

Humane Society of West Michigan Small Animal Foster Manual



Contacts

Foster Coordinator

Aurora Lesert-Lewis

alewis@hswestmi.org

Contact for: Foster animal/supply pickups and drop offs, General foster questions, Adoption questions

Foster Veterinary Technician

Sabrina Anderson

sanderson@hswestmi.org

Contact for: Medical questions/concerns, Surgery scheduling, Vaccine/medical appointment scheduling, Medical supplies

Foster Facebook Group

Join our community of fellow fosters for a network of support, as well as a place to share your new foster pet and your fostering experience with other like-minded people!

facebook.com/groups/HSWMFoster

Locations

Foster Doors - When you arrive, please pull around to the back of the HSWM facility. The parking lot is to the left. You will see the double set of foster doors with a designated parking space. These doors are to the right of our garage. You will also see our supply pick-up shed and supply return bin in front.

When to go here: Medical appointments (vaccines, exams, etc.) with the Foster Veterinary Technician,. Also foster animal pick up/drop off, and foster supply pick up/drop offs.

Admitting Doors - These doors are to the left of our Main Entrance, on the side of the building.

When to go here: Surgery drop off/pick ups, or medical appointments to see Vet Staff (this will be specified at the making of your appointment).

Protocols and Procedures

Foster Agreement

1. I understand that I am the primary caretaker. I will provide adequate food, water, social interaction, potty breaks, litter cleaning, and essential daily needs.
2. I agree that I will not relinquish custody of the foster pet to anyone except HSWM, even temporarily.
3. I understand that my foster pet may cry, whine, be fearful, be shy, be sick, be depressed, have had past trauma or abuse, not know commands, may chew or scratch my belongings, and needs my love and compassion.
4. I understand foster pets are only temporarily in my care and remain the property of HSWM and are subject to relinquishment at any time. Failure to return a Foster Pet will result in termination as a foster and a “do not adopt” status and/or legal action.
5. I agree to follow HSWM Emergency Contact Protocol immediately, when a foster pet is experiencing a medical/health emergency. I understand that my foster pet may need to be brought to HSWM for medical evaluation as soon as possible. I understand a decision will then be made by HSWM if the animal must stay at the shelter or return to the foster home.
6. I understand private veterinary costs incurred by the foster parent WILL NOT be reimbursed by HSWM.
7. I understand that HSWM WILL NOT reimburse me for any expenses related to food, toys, litter, medication, and daily care items associated with my foster pet.
8. If my foster pet escapes my home or becomes lost, I will immediately notify the HSWM Emergency Contact given to me as well as the HSWM Foster Coordinator.
9. I will not take my foster pet to a groomer
10. I will not take my foster dog to a dog park/beach without prior permission from the HSWM Foster Coordinator.
11. I agree to keep my foster dog on a 6ft. non-retractable leash when outside.
12. I agree that I will not allow my foster cat outdoors.
13. I will not give my foster cat or kitten a bath before speaking to the HSWM Foster Coordinator.
14. I will notify the HSWM Foster Coordinator immediately if my foster pet exhibits aggressive behavior.
15. I understand that my foster animal’s health is not guaranteed and may break with illness while in my care.
16. I understand my personal companion animals could be exposed to illness and I understand that it is highly recommended to quarantine my foster animal for at least 10 days to prevent exposure to my household.
17. I understand that I am not allowed to administer ANY medication to my foster animal without permission from the HSWM Foster Veterinary Technician or HSWM Veterinarian.
18. I understand that it may be necessary for the HSWM Medical Team to make a decision of euthanasia based on severe illness or behavior.
19. I understand HSWM is not responsible for damage to personal property and I waive my rights to make any claim of liability for any injury or damages.
20. I agree to return my foster kit containing supplies provided by HSWM. If I fail to return my supply kit, I may be charged a fee of \$10. I understand when I return my supply kit, this allows another shelter pet the opportunity for foster care.
21. I understand that I must communicate with the HSWM Foster Coordinator and Foster Veterinary Technician in a timely manner and keep my contact information up to date.
22. I agree to help build my foster’s adoption profile by taking frequent pictures and sending them to the HSWM Foster Coordinator.

Vacation/Going Out Of Town

When you have a trip planned or an out of town stay planned, your HSWM foster pet **cannot** be left home alone, travel with you, or be left with a different caregiver without first receiving approval from the Foster Coordinator.

If at any time you are leaving town for an extended period of time, you **MUST** contact the Foster Coordinator. This should not be done last minute. The Foster Coordinator will schedule your foster pets return or coordinate a transfer of foster care to another foster home. The Foster Caregiver, whose signature is on the Foster Agreement is the responsible party and at no time can that responsibility be transferred to another person without prior approval.

If you have an emergency that requires you to leave town suddenly, please contact the Emergency Contact as soon as possible to make arrangements for your shelter pet.

Short-notice animal returns

If you need to return your foster animal(s) sooner than expected due to a personal emergency arising, or things just aren't working out as expected (i.e., animals not getting along), please contact our Foster Coordinator. Please note that response time will vary, especially during the holidays, but we will accommodate your request to return your foster on short notice the best we can!

Foster Supply Pick-up

All food and supplies will be provided to you when you foster a HSWM shelter pet. If you are running low on supplies, our pick-up shed is stocked with common items needed for cats, kittens, dogs, and puppies. The code for the lock will be provided to you, and fosters can pick up items when needed. The shed code is not to be given to anyone outside of the HSWM Foster Program, so please do not share it. If your animal is on a special diet or you are in need of an item that is less common, please email our Foster Coordinator. When you take items from the shed, please use the sign out log on the clipboard in the shed to note what you have taken and for what animal. Items typically stocked in the shed are: cat litter, dry cat and kitten food, wet cat and kitten food, dry dog and puppy food, wet dog and puppy food, cat treats, dog treats and chews, cat toys, dog toys, and potty pads. All other items will need to be requested via email.

Supply requests (special items that are not in our foster pick-up shed) must be emailed to our Foster Coordinator one week in advance, and medication refill requests must be emailed to our Vet Tech one week in advance. Supply/medication requests are not able to be filled on-demand.

If you run out of supplies due to not alerting us soon enough and you buy your own supplies, please understand that we will not be able to reimburse you for your purchase and it will be treated like a donation.

Preparing For Your Foster Small Animal

THANK YOU FOR FOSTERING! We are incredibly grateful to you for opening your home and your heart to these animals in need, and giving them a break from the shelter. Here are some important ways that you can help your fosters feel comfortable and stay safe while staying with you, as well as preparing yourself!

Also be prepared to commit assisting with your foster's adoption by providing photos and personality information throughout the foster pet's time with you. Please send these items to the Foster Coordinator, so you can help your fosters find the perfect forever homes! At the end of the manual there will be tips on how to best provide content!

Above all--enjoy all of the laughter and smiles your foster pet provides!

Supplies

You will be provided the following items at the time you pick up your foster:

- Blankets/bedding
- Cage/habitat
- Appropriate food
- Food and water bowls/bottle
- Appropriate treats
- Hay (if applicable)
- Toys/chew toys
- Medications, if any

If you decide to buy your own supplies, we will not be able to reimburse your purchase. Rather, it is treated like a donation, which we appreciate!

Setting Up Your Space to Foster

Now that you are taking on a foster animal, you need to figure out where you can keep them separate from the rest of the house.

Prepare a safe, warm space for your foster. A spare bedroom or bathroom will do well! This will help you clean up after them and disinfect the area as needed.

Keep in mind that they may take their time warming up. Allow them to interact on their own terms when they are ready, unless you are given a separate socialization plan.

Please note that their cage should never be directly in sunlight or by a vent. Small animals have a hard time cooling down or warming up.

Bringing Your Foster(s) Home

Start slow and allow for decompression from the shelter. Moving is stressful for everyone, go slowly on your first few days and let them explore at their own pace.

Daily Care

Whether they are completely adjusted to their new foster home or not, your foster pet needs daily care! Their level of comfort will determine what type of enrichment they receive, but all foster pets still need their basic needs met, regardless of their level of socialization.

Feeding

They need fresh food provided daily. Please only feed the appropriate diet that was given to you, unless otherwise discussed. Never feed through the bars of the cages, this can promote unwanted finger biting. If an herbivore, they require hay as part of their staple diet. If they are an omnivore or carnivore, hay is not needed. Their diets should consist of pellets, as well as fresh food. Always make sure they have water easily accessible.

Omnivores: Rats, mice, gerbils, hamsters, hedgehogs

Herbivores: Chinchillas, rabbits, guinea pigs, degu

Carnivores: Ferrets

Cleaning

Cleaning is incredibly important as the majority of small animals go to the bathroom where they eat & sleep. There isn't a set time of when you need to clean the cage, but spot cleaning daily can help keep the smell down. Once a week thorough cleaning works well, and cleaning more often with the more small animals you are fostering. Never use household products for cleaning cages, warm water will do the trick.

Monitoring

Since small animals are prey animals, they hide their illness & pain really well until they are extremely sick. Some things to look out for are:

- Change in appetite & water intake
- Lethargy
- Teeth grinding, while most small animals' teeth never stop growing, they constantly chew, but if they are grinding their teeth together without a toy/food/etc, that can be a sign of pain.
- Breathing that is labored or very rapid
- Nose should be clean & clear
- Eyes should be full & bright
- Most small animals cannot vomit, so diarrhea/constipation/distended belly can be a sign of an issue occurring.

- Fur should be kept and not overly oily.
- Vocalization. While most small animals do make some noise - more than others, if you notice they are more vocal than normal it can be a sign of illness or distress.
- Posture should be upright, not hunched over/tilted/wobbly.
- Lumps and bumps. Some are harmless, while others can be fatal. It is always best to document any lump or bump.
- Change in behavior
- Mites. Mites look like dirt on the skin, so you will notice an increase in itchiness. It is not uncommon for small animals to get mites especially if their bedding/food/hay contains them.

Playtime and Enrichment

Your foster pet will need playtime and enrichment every day.

What exactly is enrichment? Enrichment are activities that provide stimulation to the brain and allow for species typical behavior (including foraging, scratching, using their nose, ect.), It provides relief and a distraction, adds quality to their space, and the opportunity for play if they want it.

Small Animal Enrichment:

- Cardboard boxes are great enrichment toys, you can use them for chewing. Cardboard tubes filled with hay & snacks work great. (Chinchillas cannot have cardboard.)
- Paper bags filled with treats
- Willow or apple sticks - good for chewing
- Pumice/lava stones
- Bird toys (ones without metal chains)
- Fleece toys

Unsafe products that are marketed towards small animals:

- Plastic balls. While they may seem cute & like a great way to get exercise, they are actually very unsafe. The animals can lose toes in the small slits, get overheated, and most small animals are not running to get exercise rather to find a way out.
- Salt licks. If given the proper diet, no small animals need a salt lick.
- Mesh wheels. Tails and toes can get caught and ripped.

Socialization

Rule of thumb: Be patient

Introducing Touch: Never reach your hand into a cage of an unknown animal. There is nothing scarier to a very small animal than a large hand coming towards them. That is a sure way to get bit! If you do have to reach in, wear gloves or use a small hand towel to get the animal out. Using a toothbrush or something similar is the best way to introduce touch. Small strokes with a toothbrush can help get them used to touch without risking getting bit. Once the toothbrush is going well, you can introduce hand touches, though never put a finger directly near their mouth, as most have poor eyesight & might mistake a finger for a snack!

Picking up/holding Small Animals:

Never pick up a small animal by their feet, head, or tail. Always make sure you have all their limbs protected and hold them close to your body. The “football method” is the best way to pick up any small animal. Most rabbits don’t like to be picked up/held so don’t take it personally if this doesn’t get easier to do! It’s best to interact with them on their level, the floor.

Neonates:

You should not interfere with mom and babies, as disrupting mom can cause her to abandon her babies. Don’t clean the cage, don’t touch - unless in danger. If mom does happen to abandon them, you will need to be the replacement mom.

Medication Administration:

First try to mix the medication in their food. If they are very under the weather, you will have to orally inject it into their mouth. Burritoing them with a towel, same as you would a cat, works very well.

Specific notes on Chinchillas: It cannot get over 75 degrees in their habitat, as they will overheat. Having a cooling stone in their cage can help cool themselves off. They also cannot get wet, as their fur is so dense that water cannot dry. They also have floating rib cages, so it is essential to be sure to handle them properly. Chinchillas do need dust baths, as this helps soak up the oils in their skin.

Specific notes on Ferrets: While no small animal should be introduced to a different species of small animals, ferrets are extremely important as they are carnivores and will eat a mouse/rate/etc. They are also one of the few small animals that can pass & catch common human illness, Flu A & B. If someone is ill with the flu, they should not handle a ferret.

Gerbils & Degus: These little guys need sand baths that help soak up the oils in the skin. They also cannot get wet due to their fur being unable to dry.

Specific notes on Rabbits:

Diet & Nutrition

Hay

Alfalfa hay is higher in protein & calcium, it is recommended for rabbits who are actively growing (3 weeks-1 year), nursing mothers, and rabbits that have trouble maintaining weight.

Grass hays, such as Timothy, Orchard, and Oat hays, are lower in protein and calcium than alfalfa hay, but higher in fiber. Grass hays are recommended for most rabbits to promote dental & digestive health.

Hay should be stored in a cool, dark, dry place to prolong its shelf-life.

Pellets

The following brands are considered good for most rabbits: Oxbow, Small Pet Select & Sherwood. We use and recommend Oxbow Garden Select. Avoid buying large quantities as they lose nutritional value after about 6 weeks, and can become rancid when exposed to moisture. It's important to remember that pellets were created for the purpose of fattening up rabbits for meat so it is NOT their main source of nutrition like cat/dog kibble.

- 1-4lbs: ⅓ cup
- 4-8: ¼ cup
- 8-10lbs: ⅓ cup
- 10+ lbs: ½ cup

Treats

Natural treats for rabbits include fresh or dried fruits, starchy vegetables (i.e carrots) and the same recommended brands as the pellets for store treats. These foods should be given in limited quantities due to the high sugar content, 1 to 2 treats a day. Fruits that are safe for rabbits include: Apples, apricots, bananas, berries, cherries, kiwi, mango, melons, nectarines, oranges, papayas, peaches, pears, pineapples, plums, & tomatoes. Note: Papayas are great for their digestion! Oxbow has a great daily papaya treat for digestive support.

Make sure to remove any pits or larger seeds from the fruit before giving it to a bunny and even skinning most things is a good precaution.

Veggies

You can typically start to feed vegetables to your rabbit at 7 months, (1 cup per 2 pounds of body weight) start with one variety at a time to see how they tolerate it.

If they experience loose stools with a certain vegetable, avoid that one and try a different one after stool has returned to normal, uniform pellets!

Leafy greens like Romaine lettuce, Spring greens, Turnip greens, Dandelion greens, Mint, Basil, Watercress, Wheatgrass, Cilantro, Radicchio, and Dill can be given everyday.

High-oxalate vegetables should be given on a more limited basis because these tend to have more sugar content/may cause gas. Examples are: Parsley, Spinach, Mustard greens, Swiss chard, Radish tops, and Sprouts.

Non-leafy vegetables should be given no more than 1 tablespoon per 2 pounds of body weight. Examples are: Carrots, Broccoli, Edible flowers (roses, nasturtiums, pansies, hibiscus), Celery, Bell peppers (any color), Brussel sprouts, Cabbage, and Broccoli.

Housing

Enclosures

Bunnies need a place to call their own for safety & privacy. This space should be large enough for a litter box, food/water bowls, hideaway, and toys with room left over for relaxing & hopping. This enclosure should be at least 4x the length of the rabbit stretched out from head to toe. Commercial cages are too small for even a dwarf rabbit so you should use the largest dog crate or ex-pen possible. If not, use the largest cage you can find, leaving the door open with a small ex-pen attached for additional room. Ex-pens should be at least 3 feet high, remember bunnies can jump!

Litter Boxes

When choosing a litter box, opt for a cat litter box that is large enough for the bunny to lie stretched out in, as small boxes often promote peeing outside the box as well as pee stains on the feet.

- paper litter (fluffy or pelleted) Examples: Carefresh, Oxbow Pure Comfort, Yesterday's News, Kaytee Clean & Cozy, Small Pet Select Soft Paper Bedding,
- newspapers/paper shreds
- aspen bark litters - Examples: Gentle Touch Pet Products

Hay should be placed in or above the litter box to promote and further litter box training.

Toys

Digging and chewing are a rabbits favorite things to do and often why they get surrendered so toys that enrich their minds and keep them busy are ideal.

Cardboard boxes: Cut holes in the sides to make a house, fill it with shredded paper to create a digging box, or thread pieces onto a length of twine and hang it from the side of the pen.

Toilet paper or paper towel tubes: Fill these with hay and put a piece of dried fruit in the center.

Wicker balls, baskets, or wreaths

Phone books or newspaper: Shredding toys

Baby toys or cats toys

Slinkies: Plastic slinkies hung from the side of the pen are fascinating to pull on.

Cotton towels or fleece blankets: great for digging around and nesting in.

Wood blocks or branches: make sure to use non-toxic wood like apple wood. I recommend always having a handful laying around!

Bunny Behavior

Rabbits are unique pets that have a communication style that many people might interpret as being difficult to understand compared to other pets. Often, patient observation is the best way to learn to read and interpret a rabbit's body language and behavior. To help get you started on learning to "speak rabbit" here are some helpful tips and behaviors to look for.

Ears: A rabbit's ears are very expressive and can tell you if it's upset, alert, or relaxed. Rabbit ears that are pinned flat back with a tense body may indicate the rabbit is upset, angry, or scared. Rabbit ears that are flat back with a relaxed body just mean the rabbit is resting. Ears that are straight up mean that the rabbit is curious or alert and rabbit ears that are not straight up, not tense and back usually indicate that the rabbit is relaxed or content.

Chinning: Rabbits have scent glands under their chin. Rabbits will often be seen "chinning" which is when they rub their chin on an item to mark it with their scent. Rabbits chin both as a territorial behavior and as a simple reminder to help them keep track of where they have been.

Flopping: Flopping is actually a sign that the rabbit is totally relaxed and comfortable. When a rabbit "flops" they might appear to have a brief attack and will suddenly fall or flip over onto their side, exposing their belly. As long as the rabbit doesn't appear to be struggling, there is no reason to panic, this just means the rabbit is content and happy in the moment.

Nipping: Nipping could be a request for attention, or it could be a warning nip letting you know the rabbit is agitated, or it might simply be a bonding behavior, where the rabbit is trying to return the favor of pets, brushes, or attention, by grooming you.

Binkies: A binky is when a rabbit jumps, runs and leaps in the air. Sometimes they will kick or twist in the air as well. Binkies are signs of playfulness and joy in rabbits.

Grunting: Grunting noises are angry reactions towards another rabbit or a person and should be heeded as a warning to back off; otherwise the rabbit might escalate by scratching or biting. Rabbits grunt when they feel threatened or territorial.

Thumping: Thumping is an attention getting behavior. Sometimes a rabbit will thump to warn others about something it has seen or heard, or to express fear or being upset. Being upset might even mean you aren't getting the treat out of the bag fast enough.

Nose Nudging: Nose nudging is another behavior that has several meanings. Rabbits might nudge, push, or toss things around as a form of play, to solicit attention from you, or as a territorial behavior meaning "mine!" or "get out of the way!" Rabbits can be very territorial and particular. They like their things arranged a certain way, and can become upset when their things are moved. If the rabbit is tossing or forcefully nudging while you are cleaning, it is probably telling you it doesn't like what you are doing. If it nudges softly or tosses toys while socializing with it and its other body language suggests it is relaxed, it is probably being playful or soliciting attention for pets and grooming. Watch the rabbit closely to put its behavior into context and determine what it means by its nudging!

Licking: Licking is a sign of affection in rabbits. It means "I love you, I trust you."

Screaming: Screaming, is a very alarming and frightening sound and is a sign of extreme terror or excruciating pain in a rabbit.

Tense body, upright tail, laid back ears / Lunging: Lunging or a tense body with laid back ears and upright tail is an angry or territorial behavior. The rabbit is telling you it doesn't like what you are doing and is prepared to fight. It might be saying "don't touch my stuff!" or "back off!"

Boxing: Boxing is when a rabbit hits you with its front feet, usually after a lunging motion.

Third Inner Eyelid Showing: If you can see the third inner eyelid in the corner of a rabbit's eye, it means the rabbit is very frightened or stressed out. You should give the rabbit space.

Laying with head flat on the ground: The rabbit is being submissive and might be requesting to be pet or groomed.

Droppings: Rabbit droppings that are not in a pile and are scattered and made one by one as the rabbit explores are normal. The rabbit is marking territory and also leaving a trail so it knows where it has been. A second type of dropping is a cecotrope which rabbits eat because it is a nutritional deposit that the body created. These are softer, darker and sometimes smelly. Regular fecal droppings are lighter and should be in a consistent round size and are often scentless seeing as they are mostly just hay.

Periscope: Periscoping is when the rabbit is curious and looking around to see what is up while standing on its hind legs. They will also do this to beg like a dog.

Tooth Grinding: There are two kinds of tooth grinding in rabbits. The first is a soft, almost purring sound and is a sign that the rabbit is content and enjoying the attention it is getting. The second is a loud, audible grinding or tooth clicking / snapping that is a sign of a potential medical emergency for the rabbit. If you can hear a rabbit grinding its teeth, best to err on the side of caution.

Honking: Soft, almost inaudible sounds, usually followed by circling are a courting behavior.

Circling: Is both a courting behavior and an attention seeking behavior.

Spraying: Is a territorial behavior. Both males and females may spray, and often unaltered rabbits will spray when in a new environment or when in close proximity to another rabbit.

Mounting: Mounting is both a mating behavior and a dominant behavior. In an unaltered rabbit, this is a sign that it is time to fix the rabbit by spaying or neutering. In an altered rabbit, it means the rabbit is displaying dominance and might be territorial. Note: for bonded rabbit pairs, mounting is a way of bonding and not necessarily a sign of dominance, just make sure both pairs are fixed. If there is ever “head mounting” this behavior should be stopped as it can damage spines and if unfixated will bite genitals.

Bonding With Your Bunny

Your bunny may be shy when you first start interacting with them and it can take some time for them to learn to trust you. To begin to build trust, start by sitting or lying on the floor nearby while they explore their surroundings. Allow the bunny to come to you and resist the urge to pet them when they first approach you. In doing so, they learn that you are not a threat to them.

Once your rabbit is comfortable with you, begin to try hand feeding and pellets, veggies or treats while saying their name. Advance to petting once your rabbit readily accepts treats from your hands. Slowly approach from above their head and gently stroke upwards from the nose to forehead. Try to avoid coming directly in front of their face, as this is a blind spot and could startle them. Once they accept forehead petting, gradually expand to ears, cheeks, shoulders, and back to discover what the rabbit enjoys most. Avoid petting the tail, feet, or belly as most do not enjoy being touched in these areas.

Handling

Most rabbits do not like to be picked up as this feels a lot like being carried off by a predator. For this reason it is best to limit handling of your rabbit to situations when necessary. To safely hold a rabbit: Place one hand on the rabbits chest and the other on their bottom, never let their feet dangle as they have very fragile backs. Similarly, never scruff a rabbit or pick them up by their ears, as this is very painful. Smoothly lift your rabbit off the ground and place them firmly yet gently against your chest. To put the rabbit down, get as close to the ground and gently release them.

General Care/Health

Grooming

Rabbits require regular grooming to maintain a clean and healthy coat. While most bunnies groom themselves, they will need your help at times, particularly if they have longer fur or have difficulty reaching all parts of their body. Regardless of which brush you use, be gentle when brushing as they have delicate skin. If your bunny develops mats, use a mat splitter to remove as scissors can easily nick the skin.

Bathing

Rabbits should never be given full body baths. Baths are extremely stressful for them and they lose body heat quickly when wet. Some bunnies may occasionally need to have their bottoms cleaned, which is easy to do with a wet washcloth. Be sure to thoroughly dry the area after cleaning to prevent irritation and infection.

Nail Trims

Nails should be trimmed regularly as long nails are prone to breaking & make hopping difficult and can even cause sore hocks.

Common Ailments

The following is a list of things to watch for that will tell you if your bun needs to see a vet immediately:

- Monitor for lethargy, loss of appetite, or signs of pain such as hunching, reluctant to move, moving slowly, loud tooth grinding, hiding, aggression, depression, or apathy.
- *Head & Ears:* Watch for head shaking, head tilting, ear scratching, sores, irritated skin, and abnormal discharge. Head tilting is particularly concerning as it could be a sign of a rare but dangerous disease.
- *Eyes:* Check for redness, weepy or watery eyes, and abnormal crusts or discharge. Presence of these may indicate allergies, an infection, or teeth that are overgrowing. Prompt treatment is needed to prevent complications.
- *Mouth & Teeth:* Look for drooling, dropping food while eating, avoidance of “hard” foods or loss of appetite. These are signs that they may have overgrown teeth or an abscessed tooth.
- *Nose & Lungs:* Listen for any abnormal breathing or sneezing. If breathing is labored, immediate care is required by a veterinarian.
- *Fur & Skin:* Check for lumps, cuts, sores, itching, flaky or irritated skin, and hair loss. These may be signs of conditions such as fur mites, fleas, ringworm, or fly strike.
- *Feet:* Examine each foot for red or irritated skin, cuts, or sores. Sores are often

the result of dirty environments, wire flooring, or inactivity secondary to obesity or a lack of space to move. Also make sure the nails are not broken or bleeding.

- *Urine:* Normal rabbit urine ranges from light yellow to a deep orange-red/rust color. Bright red urine indicates blood is present and should be evaluated by a vet. White crusts around urine spots are due to too much calcium, which can lead to bladder stones. Check the diet and switch out any high calorie foods.
- Gastrointestinal Stasis (GI Stasis)

When the muscle contractions that move food through the intestines slow down or stop, this is referred to as GI stasis. In rabbits, slowing of the intestines allows bacteria in the gut to proliferate. These bacteria produce gas that becomes extremely painful as it builds, and some produce deadly toxins. The pain and toxins will lead to hypothermia, and if not treated within 48 hours is fatal.

There are several things that can cause a rabbit to go into stasis: including stress, dehydration, pain, intestinal blockages, or inadequate fiber intake. The two key signs to watch for are refusal to eat or absence of stool in 12 hours. Other symptoms include lethargy, tooth grinding, hunching, reluctance to move, or a bloated abdomen. If you see any of these, please see a veterinarian immediately.

Mom & Babies

Baby rabbits spend their first 2 weeks exclusively inside their nest. They then begin to explore the outside world. Mother rabbits do not retrieve or move their young. If you notice a baby on its own, you must pick it up and put it back in the box. As long as the sides of the box are high enough, they'll stay put once they're inside. Newborn rabbit kits need their mother's milk. This will be their only nutrient source for the first 2 weeks of their life.

Don't worry if you don't see the doe spending time with her babies. Because rabbit milk is so calorific, baby buns only need to be fed twice per day. It's normal for their mother to stay away from the nest most of the time. The mother will usually feed her babies during the night, so you might never see the babies suckling. Fortunately, it's easy to tell whether the babies are being fed.

It's best to not handle the babies as much as possible and when you need to handle them make sure your hands are clean. It's always a good idea to pet mom first so you don't stress her out by going right to her babies, plus you'll get her scent on your hands which will be better to touch the babies.

Each morning, look at their bellies. If they are being fed, their stomachs will look round, plump, and distended. They should also have lots of energy and be very wriggly.

Concave bellies, wrinkled bellies, and **weight loss** are all signs that the babies aren't being fed properly. You should take the mother and all babies (in their nest box) to a rabbit veterinarian.

Baby rabbits open their eyes when they're about 10 days old. At this point, they're ready to start eating solid food. Some kits may begin nibbling earlier than others, but they should all be eating solids after 2 weeks. A **healthy diet for baby rabbits** includes:

- **Alfalfa hay.** This is much higher in calories than grass hay.
- **Pellets.** We use Oxbow Baby Bunny Pellets and they get an unlimited amount.