

## **Rabbits, Cages, and Broken Backs**

Our topics for this week are:

- **Handling risks for rabbits**
- **Safer methods for handling rabbits**

Pet rabbits are European rabbits, not the wild cottontail of North America. They are the most popular household pet mammal after dogs and cats. Their primary means of defense is to run and hide. Their quickness is facilitated by large, very muscular hindlimbs and thin, fragile bones.

### **Approaching and Catching**

When handling a rabbit, it is critical that their headquarters are supported and restrained. Otherwise they may kick in an attempt to escape. If the kick is not opposed by a nonslip surface, the kick may overextend the back and cause dislocation or fracture of the spine. Handlers should grasp the skin behind the rabbit's neck while the other hand scoops up the rump. The rabbit should be turned so that its head is tucked under the handler's arm while he maintains a grasp on the neck and support the hindquarters. This is called the football hold. Some rabbits will bite, so care must be taken to avoid putting fingers near their mouth.

No effort should be made to restrain or pet the head. Rabbits will strongly resist manipulation of their head, and attempted restraint of the head could lead to a broken neck.

### **Handling for Routine Care and Management**

Rabbits will try to twist and kick when resisting restraint which can cause back injuries, including fractures. If they kick with suspended hind legs, they can fracture their spine or otherwise damage their spinal cord. In addition, they also have sharp claws that can injure the handler, if allowed to kick during handling. Slick floors can also endanger rabbits due to risk of back injury.

Rabbits should never be given an opportunity to kick while being restrained or released.

The ear flaps of rabbits are important to their hearing and contribute to heat dissipation. They are delicate structures that should never be used for restraint.

A safe means of restraint is to gently scruff the skin on the back of the neck. If using a scruff hold, the hind legs must be supported and restrained. Lifting a rabbit by a scruff hold alone is likely to result in the rabbit fracturing its back by kicking. The safest means to move a rabbit is in a travel crate is to support it with both of the handler's arms.

Most routine procedures can be performed on rabbits while they are in sternal restraint on a table. A nonslip mat should be placed on the table. Otherwise, rabbits may struggle, kick frantically and fracture bones. The handler should keep at least one hand on the rabbit at all times. If holding with one hand, the rabbit's rump should be pushed against the handler's abdomen while one hand presses down on the top of its shoulders. If restraining with two hands, one hand presses down on the shoulders and the other on the rump. Toenails can be trimmed with the rabbit in sternal position by lifting one foot up at a time. Additional restraint can be applied with towel wraps around the legs and rump, but not the head and ears. The ears require exposure to air movement to control the rabbit's body temperature.

Examination or treatment of the ventral aspects of the body can be performed by grasping the rabbit's front legs with one hand, turning the rabbit over and supporting the hindquarters with the other hand. The rabbit's body should then be in a C-shape.

Rabbits should be removed from cages rump first to prevent feet from getting caught in a wire mesh floor. To place a rabbit into a cage or box, it should go in rump first facing a side wall or facing outward. This prevents it from kicking back and spraying litter out of the box and scratching the handler's arms. The handler should ensure that the rabbit's legs are resting on the surface and ready to support its weight before releasing by pressing the rabbit down and then releasing with both hands at the same time.

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If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at [CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com](mailto:CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com)

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Rabbits' hindquarters must always be supported and restrained when being handled or picked up.**
- 2. Rabbits' ears should never be handled for restraint or wrapped in a towel for handling.**

**3. When removing a rabbit from a cage, it should be scruffed and the hindquarters fully restrained before the rabbit is lifted up.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: [www.betteranimalhandling.com](http://www.betteranimalhandling.com) . This website has more than 200 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.