

BABY BUNNIES

Suddenly you find a pile of fur in the rabbit nest box. And as you watch, the fur wiggles....

Rabbits are pregnant for 4-5 weeks and can have up to 15(!) babies, but the average litter size is 7.

The female rabbit is called a doe, giving birth is called kindling and baby rabbits are called kittens.

Rabbit kits are born with their eyes and ears sealed shut, and completely furless.

FEEDING

Mother rabbits only ever feed their kittens **once** a day, rarely twice, and that for just 5 to 10 minutes. In this short time frame, the kits get their whole day's milk supply. So, if you never see the doe go near the nest box you don't need to help nature along, the doe is doing her job while you're in bed asleep. Only rarely does a mother rabbit nurse her young right after giving birth. Most often the first nursing will occur the night after the kindling. The rabbit's rich milk sustains the babies for 24 hours at a time. The preferred mealtime is between midnight and 5:00 a.m. This is probably built into the rabbit as a protective mechanism, since in the wild the doe might need to stay away from the nest for a while to avoid leading predators to her kits.

CHECKING THE KITS

Because the doe doesn't stay with her kits all day you are able to safely check the nest without causing any damage. Do this the second morning after you discover their arrival. Distract her with some favourite treats or play and check the nest quietly and gently with a minimum of disturbance (not a job for young children.) Move all the fur aside and check that all the kits are alive and do a head count. Sadly there can be dead kits, and sometimes there will be uneaten placentas in the nest box that can be removed. If the kits have nursed, their little bellies will be round, even distended. Replace the healthy kits where you found them, and cover them over again.

The doe will likely take excellent care of her babies. Only rarely does a mother rabbit truly abandon or ignore her babies. If you want definite proof that the babies are being cared for, check them early each morning. They should be warm and round-bellied. If you are concerned please call us for advice.

SEPARATING THE FATHER

Most male rabbits are gentle with their offspring. The main reason to separate off the male is that the female can become pregnant again **WITHIN HOURS** of kindling! He should be housed where he can still see and contact her as separation is stressful. Keep the male nearby and able to nuzzle his mate through a physical barrier, if possible. Rabbits form very strong bonds with their mates, but rabbits are "induced ovulators": the very act of mating induces ovulation, and makes pregnancy assured if they are together.

NEUTERING

Rabbits can be spayed (females) and castrated (males.) Females are very prone to uterine cancer and we advise all female bunnies are spayed. Ideally this can be done a few weeks after the kittens are weaned. We advise that **both** parents are desexed. Neutered rabbits live longer, healthier lives, and can live together in snuggling bliss without the constant stress of sexual frustration if only one is desexed.

Males can be castrated but can still have viable sperm and be fertile for 3 weeks after surgery so separation should continue for 3 weeks. The sooner he's neutered, the sooner he'll be healed and ready to rejoin his family.

WEANING

At around 3 weeks old, kittens start to produce and eat their caecotrophs (special night poos).

From 3 weeks old rabbits start nibbling at solid food and are getting ready to leave the nest. They will start to explore and run about the cage, playing with their littermates and trying any foods that are offered. Remember to give fresh hay daily- ideally hay should be used as bedding so they have constant access to it.

After 6- 8 weeks old the kittens become totally independent of their mother and can go to a new home: in the wild the doe would have had another litter when they are about 5 weeks old! At 5-6 weeks remove the largest kits to a separate cage and leave the doe with a smaller number of kits for a few days. Continue this gradual removal until they have all been separated and then providing Dad has been desexed they can be reunited. This gradual reduction helps avoid the doe suffering from mastitis. The kittens are best kept near the mother and father for a few days to avoid stress and rehomed after they have been on their own for a few days - ie not taken straight from the mother into a new home.