

# Safe Grooming Techniques

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Rabbits can act as if they're hardy creatures, but they are, in fact, extremely delicate—from their skin to their spines to their external systems. 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.

## Fleas

Cat flea powder is generally safe for rabbits with fleas. Carbaryl is the ingredient preferred by the House Rabbit Society's veterinary advisors. One must be hesitant to treat rabbits' fleas aggressively, because the cure can be more stressful than the infestation, so flea baths and dips are NOT recommended.

A flea comb is a non-toxic device, which takes more patience, but is both physically and psychologically rewarding. Most rabbits learn to love the attention of being flea combed, and it can be used as a supplement to or as your main flea-control program. If you want to control fleas in the environment with sprays or a flea bomb, do only one room at a time and keep your rabbits out of that room for at least 24 hours.

## Baths

Most rabbits find even an occasional bath quite stressful. NEVER—unless your 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. If your rabbit is very badly infested with fleas, there's a good chance that he is already compromised and may go into shock when bathed. Also, a thoroughly wet rabbit takes a very long time to dry, so spot cleaning the dirty area is better than an over all bath. Since rabbits are subject to heat stress, use a warm dryer, not hot.

## Mats

Rabbit skin is delicate and highly susceptible to cuts, so mats should not be cut off with scissors. Instead, use a mat splitter or mat rake to take the mass apart. Bunny fur usually requires a finer blade than most cats and dogs.

## Skin

Scratchy, flaky skin with bald patches is usually a symptom of skin mites or an allergic reaction to fleas. A veterinarian should be consulted for such skin irritations.

## Feet

If the padding (fur) on the feet is worn down, exposing inflamed or callused skin, then soft dry resting pads (rugs) should be provided. Exposed skin that becomes urine burned or broken is very likely to infect. Take extra care that rugs and litterboxes are kept clean and dry.

## Incontinence

A rabbit with a urinary infection or a disabled older rabbit may not be able to project urine away from the body. The result may be saturated fur around the hindquarters. For milder cases, shave the areas that get wet so the skin can dry (remember, rabbit fur takes a long time to dry), rinse the affected areas daily, and follow up with a dusting of baby powder or corn starch. For more infirm cases, disposable baby diapers-turned backwards so the tabs are up-do wonders for keeping the moisture away from the skin. (Huggies Step 2 work well for an 8 pound rabbit.)

## Ears

If you notice your bunny shaking his head or scratching his ears excessively, or if you notice matter in your bunny's ears, bring him to your veterinarian. In case of ear mites, ivermectin can be prescribed. If it is ear wax buildup, have your veterinarian show you how to clean your bunny's ears.

## Teeth

Rabbits teeth grow continuously and must be checked to ensure that they are wearing down properly. While you're brushing your rabbit or clipping his nails also look at his teeth to make sure there is not a problem. Bunnies with straight teeth will keep them worn down with everyday gnawing and chewing. Buns with malocclusions, or crooked teeth, will need to have their teeth kept trimmed or removed. If this occurs and is left untreated, the rabbit will

not be able to eat and could starve to death. Your veterinarian can show you how to clip a rabbits teeth or she can clip them for you.

## Nails

Rabbits 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; clip just before that point. Dark-colored nails are harder to see where they should be clipped, so it is helpful to shine a flashlight through the nail.

People are often afraid to clip nails for fear that they will cause the rabbit to bleed. You can purchase a product called Kwik Stop to keep on hand for this problem, or hold a cotton ball firmly against the bleeding nail. Your veterinarian will also clip nails for you. They should be checked every 6-8 weeks. Because of risk of infection, declawing is definitely NOT recommended for rabbits.

## Eyes

Watery eyes or and eye discharge needs to be diagnosed by a vet. In addition to any medications or eye drops, the cheek needs to be kept dry and clean so the area will not become chafed nor the fur peel off. Clean tissues will absorb mild wetness.

Ophthalmic saline solution (what people use with their contacts) carefully poured onto the cheek will crystallize the tears so that they can be removed with a clean flea comb. A touch of prescription anesthetic powder on a finger can be applied to the area if there are painful lesions.



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