

# Rabbit Health and Welfare

## Weathering the Weather

Most animals, including rabbits, can adjust to some changes in their environment. When the changes or stresses are too great, however, action on the owner's part is necessary. In these activities, youth will explore how rabbits naturally adapt to environmental changes, test for the impact of environmental change on rabbit habitats and make decisions about what to do to reduce stress caused by the change.



**Rabbit Skill:**

Brainstorm and test ways to keep rabbits comfortable under different conditions.

**Life Skill:**

Making decisions

**Success Indicator:**

Decides the best ways to keep rabbits comfortable in hot or cold weather

**Time Involved:**

40 to 60 minutes

**Suggested Group Size:**

Six to ten

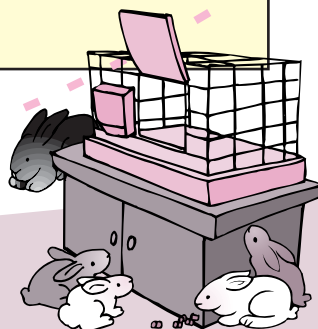
**Materials Needed:**

Thermometer, fan, sheet of plastic, rags, plastic bottles, all-wire hutch, water.

## Getting Started

To introduce the experience, ask the youth to pair up and think of ways a rabbit adapts naturally, or responds to hot and cold weather. Have each pair give one answer at a time.

**Possible answers** - panting, shivering, increased heart beat, faster breathing, fur coat, blood vessels in ears expand and blood flow increases so body heat can escape (have youth examine a rabbit's ears), etc.



## Hop to it!

Divide the group into teams of three to four youth. Give half the teams one situation and task, and the other half the second situation and task.

### Situation 1

Imagine that the temperature is 100°F, the humidity is 80% and there is no breeze.

### Your Task

Think of at least ten ways to keep a caged rabbit cool. Using charades, present your ideas to a Situation 2 team. See how many ways they can guess.

### Situation 2

Imagine that the temperature has dropped to 20°F, a strong north wind is blowing at 30 miles per hour and it is snowing.

### Your Task

Think of at least ten ways to keep a new litter of rabbits from getting too cold. Using charades, present your ideas to a Situation 1 team. See how many ways they can guess.

Bring the teams back together and talk about the experience and about making decisions. Ask questions such as the following to guide the discussion.

# Rabbit Rap

## Share What You Did

What did you do after you received your assignment?  
How did you decide how to present the charades to the other team?

What charades were easiest to figure out? Why?

What ways did your team think of to help rabbits be comfortable? Discuss how each way will help.

A: (possible responses)

Hot weather - sprinklers, fans, shade, ice-filled plastic bottles, soaked carpets or rags, wire nest boxes, all-wire hutches, handle in morning or evening, water available.

Cold weather - face hutches to the south or east, block wind, snow and rain, set hutches next to building, cover with plastic sheeting, cover newly kindled kits with clean, dry fur, keep nest material dry.

## Process What's Important

Why do rabbits need more protection in hot weather than in cold weather?

A: Rabbits can easily become overheated. If extreme, it can lead to death.

What would you do if a rabbit becomes so hot it develops heat prostration?

A: If a rabbit pants heavily and its lips, tongue and ears turn blue, heart and breathing rates increase, and mouth and nose are wet, lower the body temperature immediately by putting the rabbit in cool water (head out) for a few seconds.

## Generalize to Your Life

Why is it important to have plenty of information before making decisions?

What kinds of things do you do to keep your own living environment comfortable?

## Apply What You Learned

In what ways will working with and learning from your rabbits help you make better decisions in your life?

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# Rabbit Facts

## Cold Weather Tips

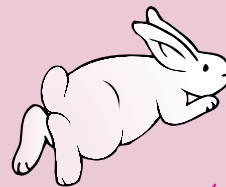
Whenever the expectant doe is exposed to temperatures of 45 degrees Fahrenheit and below, special management techniques must be used to protect the young kits.

It is very important that the "core temperature" within the nest be maintained at approximately 95 to 98 degrees Fahrenheit at all times during the first 10 to 12 days.

The appropriate size nest boxes must be used. The closer the kits "huddle" in the nest, the more heat is conserved by each of the kits in the litter.

Absorbent materials should be placed on the bottom of the nest box. Wood shavings, peanut hulls, finely shredded paper, cat litter, etc. should be used to absorb moisture.

The colder the temperature the more absorbent the nesting materials need to be. Wooden nest boxes are best for cold weather kindling. Strict attention should be given to the floor of the nest box. Most of the heat loss from the kits is through the floor of the nest. To prevent loss through the floor, use several layers of newspaper in the bottom of the box or put in a layer of Styrofoam. You need to put a board or wire bottom over the Styrofoam or the doe will tear up the Styrofoam. Some breeders attach Styrofoam to the outside bottom of the nest box.



## Bounding Ahead

1. Conduct an experiment to see how changing conditions affect a rabbit's hutch. Use a thermometer and something to simulate a wire hutch and a wooden hutch. List and graph the temperatures in the different situations you create. Perform each test on both types of hutches. Examples to test for different effects might include: direct sun, shade, water on roof, fans, plastic cover, fur cover, water-soaked rags, ice filled plastic bottles, etc. After you complete this experiment, discuss with your adult helper or group what kinds of things work best to control temperatures.
2. Visit a rabbitry or pet store to see how the environment is controlled.

# Post Mortem

Learning to conduct a necropsy (after death examination) is a valuable skill for rabbit breeders.

There are very few diagnostic laboratories for rabbits in the U.S. If a breeder wants access to information available from rabbit specialists, she needs to become proficient in performing necropsies at home. In this activity, the youth will be able to participate in an actual necropsy. Since it is unlikely a dead rabbit will be available when this lesson is scheduled, substitute a fryer.

**Rabbit Skill:**



Determining healthy vs. unhealthy animal tissue.

**Life Skill:**

Learning to learn

**Success Indicator:**

Necropsies a rabbit.

**Time Involved:**

40–60 minutes

**Suggested Group Size:**

Six to ten

**Materials Needed:**

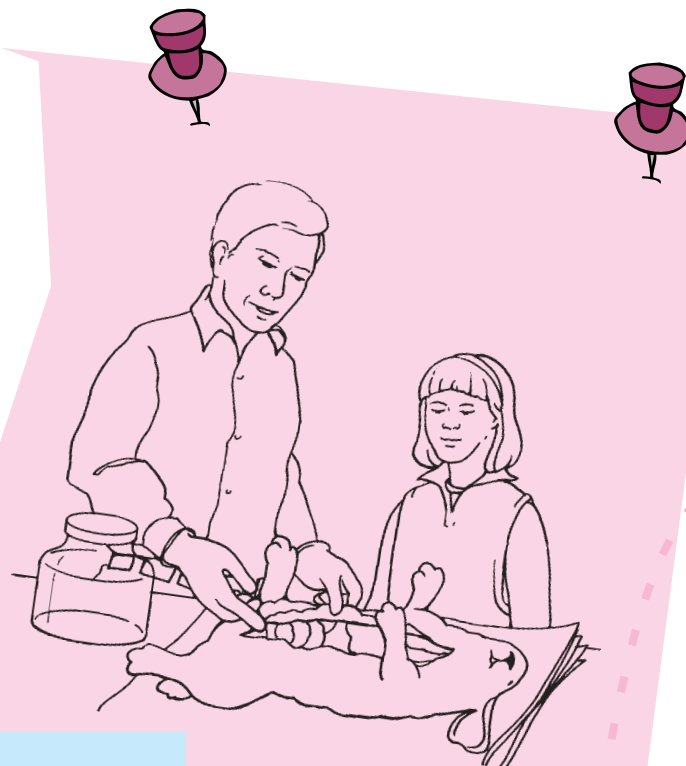
Dead rabbits (one per two or three youth), scissors, sharp knife or scalpel, rubber gloves, specimen bottles filled with 10% formalin or alcohol, plastic, newspapers, disinfectant, chalkboard or flip chart.

## Getting Started

Before you begin the necropsy activity, discuss with the youth what this experience will be like. For many people this experience may be uncomfortable. Have the group work in teams with an adult assisting each team.

### “Hop to it!”

The steps for performing a necropsy are outlined under Rabbit Facts. To do a necropsy, find a place where you will not be disturbed. Be sure the room is well lit. Cover the area with plastic (garbage bags will work fine), and lay several layers of newspaper on top of the plastic. Before you proceed, have ready a pair of scissors, sharp knife, rubber gloves and specimen bottle. Preserve any abnormality you find and keep it for a professional examination.



**HC NOTE:**  
Make drawing more detailed! Realistic?



# Rabbit Rap

## Share What You Did

How did you feel about doing a necropsy? Why do you think you felt this way?

How did you decide what to do when you split into groups?

What was the hardest part of doing the necropsy? The easiest part?

## Process What's Important

What did you discover about the rabbit you examined?

How did you preserve any abnormalities?

## Generalize to Your Life

What did you learn about your observation skills?

Where else is it important to use excellent observation skills?

What other things have you learned by observation? How have you applied them?

## Apply What You Learned

How can you use the information learned in the necropsy to be a more skilled rabbit breeder?

How is information from a human autopsy used?

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Did you know

The disease believed to cause the greatest loss of rabbits is coccidiosis.

# Rabbit Facts

## Steps in Performing a Necropsy

1. Put on rubber gloves and examine the dead animal very carefully. Notice any abnormalities or external parasites.
2. Lay the animal on its back with the neck and legs extended. Check the size and condition of the animal. Is the animal the correct size for its breed and age?
3. Make the first incision just in front of the genitals through the skin and muscular wall. Continue cutting along the mid-line (center) to the chin. Be careful not to damage any of the internal organs during this procedure.
4. Carefully expose the abdominal viscera. You may wish to make lateral incisions at the hind legs and just behind the rib cage.
5. Look for any excessive fluid within the abdominal cavity.
6. Carefully examine the abdominal viscera.
7. Remove the liver. Examine it for any abnormalities on the surface. Now carefully cut the liver to examine the internal structure.
8. Remove the kidneys and examine them externally and internally.
9. Remove the spleen and examine it externally and internally.
10. Examine the stomach; note the size, color and condition.
11. Examine the small intestine; note the size, color and condition.
12. Examine the cecum; note the size, color and condition.
13. Examine the large intestine; note the size, color and condition.
14. After examining the exterior of the gastrointestinal tract, carefully open up the tract and check the lining for abnormalities.
15. Clean up the debris from the examination of the gastrointestinal tract.
16. Open the chest cavity. Examine the lungs and heart abnormalities.
17. Examine the windpipes for abnormalities.
18. Carefully dispose of the carcass and debris.
19. Disinfect the gloves and clean up all the instruments used.

The team members first necropsy may be rather crude, but with practice they will easily recognize abnormalities.

# Bounding Ahead

1. Study five diseases common to rabbits.
2. Observe a veterinarian doing a necropsy.

# Lights, Camera, Action!

Individuals and groups around the world are becoming increasingly interested in the welfare of animals including pets, farm animals, lab animals, animals used for recreation and wild animals. This interest has caused those who raise animals to continually analyze if they are caring for these animals in the most humane ways possible. One area highly visible to the general public is the exhibiting and showing of animals.

**Rabbit Skill:**



Debating animal welfare issues  
Relating to others  
Role-plays a news conference on animal welfare at a fair.

**Life Skill:**

**Success Indicator:**

30–45 minutes

**Time Involved:**

**Suggested Group Size:**

six to thirty or more  
Paper and pencil for news reporters, video camera (if available)

**Materials Needed:**

## Getting Started

In this activity, youth will have the opportunity to present their feelings and view through an interview process. The youth will role-play any one of these roles: news reporter, camera person, youth showing an animal at the fair, person with strong animal welfare views and beliefs, parent or volunteer who works with youth groups interested in animals.

Before beginning the role play activity, ask each person to pretend to be a person who is not familiar with raising animals and who is visiting a fair in which animals are being exhibited and shown. Ask the group to name as many activities as possible that might be seen as either being harmful to animals or simply not natural for animals to do or to have done to them. After a list is generated, move to the experience.

Possible answers: ways in which animals are moved, loaded and unloaded, fed and watered, moved with show whips or canes, penned, shown, trimmed, tied up, auctioned, led around with halters, etc. In the case of rabbits, possible answers are how they are held, penned, fed, judged, etc.

## “Hop to it!”

Divide into groups of six people and present the following situation and task to do:

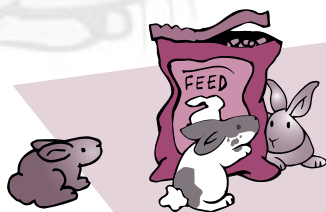
### Situation:

A news reporter and camera person are at the fair in the animal exhibit barns. These news people are interested in a story for the 6 p.m. evening news dealing with the animal welfare issue. They have asked a youth who is showing animals, a parent, a volunteer who works with the youth groups interested in animals and a city person who doesn't believe in eating meat and who is a strong spokesperson for animal welfare to be interviewed together.

### Your Task:

Each person chooses one of the six roles to play. After you know what role you'll play, meet together for about ten minutes with those who are playing the same role in their groups and think of possible questions and replies for your character. Then move back to your group again. The reporter will conduct the interview on the topic, “Why are Animals Treated as They Are?” Following the interview, the reporter and camera person will prepare and present a TV news story along with the reporter and camera person from all other groups as a summary for the interview.

If you have several groups of four to six, conduct the news conferences simultaneously. Have the news teams give their reports separately so everyone can hear what the major points were in each group.



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# Rabbit Rap

## Share What You Did

What happened in your news conference?  
How did you feel in your role?  
What points of view did each person have about animals and their welfare?

## Process What's Important

What were some common themes or thoughts you heard?  
How were each person's view points and beliefs the same? How were they different?

## Generalize to Your Life

Why is it important to control your emotions when confronted by someone who has very different views than you?  
What did this tell you about our right of free speech?  
What other situation like this have you had?

## Apply What You Learned

What will you do differently next time you are interviewed or confronted by a person with ideas very different than yours?

**Photo:**  
of youth with rabbit talking  
to a reporter

**Acknowledgments:** Adapted from the Kansas 4-H Poultry Curriculum Notebook.

# Rabbit Facts Media Questions to Consider

1. How does the media help develop public policy?
2. How is public understanding of animal welfare increased through media coverage?
3. How can good media relations be achieved through consistent contacts with the news media?
4. Why is it important to wait a few minutes before doing an interview with a reporter?
5. Where is the best place for an interview?
6. Why should you ask the reporter for a list of questions in advance?
7. What is the value of questions asked off the record?  
Note: Nothing is really "off the record"!
8. Why is it important to know when the article will run and how long it will be?
9. When might radio interviews be conducted over the telephone?
10. Why is it important to make an appointment before dropping by to see the editor?
11. Why should you look at the camera when being interviewed for television?
12. Why is it important to prepare a short standard message for broadcast interviews?
13. Why is knowing plenty of facts important in preparing for an interview?

# Bounding Ahead

1. Interview a news reporter or weekly newspaper editor. Find out how news is collected and what kinds of questions get the best responses. Share what you learned with the group.
2. Find out what groups interested in rabbits are doing to promote humane care of animals. Share what you discover with the group.