

If you own a pregnant doe (a female rabbit), you will need to know how to take care of her before, during, and after her pregnancy. It's important to be aware of what is needed to ensure both her health and the safe delivery of her kits (babies).

Medium to large size rabbits are sexually mature at 4 to 4.5 months, while giant breeds are ready at 6 to 9 months. If your female rabbit is at this stage of maturity and you have reason to suspect that she has been breeding, then check for pregnancy as follows. A pregnancy can be detected between 10 to 14 days after mating, with 12 days being optimal; between these days, the fetuses will start to grow rapidly, causing them to be detectable by touch, and they will feel like the size of grapes. Be gentle when feeling for them! Be aware that false pregnancy is common in rabbits, so even if you find all the signs, you are probably best checking in with your vet as well. These are some of the other signs that your rabbit is pregnant:

- In the third week, your doe may begin to show increased abdomen size. You may also see slight movement.
- She starts to have mood swings and is easily annoyed. She may also not want to be held or stroked. Your doe may begin growling at you or act differently towards you. She may begin resting on her side more to deal with discomfort of the growing kits engorging her abdomen space.
- When there are around two to three days left of pregnancy, she will begin nesting. This typically consists of her pulling out her fur.
- Note that none of these signs alone are sufficient to diagnose pregnancy. Rabbits do have false pregnancies due to hormonal fluctuations, they can also gain weight and dig in the bowls for other reasons. And conversely, many pregnant does show no signs of pregnancy until a few minutes before they are ready to kindle.

It is possible that a doe with a smaller litter, four kits or less, will have a slightly longer pregnancy than a doe with a litter that is larger than four. The main concern is to know the start of the pregnancy (you may need your vet's help), as the time of birthing should not go beyond 32 days, in which case your doe needs to see the vet promptly. Without inducing labor after day 32, a litter of dead kits is likely by day 34.

Your doe will need special changes to her diet to ensure that she is getting adequate nutrition; a doe with nutritional deficiencies may abort or reabsorb the fetuses. Due to her carrying more weight, she will need extra nutrition to her eating habits. Provide her with high quality food along with fresh, clean unlimited amounts of water.

- Slowly make changes to her diet (rabbits should always experience gradual dietary changes) to include foods like: carrots, celery, cucumber, lettuce, rabbit pellets, stacks of hay, tomatoes, parsley. A diet of alfalfa hay instead of grass hay should be instituted, as well as offering more rabbit pellets than normal. Ensure access to clean water at all times.
- As she is pregnant, her body will be demanding more. Mix up the vegetables above into a salad with a bowl of water.

A nest box is where she will give birth and take care of her young. The nest box is essential because kits are born naked, blind, and deaf and have no ability to regulate their own temperature until day 7. Nest boxes can be purchased from pet stores, and should at least 4 inches (10cm) wider and longer than the doe. The nest box should be provided to your doe 26 days into her gestation period.

- Your doe will pick fur from her own body (dewlap, belly, and thighs) for her nest box, but you can help her by providing her with straw and paper.
- If you decide to build your own nesting box, use clean, new wood, such as freshly purchased plywood or particle board.

With a pregnant rabbit, the following problems can arise:

- Mastitis - This is an inflammation of the mammary glands found on the rabbit's belly. At the time of being about to deliver, your doe's mammary glands will fill with milk for feeding the kits. Mastitis occurs if bacteria gets into the milk duct and travels into the mammary gland. This can occur as a result of a poorly formed gland, or because she is in an unhygienic environment (ensure that her bedding, her nest, her housing, etc., are

impeccably clean). Check the doe every day post-birth to see any signs of swelling or redness, indicators of possible mastitis; if the mammary glands are blue, then the infection is very severe. Other signs include refusing to drink and eat, running a fever, and appearing depressed. Get her straight to the vet as she needs immediate antibiotic care.

- Pregnancy toxemia - This can occur in a doe that has not received adequate nutrition during pregnancy (and false pregnancy), so it is important to ensure that your doe gets a high energy diet for late pregnancy, that she does not fast, and that she does not get obese. It can occur either late in pregnancy or after delivery and occurs most in Dutch, Polish, and English rabbit breeds. The symptoms include acting depressed, weakness, lack of coordination, and convulsions. If left untreated, she can die within hours, so get her to the vet immediately for treatment with an IV drip and dextrose.
- Killing her young - Some does will kill and eat their young. The reasons for this vary and it pays to remove any possible reasons: ensure that the nesting area is warm at all times, remove kits that fail to nurse, keep the nest clean, and keep other pets (especially dogs) away from the nest to reduce the doe's nervousness.

Some things to be aware of when your doe is giving birth include:

- Kindling usually occurs in the morning.
- Most rabbit births occur quickly, born head or feet first. However, some labor can continue for a day or two, before all kits have arrived.
- Dystocia, or a problem giving birth, is not usual with rabbits, so you probably won't need to help her give birth. Do be sure that the area is quiet, free of anything that could make her nervous, such as noise, other pets, unusual lights, too much heat or cold, etc. Anything that causes her to be too excited or threatened can bring her to harm or eat her kits.

Make sure they are healthy, breathing and drinking their mother's milk. A litter can contain up to a dozen kits. Once born, the dam will nurse them, but not

continuously. Provide her with continuous fresh water as it's vital for a nursing rabbit.

- It can be fun having newborn rabbits, but do not disturb the dam or the kits. Disturbing them can stress and frighten them.
- Wait a couple hours, then offer your doe a favorite treat to keep her occupied while you check the kits. Remove any dead kits, as they can rot and infect the healthy ones. Once done, cover them back up with nesting material and leave them be.
- If you find that there are more kits than the nipples (8 to 10 nipples), they can be fostered in the first three days to a doe with a smaller litter. Just be sure to cover them with the fur from the new doe to get them accepted, and try moving the stronger, larger kits to increase the success of the transfer. Unfortunately, raising kits by hand tends to have a high death rate.
- Does will nurse only once to twice daily, with each kit getting about three minutes of feeding time.

Kits will nurse at least until about 4 to 5 weeks, at which point they are weaned by the doe slowing down her milk production. Keep an eye on the doe's general health and the manner in which she interacts with her kits. If there is any aggressive behavior, remove the babies right away. Some things to bear in mind with new kits:

- Kits with a sunken stomach are not getting enough milk; a full stomach is a sign of proper feeding.
- Upon opening their eyes at about 10 days of age, check for eyes stuck shut or for infections.
- Until the age of 8 months, keep kits fed on rabbit pellets.
- Leave the kits with mother until 7 weeks of age minimum. At this point, if the litter is large, you can remove the largest pair or trio and place them in their own cage. This will give a chance to the smaller ones to nurse for a week longer and catch up in weight.
- Kits should all be removed from mother by 8 weeks, as the doe may get nippy with them and try to shake them off. This also gives the kit a chance to explore its new environment.

It is best to wait 35 to 42 days after the birth of the initial litter to rebreed her, to give her time to recuperate and care for her current litter.

- Be aware! Rebreeding can occur *any time* from 72 hours after your doe has given birth.

most of this information was found at

<http://www.wikihow.com> How to Take Care of a Pregnant Rabbit.