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RABBIT TRACKS: *Summer Rabbit Care*

Introduction

You can never eliminate all the stress in your rabbits' lives, but you can work to prevent or reduce much of it. This information is designed to help you prevent or reduce the stress on your rabbits that is caused by summer conditions.

As summer temperatures rise, your rabbit's fur coat becomes a problem. Wild rabbits can seek the comfort of their burrows in the cool earth during hot weather, but tame rabbits in hutches don't have that option. They rely on you to provide relief from the heat.

Domestic rabbits need more protection from the direct sunlight, radiating heat and high temperatures of the summer months than they do from the cold wind and snow of winter. Animals that are healthy can endure short-term or minor stresses, but long-term or severe stresses will eventually cause them to break down.

The Comfort Zone

The rabbit's normal body temperature is 102°F to 103°F. Their "comfort zone" (the outside temperatures at which rabbits process feed most efficiently and gain weight the easiest) is 60°F to 65°F. When temperatures are above the comfort zone, rabbits eat less and use more energy to remove heat from their bodies. Since rabbits don't perspire, they lose body heat through their breath and from air movement across their bodies.

A rabbit's ears also help regulate its body temperature. As its body temperature rises, the blood vessels in a rabbit's ears expand and the blood flow through the ears increases. Rabbit ears are large and have very short fur on the outside and almost no fur on the inside. This combination of increased blood flow and lack of fur means



that more body heat can escape from the ears than from any other part of a rabbit's body.

When the temperature is higher than 85°F for 4 or 5 days in a row, mature bucks (age 5 months and up) often become sterile. Even though they continue to mate, their breeding efforts may be useless for up to 60 days. Bucks that mate often (twice a week) are less likely to be affected by high temperatures than bucks that don't mate very often.

If the temperature goes over 92°F, most rabbits will suffer from heat prostration. Fat or excited rabbits and does that are about to kindle are most likely to develop heat prostration. Rabbits with heat prostration have blue lips, tongues and ears; increased heart and breathing rates; wet noses and mouths; frothy, blood-tinged discharges from the mouth; and they pant heavily.

If you see a rabbit that looks like it is suffering from heat prostration, lower its body temperature quickly or it may die. Put the

rabbit in cool (not cold) water for a few seconds. (Be sure to hold its head out of the water. A seriously ill rabbit may not be able to hold its own head up.)

Ventilation

A well-ventilated rabbitry helps create a healthy environment for you and your rabbits. A good ventilation system will bring in an adequate supply of fresh air and distribute it without causing drafts. The system will remove excess moisture, heat and odors from the building.

Ideally, your ventilation system should keep the humidity below 60 percent and the temperature between 40°F and 80°F. Most 4-H'ers can't afford indoor rabbitries with fans triggered by thermostats or automated cooling systems. That means you'll probably need to adjust your system often to keep your rabbits comfortable. Make sure the hutches of your outdoor rabbitries have wire floors and are shaded to provide good air movement and protection from the sun. It would also help to paint the hutches white to reflect some of the sun's rays.

Cooling System

Some rabbit raisers use sprinkler systems to water the roofs of their rabbitries to help lower the temperatures inside the building. Spraying the tops and undersides of outdoor hutches with water will cool them quickly, but if the humidity is very high, spraying rabbitries with water may just make the situation worse. Large fans that move the air without creating drafts around the rabbits may be a better solution for indoor or outdoor rabbitries. You can also set up awnings over outdoor hutches for shade.

When it is extremely hot in your rabbitry, put water crocks or large bottles filled with cold water or ice in the hutches. Cool off nursing bunnies by putting them in a cooling basket made of 1/8-inch hardware cloth and hanging the basket near the top of the pen (but still inside it) during the day. Remember to put the bunnies back in their nest box in the evening to nurse.

Some rabbits (usually smaller breeds and younger animals) handle heat better than others. If one of your rabbits shows signs of heat stress, put it in an all wire carrier on the ground **in the shade** or take it into your basement or another cool place until it has recovered.

Feed and Water

Rabbits normally consume twice as much water as feed. Water is the single most important nutrient to rabbits and other animals. Because water is an inexpensive and abundant nutrient (at least in Michigan), its importance to the well-being of animals is often overlooked. Rabbits must have water to help control their body temperatures. In fact, on very hot days, a rabbit will consume nearly four times as much water as feed. So it's very important to provide an adequate supply of clean, fresh water.



Handling


Handling rabbits during warm weather can be very stressful to them. If you're getting your rabbits ready for a show or some other activity during hot weather, work with them during the cooler morning or evening hours.



Insect Pests

Warm summers usually mean an abundance of insect pests around a rabbitry. Insects are annoying, and may cause your rabbits a great deal of stress. Therefore you should do everything you can to reduce the insect population around your rabbitry. Hauling manure regularly will help cut down on fly breeding sites. The proper use of insecticides, fly bait and insect lights will also help keep insect populations in check. Window, door and air vent screens will cut down the number of insects that make it into your rabbitry in the first place.

Be a Careful Rabbit Raiser

High temperatures can cause serious problems for your 4-H rabbits. Always be on the lookout for signs of heat stress. Know when your rabbits are content and healthy, and what to do when they aren't. By providing a comfortable environment for your rabbits, you'll lower their stress levels, which can improve their physical condition and may improve their show performance. 

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This bulletin was written by the members of the 1985-87 State 4-H Rabbit Developmental Committee. It was designed and illustrated by Cynthia Alderson, 4-H Graphic Artist. The bulletin was edited by Rebecca McKee, 4-H Publications Editor.



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