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Rabbit E-newsletter

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Preparing for the Birth of Baby Rabbits

Welcoming baby rabbits into the world is exciting. But don't overlook the importance of the weeks and months preceding the big day. By making preparations in advance, you can increase the likelihood of having a healthy doe and a healthy litter of kits.

Good Health

To give kits the best possible chance to survive and thrive, check before breeding to make sure the doe is in good health. If you notice any of the following with your doe, it's best to postpone breeding until these conditions are resolved:

- Overweight or underweight
- Infection of the genitals or mammary glands
- Weepy eye (may indicate a respiratory infection)
- Matting inside the front paws (snuffles/nasal discharge may indicate possible Pastuerella or Bordetella)
- Sore hocks or bleeding footpads

Breeding a doe that's already in questionable health does not bode well for her offspring. Always deal with health issues before attempting to breed.

Sound Management

Once your doe is expecting, you'll think of a million things you wish you had done in preparation. So here are some things to consider in advance:

- **Cage**—Once your doe has mated, this is no time to turn her world upside down. Changing her to a new cage at this sensitive time can cause her needless stress, so plan ahead. If you're thinking of breeding, now's the time to switch your mother-to-be to a cage that is weather appropriate and can accommodate a nesting box. Place it in a low traffic area that is draft-free.
- **Consistency**—Again, don't turn her world upside down during pregnancy. Maintain her normal lighting and feeding schedule and keep feeding the usual amount of a nutritious feed.
- **Nest Box**—On the 28th day of gestation, introduce a clean nest box to the corner of her cage furthest from where she does her "business" (don't introduce the box too early or she may use it as a litter box). Nest boxes can be made of wood, plastic, wire or metal. If using wood, beware of splinters. Remember that in environments with low humidity, plastic boxes can generate static electricity. A wire nest with a replaceable cardboard insert is another option. If using a metal nest box, insert a three-quarter-inch plywood board in the bottom to keep kits from coming in direct contact with the metal, which could allow them to become too cold or too hot. Plan on leaving the nest box in the cage for two weeks.
- **Bedding**—Straw, wood shavings, heat-treated bed-a-chips and shredded paper or corncobs are all good options. Check bedding regularly to make sure it's dry and ready for the forthcoming babies.

One way to tell that a doe is getting ready to "kindle," or give birth, is that she will begin to pull fur from her underside. She'll use this fur to line the nest and to help keep her tiny, hairless babies warm after they're born. Once she begins pulling fur, do not disturb the nest box. Allow her to satisfy the instinct to create a safe space for her babies.

Good Nutrition

Remember, a doe's body is performing a task of phenomenal proportions during gestation—she's literally creating new rabbits from the ground up, and that requires adequate protein to build muscles and organs, as well as vitamins and minerals to create strong bones and teeth. It's crucial that she get optimal nutrition so that she doesn't deplete her own nutritional stores to provide for her babies. A good choice of feed for a breeding doe is Purina Mills® Advanced Nutrition Professional Formula with 18% protein. This will give her the nutrition she requires during this demanding stage of her life.

Towards the end of the gestational period, should you notice that your doe isn't finishing her rations, don't panic. This is normal and another indication that birth is imminent. If she's carrying a large litter, she may not have enough stomach capacity to eat like she normally does. Once she gives birth, remove any old food remnants and start providing feed according to directions for a doe and litter.

Feed requirements can vary depending on weather conditions and the needs of individual rabbits and the number of reproduction cycles scheduled per year. For instance, a New Zealand resting doe might require six ounces per day on a 14-day rebreed schedule. A Mini Rex or Dutch rabbit on a 42-day rebreed schedule might require three ounce per day, while a Netherland Dwarf on the same schedule might require only two ounces per day.

While no one can guarantee a foolproof gestation and delivery, you can greatly increase your chances of having a healthy doe and kits by following these simple suggestions and preparing in advance.