



Water

The Need for Water

Water makes up about two-thirds of a rabbit's body. It helps the rabbit digest food, absorb nutrients and remove waste. It also helps keep the rabbit's body temperature within a normal range (102 °F to 103 °F).

A rabbit's water loss is constant – in its waste, breath and perspiration. To work well, its body must take in water often enough and in enough volume to replace what it loses and to form new tissue and blood.

The water that rabbits need can come from three sources:

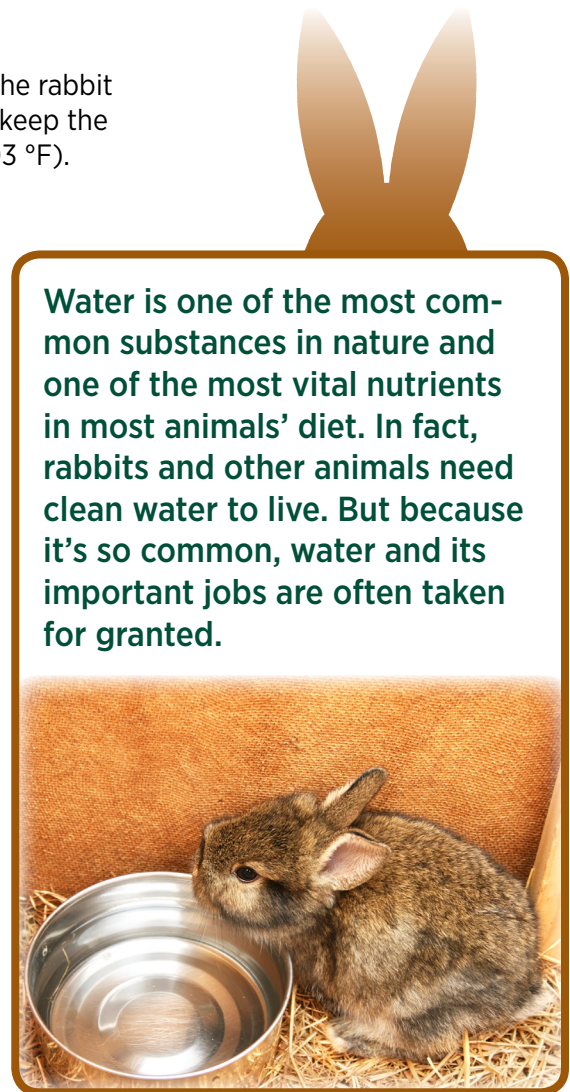
- ▶ Its drinking water
- ▶ Its food (even the driest food has some water in it)
- ▶ Its body (called “metabolic water,” this is a product of chemical reactions in the rabbit's body)

Metabolic water and the water in dry feeds provide only a small percentage of the water rabbits need. Most of their water must come from drinking water. When you keep your rabbits in pens, they depend on you to provide the drinking water they need.

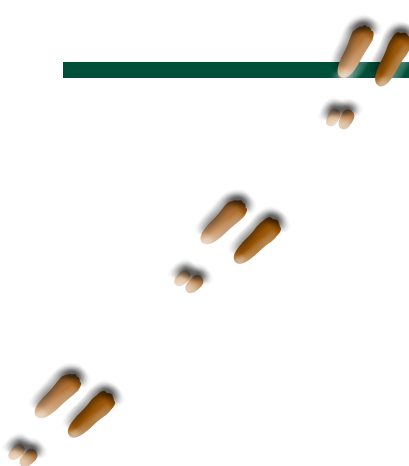
Your rabbits will die much sooner from lack of water than from lack of food. They can lose up to one-half of their body protein and survive. They can lose nearly all their body fat and survive. However, a loss of only 10 percent of their body water can be fatal.

Your rabbits can miss a feeding sometimes, but should have a good fresh supply of water every day. In fact, if you don't give your rabbits drinking water for even one day, they could die.

Rabbits often consume two to three times more water than feed. This may change if you give your rabbits a new type of feed. It may also change if the air is too hot, too cold or too humid. Like humans, rabbits drink more water on hot days, when they may consume up to four times more water than feed. On a normal day a doe and her litter will drink about a gallon of water.



Water is one of the most common substances in nature and one of the most vital nutrients in most animals' diet. In fact, rabbits and other animals need clean water to live. But because it's so common, water and its important jobs are often taken for granted.



Water temperature can also affect how much rabbits will drink. If their water is nearly freezing (32 °F) or above 90 °F, they will probably drink less than usual. On a warm day, when the temperature is above 75 °F, rabbits prefer cold water. They like tepid or warm (not hot) water when the weather is cold.

If you don't water your rabbits often enough on cold days, they may wind up drinking too much very cold water at one time. Then they have to "spend" a lot of the body heat they build up from the calories in their food to warm all of that cold water to their normal body temperature. That means your rabbits will eat more, but will get less nutrition from the feed. (See 4-H 1439, *Rabbit Tracks: Winter Rabbit Care*, for tips on making sure your rabbits have enough water during cold months.)

Water Quality

If you give your rabbits stale or unclean water, they'll drink less than they would if the water were clean and fresh. This will slow their growth and cause poor reproduction.

Dirty water crocks in your rabbitry (the place where you keep your rabbits) are perfect breeding places for germs. Automatic systems can get dirty and collect germs, too. So it's important that you clean and disinfect every waterer regularly. This will help ensure that your rabbits have wholesome, fresh water at all times.

Rabbits need small amounts of a variety of minerals in their diet to stay healthy, and they can get many of them from water. Too much of some minerals, however, can be toxic or poisonous to your rabbits.

If you think a water supply might be unsafe, have your local health department or a commercial company test it for contaminants and mineral content.

Water is the most important – and probably the least expensive – nutrient your rabbits need. Water can help prevent some costly health problems. One of the best and simplest things that you can do for your rabbits is to give them an ample supply of fresh, wholesome drinking water every day.



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