



## Hand- Raising Baby Rabbits

Hand raising baby rabbits can be quite tricky and demanding, taking up a lot of time. It should never be taken on lightly and there are some points that should be considered before deciding to hand raise.

You need to be 100% sure that the mother rabbit isn't feeding the babies. Unless the mother rabbit is known to be dead, there is a good chance that she is feeding her babies, even if she seems to be ignoring them. A mother rabbit does not constantly tend to her babies the way we might think. Instead they generally feed their babies only once or twice per day, and then leave them alone. This is normal and natural: in the wild, a mother rabbit generally stays as far away from the nest as possible to avoid attracting predators to her babies, only revisiting the nest to feed her young.

If you think the mother rabbit is "ignoring" her litter, have a look at the babies. If the babies' tummies are round and full-looking, they are warm, their skin is not wrinkled, and they are sleeping calmly in the nest, then the mother rabbit is likely feeding them. If the babies are wrinkled, cold or have shrunken bellies, then you may have to intervene.



Before handling the babies, wash your hands well. This not only removes bacteria but eliminates any smells from other objects or animals that can stress the babies. Once they're clean, rub your hands in a bit of clean, fresh hay and on the mother rabbit's fur to scent your hands.

Before starting any syringe or bottle feeding it is worth trying to get the babies to feed. There are a couple of ways to do this including holding the mother over the babies in the nest to give the babies enough time to feed. If she won't stay there, another option is to hold the mother rabbit on her back in your arms and gently try to put each baby onto a nipple to self-feed. Sometimes it is helpful for the babies if a small amount of milk is expressed from the nipple to entice the baby to suckle. If this is not successful then you may need to start hand raising.

It is best to keep the babies in a warm, quiet place in a nest. Bunny fur is the best lining for the nest, but clean cotton wadding will do as a substitute. Just be sure the babies do not get tangled in it. For heating, two or more babies usually are able to snuggle and keep each other warm if they have a good nest. If there's only one baby, a warm water bottle or heat pack wrapped in a soft towel can provide an excellent heat source, but be sure the baby can crawl away if it feels too warm.





**Formula and Feeding Supplies:** We recommend the use of the Wombaroo Rabbit Milk as it is well balanced and contains a 'milk oil' equivalent which is important for baby rabbits. It comes as a powder which can be mixed with warm water to make a milk for the babies. All the mixing instructions are on the box. Wombaroo Rabbit Milk can be purchased from The Unusual Pet Vets otherwise some veterinary clinics and larger pet shops will stock it.



You will also need some small plastic syringes for feeding the milk to the babies. These are available from the Unusual Pet Vets, as well as some pharmacies.

You can also purchase small plastic feeding bottles and plastic teats from some large pet shops however you will need to buy the smallest teat possible as usually the puppy and kitten ones are too big. Most baby rabbits will feed from a syringe without a problem.

You will also need some small scales to weigh the baby rabbits. The amount of milk to feed is dependent on the baby's weight. On the Wombaroo Rabbit Milk box there is a weight chart and the number of mls of milk to be fed over 24 hours. Depending on how much the baby rabbit will take in one feeding session will depend on how frequently you have the feed them.

**Feeding Procedure:** When feeding it is important to take care to prevent aspiration (inhalation) of the formula by the babies. The smallest drop of formula in the lungs can cause fatal pneumonia within a few hours. The following instructions provide a step-by-step feeding guide:

1. Make sure all your syringes and bottles have been washed before use.
2. Baby rabbits can be wiggly and unpredictable so please take care to ensure they are fed in a safe place where they cannot fall.
3. Hold the baby upright (or in some cases on their back gently) in one hand, and the bottle/syringe in the other.
4. Babies often resist feeding at first, and you must overcome the temptation to force feed. If the baby won't accept the teat or syringe, then simply wet the baby's lips with a drop of warm formula so they will hopefully lick it off. Once they have swallowed that, repeat the procedure over and over. Be persistent and gentle. In most cases the baby will soon learn about feeding time and take the formula willingly though they may not do this on the first feeding.
5. Do not be too forceful and squeeze too much formula into the baby rabbit's mouth. They can aspirate milk quite easily so only drip the formula slowly for the baby to lick up.





6. If the baby grabs the teat and begins suckling, allow them to do so without adding any pressure yourself. The baby should be able to suckle with enough strength to empty the bottle or syringe without any help from you. If you provide extra force, the baby may accidentally aspirate formula that's coming in too fast.

7. If the baby does not suckle, it's generally not a major problem. Most will learn to lap/sip from the tip of the teat, and this is actually safer in many cases as it does reduce the risk of aspiration. Try to hold the teat/syringe tip sideways or down-pointed (so the plunger is lower than the tip), relative to the mouth, to further reduce the risk of aspiration.

8. Until they open their eyes, handle the babies as little as possible when you're not feeding.



NOTE: Many newborn mammals cannot urinate/defecate on their own. Many baby bunnies will require the stimulation of the mother's grooming tongue on their bellies and genital region in order to release a stream of urine and faeces. If you are hand raising then you will need to try to mimic this behaviour. To do this use a cotton ball moistened with warm water, and gently tap/rub the urogenital area until you feel the baby's abdominal muscles tense and they release a stream of urine or pass faeces. Getting this response may take 15-20 seconds of stimulation, or even more in some cases.

Baby rabbits' eyes open at about 10 days of age. Once this occurs you can start gradually introducing them to timothy and oaten hay, chaff, pellets, small amounts of green vegetables and water in a shallow dish.

By 2 – 4 weeks of age normally baby rabbits will start eating their mothers caecotrophs to keep their gastrointestinal tract full of good bacteria. If you have access to the mother rabbit or another healthy rabbit's caecotrophs – mix them with some of the formula or some warm water and syringe feed this to the babies. Its good to repeat this 2 or 3 times over 2 – 3 weeks to help them establish normal gastrointestinal flora.

**Weaning:** A mother rabbit feeds her babies for about 3 - 6 weeks, gradually decreasing the frequency of feedings until they lose interest. Your baby bunnies will start to nibble solid food at about the age of two to three weeks, but this does not mean they are ready to be weaned.

If the babies still beg for nursing by the age of six - eight weeks, you can begin to dilute the formula with clean drinking water to help the weaning process. Start with 25% water to 75% formula, and gradually decrease the percentage of milk until the babies lose interest.





Baby rabbits can then be rehomed to new families by 8 weeks of age, as long as fully weaned and eating solids well on their own.

Baby rabbits should then be vaccinated against Calici Virus when they are 8 weeks old, then a booster is required 4 weeks later, and then bi-annually from then on.

Rabbits can generally be sterilised from 12 weeks of age for males and 16 weeks of age for females. Male and female baby rabbits should be separated from each other by 10 – 12 weeks of age to prevent any early pregnancies.

If you have any further questions please don't hesitate to get in touch with us.



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