbits also have fur to protect their skin. The pH of human skin is about 5.5 . Thus, shampoo for humans generally has this pH. This pH is also best to maintain healthy human hair. It closes the hair cuticle which protects it, keeps it soft & reduces dryness & frizz.

But the skin pH for pets is different. It varies for each pet, but the averages are: rabbit 6.7, cat 6.5, dog 6.5 . That's why human shampoo is not ideal for pets. Shampoo made for dogs & cats is better for pets since the pH (in theory) matches the skin (but you don't know for sure unless you research a particular product). To do research, contact the manufacturer or search the web for the product's Safety Data Sheet (then look at Section 9).

Irritants

Even with healthy skin, you don't want to use a shampoo with irritants. If a rabbit needs a full bath, it often has compromised skin (red, swollen, broken, scaly). In this case, it is even more important that the shampoo does not have irritants in it.

When "fragrance" is in shampoo, the law (in the US) says companies don't have to specify what exactly is added. It can be anything, & often contains irritants. In addition, rabbits have a good sense of smell so the fragrance could be too strong for them. So it's best to not have fragrance in shampoo. Alcohols are irritants & sting compromised skin. However, cetearyl alcohol is a fatty alcohol that usually does not sting so is generally safe to use.

Soaps are alkaline so do not match the pH of rabbit's skin so is an irritant. Dyes & sulfates can also irritate the skin. Phthalates & parabens have been shown to be endocrine disrupters so could be harmful in the long term.

Other

Hypoallergenic shampoos are good to use, since you never know what kinds of allergies your rabbit has. A shampoo with colloidal oatmeal is generally considered a good choice since it is anti-inflammatory, moisturizes skin & relieves itching. It cleans the skin without using harsh chemicals. But be aware that some manufacturers add a miniscule amount just so they can say it's oatmeal shampoo. In the list of ingredients, the closer to the start of the list "oatmeal" is listed, the more it has.

Some pet shampoos are labeled as "medicated". While these might be good for certain skin conditions, if used for normal skin, they can actually be harmful. Only use a medicated shampoo if a rabbit-savvy veterinarian has recommended it for your rabbit's condition.

While some people think "baby" shampoo is mild so can be used on pets, this is not the case. Baby shampoo is simply made to not sting the eyes, which have a pH of 7.0. Whereas some baby shampoos have a pH of 7.0 (which would be fine for pets), not all do (Johnson's baby shampoo has a pH of 5.0). Some use a less harsh surfactant (to be tear-free) but maintain the pH of adult human skin, which is not ideal for pets. Many also have a fragrance.

Similarly, some people think Dawn dish soap is good for pets since it's used in wildlife rescue. It's used to clean crude oil off of wildlife just once per animal & is much too alkaline for pets.

Conditioners

Human conditioners have a pH similar to human shampoo. It makes the hair soft & helps to detangle it. However, the pH is wrong for pets. Conditioners often contain many ingredients with unknown effects on pet skin & fur. They also often contain fragrance & alcohol. Some are "leave in", which are problematic for an animal that licks its fur. While a conditioner might remove tangles, it doesn't remove mats. Using it also adds more time to the bath (rub in conditioner, wait a few minutes, rinse thoroughly), which is already stressful to the rabbit.

Rabbit-savvy veterinarians say conditioners should not be used on rabbits.

Summary

If you unexpectedly need to quickly wash your rabbit, get any pet shampoo (hypoallergenic & fragrance free is best). If you want to get the best shampoo for your rabbit, get a pet shampoo that is hypoallergenic, non-medicated, with colloidal oatmeal & does not have: fragrance, dyes, soaps, alcohol, sulfates, phthalates or parabens. Research the product to make sure the pH is about 6.7 (for rabbits).

For specific brand shampoo recommendations, see my Grooming paper. Search for "shampoo". For inexpensive shavers, search for "shaver".

http://curiousbunny.com/grooming_your_rabbit.pdf

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