

Double 'D' Ranch

716-672-5678

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WHAT TO DO ABOUT AN 'OOPS'


Deb Olon-West


Ok, you have been the perfect, responsible bunny caretaker of a mixed set of bunnies, but for some odd reason, had not been able to get one of them fixed to prevent the inevitable litter. We keep our unaltered rabbits in separate hutches and still had our share of breeding incidents because one of the kids left a hutch door open or they weren't locked up tight, or that ingenious, determined buck found a way to escape and break a would be love of his life loose. Don't feel too guilty, the mating drive of these darling creatures is very strong and the bucks will go to great lengths to see that we don't run out of future generations.


Don't panic (like I did), take a deep breath, assess the damage, and plan for your upcoming little cuties. Here are some steps to help you get through this situation:


 Make certain that you have the phone number of a rabbit savvy vet handy in the case of any trouble.


 You'll want to know how much time you have until the blessed event. Mark your calendar the day you suspect the breeding took place; count 28 days from there, as well as days 32 and 35. A doe's gestation period ranges from 28-35 days, with the average (kindling) birthing day being day 32.


 During this time, make certain that the buck stays away from the doe, especially after she kindles the young. She may leap on the babies, step on them, or even eat them in an effort to 'protect' them from the male.

 The doe will pretty well set her own pace as to how much she wants to eat, but it is a good idea to keep her food dish full as well as her water dish with fresh water.

 As always, cleanliness is next to godliness, so it is a good idea to make certain that the hutch stays clean at all times to prevent disease or infections that may be passed on to the young. When you clean the doe's hutch, try to handle her as little and as carefully as possible.

 Be prepared for mood swings in the mother-to-be. Expecting does and pregnant humans have plenty in common with their hormones going berserk and their behavior changing into someone you wouldn't recognize. I have heard of the sweetest rabbit turning into Monte Python's Lorax just because she was pregnant ('But Fluffy never bit before; now you have to count your fingers every time you reach into her cage'). Try not to worry about it; hopefully, your sweet rabbit will return once she has recovered from kindling.

 If you know how to palpate the rabbit, you should be able to feel the kits within 10 days from conception. To palpate: gently set your bunny on a flat surface. Put your hand underneath her below the belly and just above the pubic area directly across from the spine. Press gently on both sides of your starting point for lumps that feel like grapes, which should be your babies. A rabbit's uterus differs from a human's in that it is 'Y' shaped and can contain more than one kit.

 On Day 28, it is time to put a nestbox in the mother's hutch for the babies. It does not have to be huge, but large enough for Momma bunny to be able to get in and nurse the kits

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without squashing them. Nest boxes are sold commercially, but a simple one made of wood works as well. Just make certain that the mother can get in and out with no trouble. You can line it with hay or grass

🐰 Soon before the doe kindles, she should be doing the 'hay dance' in which she is preparing for the babies by arranging it where she wants in the nest box, as well as pulling out hair to uncover the nipples for the kits to nurse and add warm cushioning to the nest

🐰 When the big day arrives, chances are that the doe should not need any help giving birth. You can expect anywhere from 2 to 22 kits depending on the breed. We have averaged four to six kits in a litter and had a maximum of eight in a litter.

It is a good idea to keep an eye on a first time mother in case she needs help. Be prepared to call the vet if any of the following happen:

🐰 If the mother is screaming during the kindling.

🐰 If all of the kits have not been born.

🐰 If a kit gets stuck in the birth canal.

There is a little blood with the arrival of the litter, but nothing to be concerned about unless there is a lot of blood.

You should quietly visit the new family and make certain that all of the newborns are in the nest box and under the fur, which the doe should have placed on them for warmth. You can part the hair to see the babies, but please do so with clean hands and pet the mother first to spread her scent on the kits (you also might want to distract the mother with a treat while checking on her babies). The kits are born hairless and with their eyes closed, so it is very important that they are not on the wire of the cage since they could die of exposure in a short time. If you find one on the wire, it is crucial to warm the kit as soon as possible by placing it on your bare chest for at least ½ an hour to 45 minutes and placing it back in the nest with its littermates.

Chances are that you will not see the doe nurse her young since she will do so during the night. They are usually fed twice a day. You can check to make certain that they are being fed by carefully removing the hair covering them and examining their bellies for roundness. In the first few days after they are born, you may be able to see the milk in their bellies. Primarily, you are looking for nice, round bellies, but if you see them being concave, the mother might have rejected them and you will need to feed them with Esbilac (puppy and kitten formula) that you can buy at a pet store. The best substitute for mother's milk is fresh goat milk since it is easier on the system than cow's milk. You can feed them with an eyedropper or with small kitten bottles from the pet store.

The kits' eyes should open in 10 days. If the eyes are not open by the time they are 14 days old and are crusted over with mucus, you can gently saturate their eyelids with eye drops and remove the debris.

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Keep plenty of fresh food and water available to the doe and within reach of the kits after they start climbing out of the nestbox at about 14 days. The young will start climbing out of the nestbox and exploring at about that time, since they should also be fully furred. Since they are smaller and have little fear, they may also be trying to escape from the cage., so you may have to keep an eye on them for that.

The kits should stay with their mother until they are eight weeks old; the mother will wean them when it is time. They should be eating unlimited timothy hay before then, as well as eating alfalfa-based pellets. There is some controversy about when to start feeding them fresh greens, but my rule of thumb is to refrain from doing so until they are 6 months old and feed them only small amounts at first to prevent diarrhea.

When it is time to leave their mother, we advise that you find homes for them yourself. Simply giving the litter away decreases their value in the eyes of the public, but a reasonable fee for each rabbit would encourage a new caretaker to take care of the rabbit properly. With each bunny, it is a good idea to make certain that they are going to a good home and to give some of what they had been eating with them. Written instructions about proper care is also a good thing to send with a newly adopted bunny.

My final piece of advice once the matter of the babies is resolved is to make certain it doesn't happen again. Please make certain that all of your rabbits are spayed or neutered. It is the responsible thing to do and is better for your rabbits in the long run.

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Deb and Dale's home for wayward bunnies

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