

How to Care for Newborn Rabbits at a Shelter (for a few days)

Sometimes a rabbit will give birth to a litter of babies at an animal shelter. Staff & volunteers may not have the knowledge to care for the litter. This paper briefly describes how to care for the litter for the first few days. The object is to keep the litter & mom healthy until they can be moved to a place that is more suited to the care of newborns (usually a foster home). Details on longer term care for newborns can be seen at
http://www.curiousbunny.com/newborn_rabbits_detail.pdf .

If there are any other rabbits in the cage, remove them as soon as possible, so the mom & babies can be alone. If there is more than 1 adult female in the cage & you aren't sure who the mom is, note that the real mom might have blood under her tail or swollen nipples. She might also be the one staying in the nest box. And, of course, she'll be the one nursing the babies. If in doubt, leave any females you think might be the mom in the cage.

If the mom gave birth to the babies in a dirty litter box, that's fine for now. Leave them there. When you transfer them to foster care later, you can then put them into a clean nest box.

If the babies are on the floor of the cage, make a nest box for them. A clean litter box will work (high sides are best). Or you can use anything that has straight sides & is heavy enough so the mom can't tip it over. Line it with timothy hay or plush blankies. Terry cloth towels are not the best, as they can have loose threads that can wrap around the babies' legs. But if that's all you have, go ahead & use them. Be sure to use towels that have no loose threads or holes in them. If there is not enough fur to cover the babies, add shredded newspaper. Since you'll now have a litter box & a nest box in the cage, you might have to remove the hidey box to make room.

Always wash your hands in warm water & dry them thoroughly so they are clean & warm before you handle the babies. The babies are very sensitive to bacteria & they can get cold very quickly. A person knowledgeable about newborn rabbits should examine them quickly daily to make sure they are doing ok. Count heads at least three times a day, as the babies can sometimes get out of the nest box. If that happens, they can get cold very quickly & die. Note that too much handling can stress the mom & babies.

Cover the front of the cage with a towel. This helps prevent the mom from being startled by the hustle & bustle of the shelter. If the cage door is not solid along the bottom 6 inches, & the babies get out of the nest box, they can fall out of the cage. To prevent this, **weave newspaper along the bottom 6 inches of the door** so the babies will not fall out. Get approval from your shelter to put a big sign on the cage saying, "Newborns, Do Not Clean." The sign is for the regular shelter staff. People who know how to care for the newborns can clean the cage as needed. If the mom is cage protective or a bit freaked out, put her into a carrier before doing things in her cage. If the mother is extremely stressed, don't do anything in her cage unless absolutely necessary (feeding, putting newborns back into the nest box). Otherwise, she might abandon the babies.

If the newborns are getting adequate care in the shelter, you can keep them there for 1 – 5 days to let them rest before moving them. Keep this information in the shelter rabbit folder & review it with your rabbit handlers once a year.