



# FOSTER CARE MANUAL FOR RABBITS



**SPCA SERVING  
ERIE COUNTY**

SINCE 1867

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## **The Foster Care Volunteer**

The foster care volunteer plays a special part in saving lives at the SPCA. Many of the animals that come to the SPCA are not immediately ready to be placed up for adoption. These animals may be injured, sick, too young, too small, un-socialized, pregnant or orphaned. To keep these animals at the shelter for care and treatment is not always in their best interest. For instance, a rabbit with medical issues or that is too young might already be stressed and could become more stressed if housed at the SPCA. Being in foster care also allows the rabbit to become socialized in a home environment.

That's where the foster care volunteer comes in. These volunteers are highly committed people who give weeks or months of their time to homeless pets needing extra care. Having a foster care program is a real celebration of the overall success of the SPCA in lowering the number of homeless pets in Erie County!

## **Overall Responsibility of the Foster Home**

Foster homes are responsible for providing a warm, safe and clean environment for the animals in their care. They are responsible for providing socialization, enrichment and medical care for the animals in their care. The foster care volunteer is also responsible for contacting the SPCA if any medical problems arise. The SPCA is responsible for providing all necessary food, supplies and medical care. Volunteers should understand that if they seek medical help outside of the SPCA, they take financial responsibility in doing so. To prevent an unnecessary vet bill, it is our policy to see all of our foster animals at the shelter for any medical care needed.

## **Time Commitment**

The amount of time that a foster animal needs to remain in foster care varies depending on each specific situation. Some rabbits may require only a week or two, while the fostering of a mother rabbit may be upwards of six months. When the rabbit is placed in your care, you will be advised of the estimated foster duration and possible return date.

People who work full time can still be wonderful foster parents.

## **Emotional Investment**

Foster parents sometimes become emotionally involved with the animal they are caring for, therefore it is important that foster parents understand that sometimes, not often, an animal will inevitably not survive, even in the best of care. Each foster parent will handle

this differently. Please feel free to discuss your feelings with any staff member of the SPCA.

Bonds will form between you and our foster rabbit. This is perfectly natural but does not mean that you should adopt the rabbit. The same considerations for any person adopting a pet should be maintained for the foster parent. The foster care volunteer should analyze whether adopting the foster rabbit fits with their household or is just an emotional response to caring for this sick or young rabbit. After returning the rabbit to the shelter, you can check on his or her status up until he or she is adopted.

## **Risks**

There is always a risk of bringing disease (or even injury) home to your own pets when taking in a foster rabbit. The SPCA has done all it can to determine the health of the rabbit(s) before going into your home. If there are known risks, you will be advised at the time of foster placement and it is your choice whether to take on the responsibility.

## **Basic Facts**

- Rabbits can be litterbox trained.
- They can live to be 7-10 years old.
- Rabbits are inquisitive, sociable animals.
- They make wonderful indoor companions.
- Rabbits can purr when contented.
- Like cats and dogs, rabbits need to be spayed or neutered to improve health and behavior.
- Unlike other pets, most rabbits do not like to be held. They prefer to sit beside you.
- Rabbits like to play with toys, such as cardboard boxes, wire cat balls, hard plastic baby keys, and untreated willow baskets.
- Rabbits need to have things of their own to chew on (or they might nibble on your things.)
- Rabbits need to be protected from predators, poisons, temperature extremes, electrical cords, and rough handling.

## **Home Set Up for your Foster Rabbit(s)**

To set up the rabbit, we recommend utilizing a small area or roomy cage (or both.) Use a laundry room, bathroom, hallway blocked off with baby gates, or part of a larger room sectioned off using furniture, boxes, or other objects he can't scale or knock over. Choose a spot that gets some regular, not-too-noisy traffic, where he can see and hear but not be trampled by your daily routines. Start house training by providing at least one or two litterboxes. A fresh layer of grass hay on top will both encourage and reward him for

hopping in. If you know what brand of chow he was eating, keep him on it for a while to minimize risk of digestive upset (unless it was rabbit junk-food that contained corn, seeds, and other unhealthy additions.) Fresh water in a bowl or bottle, or both, should be available at all times. Give him at least one cardboard box with two bunny-size doors cut, and a towel draped across one area of his cage, as hiding places. Start him on the road to good chewing habits by removing forbidden and dangerous temptations such as house plants, electric cords, and books.

- Provide permitted alternatives such as untreated straw, wicker, or sea-grass baskets and mats, cardboard tubes and boxes, plastic baby-toys for tossing, fruit-tree branches, and plenty of fresh hay.

## Domestic Baby Rabbits and Their Mom

The first thing to do is to remove the father, or any male, if he is with the mother. Males will probably not hurt the babies, but he can impregnate the female again, even on the day she gives birth. Not only can he impregnate the mother rabbit, he will also impregnate the female offspring as soon as they mature.

## Creating a Nest

Place the mother and the babies in a small, warm, quiet room. If she is indoors, give the mother a litterbox in the opposite corner of the nest. If she is not used to being in the house, this may stress her more than being left in her outdoor cage. The only thing to do in that case is add a proper nest area.



If the babies are scattered, cold and do not have plump tummies, the mother needs help making a proper nest box, and the babies need to be warmed up before anything else is attempted. No baby mammals can successfully digest foods if their body temperature is below normal. This is extremely important to understand.

In this case, warm the babies as follows: Place a hot water bottle, filled with warm water (not hot!) into a small box of any kind. Line it with clean terry cloth towels and place the bottle UNDER the towels. A small plastic container or a leak-proof plastic bag can be used

if necessary. Make a small space within the nest and put the babies in the temporary warming nest.

Be sure the babies are not in direct contact with the warm water (it may become too hot for them.) Be sure that the towels do not have holes in them and are not frayed, because the fine threads could cut their delicate skin and holes could strangle them should they squirm through one.

In the meantime, prepare a proper box and nest for the mother, so she will feel secure when the babies are returned to her. Get a cardboard box which is just slightly larger than the mother rabbit. It should not be too big, or the babies may scatter again and miss an important feeding. A doorway should be cut in the center of one side, which is just large enough for the mother to fit through. The doorway should have a lip of about 1 inch above the floor to help keep the babies in the box.

Place a large handful of straw, grass or hay in the box and place it in a corner of the rabbit cage. Be sure it is not in the corner that the mother rabbit uses as a bathroom! Make sure that grass clippings do not contain any pesticides or fertilizers. Do not use fabric scraps, burlap, gauze or anything else with fine threads or holes in it. The straw/hay should be replaced every three or four days as it will become soaked in urine. You can just take the babies out of the box, and remove and replace most of the clean fur, and change the rest of the bedding and line the box with clean bedding.

The babies can be placed into the new nest as soon as their body temperature feels warm to the touch. (Only warm the babies if they have been scattered on the cage floor. If they were huddled together in a good nest site, leave them alone, except to check whether they have been fed.)



## **Are They Getting Fed?**

A well-fed baby will have a very, round and plump tummy. If the babies' tummies are full, the mother is feeding them and the caretaker can rest assured that things are going as they should. The babies can be examined every day if that will make the caretaker feel more assured.

If the babies have not been fed, they will have sunken tummies, their skin will be wrinkled from dehydration and they will be weak (their response to being handled will be weak or non-existent, although they will hopefully be breathing.) Scattered babies are more likely not to have been fed, so make sure that they are warm first.

If the babies are weak or dehydrated, veterinary intervention is advised, so please contact the Foster Care Department sooner than later. Placing a drop of honey or fruit jam into their mouths sometimes helps elevate their blood sugar level until veterinary help and/or mother's milk is available.

If you feel it is necessary to examine the babies every day to verify that they have been fed, pet the mother rabbit first, to help cover human scents, and avoid wearing heavy perfumes. It is best to handle the babies as little as possible until they are old enough to leave the nest box on their own.

If it has been close to two days and you are positive that the babies have not been fed, call foster care immediately at 716-629-3509. Try allowing the babies to nurse, as suckling sometimes stimulates the milk glands. If that happens, monitoring the babies' growth is the only thing that needs to be done. Mother rabbits stand upright while nursing and the babies lie upside down beneath her. Hold the rabbits in this natural position.

## **Is There a Problem?**

Oftentimes people are concerned that the mother rabbit "is not feeding the babies," because she is rarely seen with them. This is normal behavior for a domestic (or wild) rabbit and that mother rabbits do not "lay" with their offspring in the same manner as dogs and cats do.

Domestic rabbits retain some of the genetic imprints of their wild European ancestors, that are preyed upon by others in nature. Mother rabbits instinctually sense that staying with their offspring will call a predator's attention to the nest. Adult rabbits have a scent, while babies do not yet have a scent. Most mother rabbits will not hop into the nest (or box) to

check on their babies during the day, although she is usually watching from a safe distance. This is normal behavior.

A mature female will often pull fur to make a nest, with or without a male present and regardless of whether actual mating has occurred. This hormonal behavior is known as a “false pregnancy.”

If the mother has pulled fur in an attempt to make a nest, she will probably be all right if her nest is appropriate. It is safe to examine the babies and move them, with the mother, to a more proper place, if necessary.

Rabbits feed their babies only once or twice per day and will only do so when they feel safe, usually just before dawn and/or just after dusk. If humans and children are continually gathered around the cage, the mother may become too stressed to nurse the babies.

There is a way to determine if the mother is feeding her offspring. Did the mother rabbit pull some of her fur out? Did she shred papers, or gather hay or rip up carpeting (if housed indoors) in an attempt to “make a nest?” Mother rabbits usually make a nest any time between a few days prior to the birth up to the day of birth itself. She may also do so without an actual pregnancy.

## **Are the Babies in Danger?**

If you think that the mother is injuring the babies while kindling (giving birth,) while feeding, or has eaten any of the babies, several issues should be explored. Sometimes a mother rabbit will accidentally injure the babies because her nails have never been clipped, the nest box is not proper, or she is stressed and skittish as a result of too much activity going on around her. Some rabbits are highly skittish by nature. Very young mothers, especially those under six months of age, may not understand what has happened to them and veterinary intervention is imperative. Nervous and young mothers sometimes abandon their babies for unknown reasons, which may include having produced unhealthy babies. Sometimes the nutritional status of the mother is highly inadequate.

If the mother seems to be eating her babies, nutritional deficiencies are one of the possible scenarios. It is normal for these vegetarian animals to eat the afterbirth. It prevents predators from discovering the nest and provides the mother with some much-needed nutrients.

If the mother rabbit has died, cannot or is not feeding the babies, you should contact foster care immediately at 716-629-3509. Sadly, bottle-feeding baby rabbits usually culminates



in the babies' death within a few days to weeks. Bottle feeding is terribly unsuccessful because there is no milk replacement formula that is 100% adapted for baby rabbits.

## Nutrition

### What are the basics of a good foster rabbit diet?

A rabbit's diet should be made up of good quality pellets, fresh hay (alfalfa, timothy or oat), water and fresh vegetables. Anything beyond that is a "treat" and should be given in limited quantities.

The SPCA will provide the hay and pellets for rabbits placed into a foster home.

### What kinds of veggies should I feed my foster rabbit?

When shopping for vegetables, look for a selection of different veggies--look for both dark leafy veggies and root vegetables, and try to get different colors. Stay away from beans and rhubarb. Here's a suggested veggie list.



Alfalfa, radish & cloversprouts

Basil

Beetgreens

Bokchoy

Broccoli (mostly leaves/stems)

Brussels sprouts

Carrot & carrot tops

Celery

Cilantro

Clover

Collard greens

Dandelion greens and flowers (no pesticides)

Endive

Escarole

Green peppers

Kale

Lettuce: Romaine, Red or Green leaf (no iceberg or light colored leaf)

Mint Mustard greens

Parsley

Pea pods (the flat edible kind)

Peppermint leaves

Raddichio

Radish tops

Raspberry leaves

Spinach

Use sparingly or rotate. Vegetables high in either oxalates or goitrogens may be toxic in accumulated quantities over a period of time.

### **What kinds of treats should I feed my foster rabbit?**

#### Fruits:

Apple  
Blueberries  
Melon  
Orange  
Papaya  
Peach  
Pea  
Pineapple  
Plums  
Raspberries  
Strawberries

### **Is feeding hay important?**

Hay is essential to a rabbit's good health, providing roughage which reduces the danger of hairballs and other blockages. Apple tree twigs also provide good roughage.

### **What quantities of food should be fed to babies and "teenagers"?**

- Birth to 3 weeks--mother's milk
- 3 to 4 weeks--mother's milk, nibbles of alfalfa and pellets
- 4 to 7 weeks--mother's milk, access to alfalfa and pellets
- 7 weeks to 7 months--unlimited pellets, unlimited hay (plus see 12 weeks below)
- 12 weeks--introduce vegetables (one at a time, quantities under 1/2 oz.)

### **What quantities of food should be fed to young adults? (7 months to 1 year)**

- introduce timothy hay, grass hay, and oat hays, decrease alfalfa
- decrease pellets to 1/2 cup per 6 lbs. body weight
- increase daily vegetables gradually
- Fruit daily ration no more than 1 oz. to 2 oz. per 6 lbs. body weight (because of calories)

### **What quantities of food should be fed to mature adults? (1 to 5 years)**

- Unlimited timothy, grass hay, oat hay, straw
- 1/4 to 1/2 cup pellets per 6 lbs. body weight (depending on metabolism and/or proportionate to veggies)
- Minimum 2 cups chopped vegetables per 6 lbs. body weight
- Fruit daily ration no more than 2 oz. (2 TBL) per 6 lbs. body weight.

### **What quantities of food should be fed to senior rabbits? (Over 6 years)**

- If sufficient weight is maintained, continue adult diet
- Frail, older rabbits may need unrestricted pellets to keep weight up. Alfalfa can be given to underweight rabbits, only if calcium levels are normal. Annual blood workups are highly recommended for geriatric rabbits.

Absolutely NO chocolate (poisonous!), cookies, crackers, breakfast cereals, bread, pasta, yogurt drops or other “human treats.” There is research to suggest these items may contribute to fatal cases of enterotoxemia, a toxic overgrowth of “bad” bacteria in the intestinal tract.

## Should I give the rabbit items to chew?

Yes, here are some items that are OK for rabbits to chew on:

- Apples
- Willow and aspen branches
- Hay
- Pine firewood
- Untreated fresh pine lumber attached to cage so it doesn’t move
- A basket with hay in it—let the bun chew the basket as well as the hay
- Compressed alfalfa cubes

## Handling

### Approaching a Rabbit

The safest approach with rabbits is to begin by stroking the top of their heads. Do not offer your hand for a rabbit to sniff the way you would to a dog, because most seem to find this gesture offensive and may attack (lightning fast lunge with a snort.) Most rabbits do not like having the tips of their noses or chins touched. Their feet also tend to be ticklish.

### Lifting

Rabbits should not be lifted by the ears or scruff. Instead, lift the rabbit by placing one hand under the chest of the rabbit and place the other hand beneath the rabbit’s rear end, slowly lift and bring rabbit snug to your body. If the rabbit begins to flail then stop and allow the rabbit to calm down before proceeding again. A rabbit’s back is very fragile and they can injure themselves easily if they are allowed to thrash when being picked up.

### Grooming

Rabbits can act as if they’re hardy creatures, but they are in fact, extremely delicate. Care must be taken to maintain their good health. The following basics are necessary to know in order to groom rabbits safely and to help keep them healthy.

## Shedding

Rabbits are fastidious groomers. They insist on being clean and tidy and will lick themselves like cats, and like cats, they can get hairballs if they ingest too much hair. Unlike cats however, rabbits cannot vomit.



Rabbits need to be brushed at least weekly. In addition to removing any loose hair, this weekly brushing session helps prepare them for the multiple daily brushings that they must undergo when their heavy shedding begins.

## Baths

The vast majority of rabbits, like their ancestors, do not relish getting wet. Even an occasional bath is quite stressful to the average rabbit and is not recommended. **NEVER**, unless an SPCA veterinarian advises it to bring down a fever, should you give a sick rabbit a bath. Because seemingly healthy rabbits can have undiagnosed problems, it's best not to subject them to the stress of a bath.

## Nails

Rabbit nails can grow to be very long and sharp and will be uncomfortable for the rabbit. If the rabbit has light colored nails they are very easy to trim. You can see the blood inside the nail and you clip just before that point. The dark colored nails are harder to see where they should be clipped but it is still visible. You can schedule to have the nails clipped with the foster department if you aren't comfortable doing them yourself.

## Eyes

Watery eyes or and eye discharge needs to be diagnosed by a veterinarian. If the rabbit's eyes are watery call the foster department to schedule an appointment to be seen.

# How to tell if your Foster Rabbit is Sick

**CONTACT THE SPCA IMMEDIATELY IF YOU NOTICE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING:**

- Diarrhea with listlessness
- Sudden loss of appetite with bloat and abdominal gurgling
- Loss of appetite with labored breathing
- Loss of appetite with runny nose
- Head tilt
- Incontinence (urine-soaked rear legs)
- Abscesses, lumps or swellings anywhere
- Any sudden behavior change

**Bites and scratches may also cause issues for humans.** Any bites or scratches must be reported to the SPCA, and then the SPCA will report it to the Health Department. Wounds need to be cleaned out thoroughly and antibiotics may be necessary. If the rabbit has bacteria in its nails, the bacteria can go into your bloodstream and can be very harmful. You need to clean the wound immediately and call your doctor for advice and possible treatment.

The SPCA is available 24-hours a day. During regular business hours, all questions are welcomed. Calls after hours should be limited to emergencies. After regular business hours or on weekends, please contact the SPCA through the answering service. The service will contact the staff member who is on call

**SPCA main number** **716-875-7360**

**Night answering service** **716-712-0251**

**Foster Care Department** **716-629-3509**

**\*\*\*SPCA EMERGENCY** **716-875-7363**

**(Please do not use this number unless it is an emergency)**

We appreciate all of the hard work and time foster families put into their foster animals. Because of our dedicated foster families, thousands of homeless pets are given a chance to find their forever homes. While fostering does *not* entitle you to a free adoption, it does give you the pick of the litter. If you or anyone you know is interested in adopting the animals in your care, they must be pre-approved at the SPCA. When the animals are brought back to the shelter it is imperative that we know the name(s) and phone number(s) of the adopters.