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Autumn is the Time to Get Your Rabbit Ready for Cooler Temperatures

Autumn is here and the beautiful weather offers a great opportunity to take inventory and start getting your rabbit ready for cold weather. Here are a few tips that will help keep your rabbit happy and healthy as we head toward the winter months.

- In the fall, temperatures can swing wildly from day to night and these fluctuations can stress rabbits. Since a rabbit's digestive system is very responsive to stress, a common problem during the autumn months is enteritis, also known as scouring (diarrhea). You can help relieve stress by injecting some consistency into your rabbit's life by feeding at the same time every day.
- The colder it gets, the more calories rabbits must consume to stay warm—as much as three times normal. If your rabbit does not have access to adequate food, he will be hungry, cold, lose weight and get sick. He could even die of illness or hypothermia. One way to be sure your rabbit is getting adequate nutrition during cold weather months is to provide a complete feed such as Purina Mills® Rabbit Chow® Complete Blend.
- Although a rabbit can eat more to help maintain body temperature, there are limits to how much food he can consume. This is where warm, dry housing plays an important role.
- Fall is a good time of year to check for leaks in the roof of the hutch. Your rabbit's hutch should have solid walls on at least three sides and a slanted overhanging roof that will allow rain and snow to run off.
- If you use tarps as windbreaks, fall is the time to repair or replace any tears or missing grommets.
- Winter is just around the corner. Now is a good time to place your rabbit's hutch in an area protected from blustery winds and heavy precipitation.
- Straw or bedding in the hutch will provide extra warmth on cold autumn nights, but it must be kept clean and dry. Damp surroundings—whether from rain, snow, urine or a leaky water bottle—are an invitation to disaster in cool weather. Dampness will contribute to chilling and immune stress that can easily progress to serious illness.
- Even in cold weather, rabbits need access to fresh air. Without good ventilation, they can be susceptible to respiratory diseases. An enclosed box inside a wire cage is a popular design that provides shelter against wind and rain, but also allows for good airflow.
- Since your rabbit is replacing his old coat with a new winter coat, fall is a good time of year to step up your grooming routine. Regular brushing can eliminate loose hair and help prevent hairballs.
- The more a rabbit eats, the more water it needs. Because water is so important, check your rabbit's water source several times a day in cold weather to make sure it is clean and unfrozen.
- Glass water bottles can freeze and break, so autumn might be a good time to transition to plastic or metal containers. (It's a lot easier to change to a new waterer now than to scramble to change bedding and clean up a burst water bottle in the middle of a cold, snowy night.)
- If you opt for a heated waterer, clean it regularly to inhibit bacterial growth so that the water will be appealing to the rabbit. Also be sure to keep the electrical cord out of reach so bunny can't nibble.
- If you're breeding rabbits, keep in mind that fertility decreases as daylight decreases. To maintain breeding consistency, keep the amount of light constant for 14 hours a day. One solution is to hang a 36-watt fluorescent tube light about six feet above the rabbits for every 55 square feet of floor space.
- Baby rabbits are not equipped to tolerate cold the way adult rabbits are, so it's very important to provide extra warmth if needed. If you supplement the heat, be sure to monitor the temperature of the nest daily. If the nest gets too hot, the doe may refuse to nurse the litter. Remember, a little heat goes a long way in a small nest box.
- If you have an indoor rabbit, remember the holidays are approaching. Take care to keep your rabbit away from electrical cords around the Christmas tree, and don't let him nibble on fallen pine needles.

A little extra care now can go a long way in getting bunny ready for the extreme weather ahead. Have a great fall.