



Winter Rabbit Care

The Comfort Zone

The normal rabbit body temperature is 102 °F to 103 °F. Their “comfort zone” (the outside temperatures at which they process feed most efficiently and gain weight the easiest) is 60 °F to 65 °F. Temperatures of 20 °F to 60 °F aren’t usually too much of a problem for rabbits, but even in those relatively mild temperatures, you must protect them from direct contact with cold winds, snow and rain.

Face your hutches to the south or east to protect your rabbits from Michigan’s prevailing northwesterly winds and storms. Setting the rabbitry (the place where you keep your rabbits) next to a building, solid fence or woodlot, or covering the hutches with lightweight plastic sheeting, will also provide a barrier against winter weather.

Ventilation

Proper ventilation is just as important to rabbits in cold winter weather as it is during the warmer summer months. Unfortunately the measures you take to try to stop heat loss may also cut off air flow in the hutches. This can make the pens damp or even wet, and can let foul odors and ammonia fumes build up.

The air flow in and around your rabbitry will vary with the weather, so keep an eye on conditions and adjust the air flow as needed. No matter what type of ventilation system



you use, make sure that there is gentle air movement around each animal and that there are no drafts, pockets of stale air or sudden temperature changes.

Does and their newly kindled (born) kits, and does that are about to



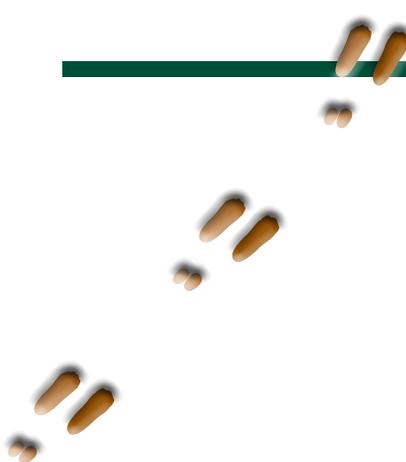
All animals must adjust to changes in their environment. Mammals pant or sweat if the temperature is too high, and they shiver if it’s too cold. Their heart rate increases and they breathe faster when they run or are under stress.

If a change in the environment or the amount of stress they’re experiencing isn’t too severe, animals can usually adapt fairly well. But if the change or stress is too great, they may not be able to adjust. Healthy animals can endure short-term or minor stresses, but long-term or severe stresses will eventually cause them to break down.

The stresses of winter can be very hard on wild and domestic rabbits. If you don’t “winterize” your rabbits and their hutches well enough, they won’t breed, gain weight or show well. Winter-related stresses to your rabbits may include:

- ▶ Low temperatures
- ▶ Poor ventilation
- ▶ Drafts
- ▶ Poor nutrition (including lack of drinking water)

You can prepare your rabbits for winter by following the tips in this sheet.



kindle, need extra attention in winter. Save clean, dry fur from old nests to help cover bunnies whose does haven't pulled enough fur to cover them. When it's very cold, water droplets from the rabbits' breath may condense on the nest box fur. If the nest material becomes wet, replace it.

Feed & Water

Rabbits need more energy just to survive Michigan's cold winter temperatures than they do in the warmer summer months. You'll need to provide plenty of the proper feed and clean water to help your rabbits maintain their body heat in the cold.

When the temperature is at or below freezing (32 °F), water your rabbits two or three times a day. If you provide water in large pans, your rabbits may only have time to drink a little bit before the water freezes. If you use small bowls, you may have to fill them more often because the rabbits will drink all of the water as soon as you set the bowl in the cage.

You might want to use a set of two water dishes for each cage. That would let you thaw and clean one dish while the other is in use in the pen.

Be a Careful Rabbit Raiser

Successful rabbit raisers strive to maintain the best conditions possible for their rabbits. Good managers also try to remove as many sources of stress to their rabbits as they can. This means they constantly watch for signs that their rabbits may be stressed, such as:

- ▶ The smell of stale or tainted air in the pens
- ▶ Too much moisture in the pens
- ▶ A rabbit that sneezes or coughs too often

It takes a special person to brave harsh winter weather to care for rabbits, but that's what it takes to develop a successful 4-H rabbit project. Remember, providing your rabbits with that one extra measure of comfort may mean an extra bunny being born in every litter. It may also help put a blue ribbon in your hand at your next rabbit show.



Acknowledgments

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