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## SAFE CARE AND HANDLING OF RABBITS

*Clover Safe notes are intended primarily for 4-H volunteers and members nine years and older.*



*Photographs Courtesy of  
Elkus Youth Ranch*

### Rabbit Characteristics

Rabbits belong to the order of mammals called Lagomorpha which also includes hares and pikas. When living in the wild, rabbits spend their time on the ground eating green grasses and leaves and avoiding predators such as hawks and coyotes. Because rabbits are preyed upon by other animals, they have well developed senses of smell, hearing, and long distance sight. Furthermore, rabbits are capable of high speed running and maneuvering to escape predators. Rabbits also are excellent diggers and will burrow out underground homes, called warrens, where they feel

protected and prefer to rest and sleep.

### Safe Care and Handling of Rabbits

Being aware of rabbit characteristics provides guidance on how to safely care for and handle rabbits as follows:

- Rabbits have a natural instinct to flee and at first, may resist human contact by kicking, scratching, and/or biting when handled. Slowly allow your rabbit to become familiar with you by sitting on the floor and letting the rabbit first explore you.
- Initially touch the rabbit by gently petting the top of its head or stroking its back.
- Begin to pick up your rabbit after the rabbit has become familiar with you. Carefully pick up your rabbit by sliding one hand under the rabbits haunches (hind legs) while using your other hand to gently hold the rabbit under the chest. This lifting procedure protects the rabbit's spine while being picked up.
- Never pick up a rabbit by the ears.
- Avoid creating loud/sharp sounds and/or making fast movements to prevent spooking your rabbit.
- If scratched or bitten by a rabbit, notify your group leader, parent, or guardian. Wash the wound with soap and water and cover with a clean bandage. Seek medical attention if the wound is large/deep or appears to be infected.
- A rabbit's diet should consist of green rabbit pellets with fresh hay and some fresh vegetables. Never feed a rabbit chocolate, cookies, crackers, bread, cereal, or table scraps. A piece of apple or a carrot is considered a treat by a rabbit.
- Healthy rabbits require exercise and should be allowed out of their cage or pen for several hours daily. If you allow a rabbit to roam inside parts of your home you will need to rabbit proof those portions of your house.
- If a rabbit does not respond to your attention or moves away from you, leave it alone. Be patient and let the rabbit interact with you on its terms.
- Never chase a rabbit for fun. It will think it is being hunted.
- A rabbit cage or pen should be large enough to comfortably accommodate the fully grown rabbit and for that rabbit to stretch out and lie down.
- Always wash your hands with soap and water after handling a rabbit or any other animal.

