

Welfare Issues in Breeding Does

Physical wellbeing

Welfare Issue	Problem	Solution
Physical confinement in cages	Lack of space for exercise and natural behaviour Lack of height to rear on hind legs	Use indoor pen or outdoor free range systems with no height restriction. Provide sufficient horizontal space (at least 4500cm ² per rabbit) and vertical space (no height restriction)
Insufficient fibre in diet	Poor dental health and gut function	Provide permanent access to hay, grass or leguminous plants (such as alfalfa)– loose, or in a rack or compressed tube
Poor physical comfort	Wire flooring	House rabbits on non-wire flooring. Alternatives include plastic, rubber or bamboo slats, or straw bedding on solid floor (requires frequent replenishment to prevent disease)
Poor thermal comfort	Heat stress	Ensure ventilation systems maintain the temperature in a rabbits thermal comfort zone (<25°) and they have sufficient space to cool down (e.g lying stretched out) in warm climates
High replacement rates	Major causes are infertility and mastitis, enteric and respiratory disease	Provide a hygienic, well-ventilated environment
High disease rates	Poor hygiene, diseases include Coccidiosis and Pasturellosis, respiratory disease, and parasitic or fungal infection	Provide a hygienic, well-ventilated environment which is cleaned thoroughly between batches. Coccidiostats can be used to prevent Coccidiosis
Injury	Hock lesions Pododermatitis Aggression injuries	House breeding does on non-wire flooring. Group housed does are at risk of aggression between individuals. They should be provided a high space allowance and aggression problems should be closely monitored.
Kit mortality	Kits killed by other does	Does should have individual nest boxes for giving birth and during early lactation

mental wellbeing

Welfare Issue	Problem	Solution
Boredom	Barren environments	Provide stimulating housing conditions with enrichment including platforms, tubes and gnawing and chewing items
Individual housing (female does and male bucks)	Social isolation, stress	Does can be group housed, with careful management and sufficient space to prevent serious aggression
Fear	Unfamiliarity with humans, noise and disturbance, open spaces	Handle rabbits regularly and gently from a young age to reduce their fear of humans. An enriched should be provided, rather than empty open space, including platforms which offer different levels and tubes for hiding. Noise levels should be minimised
Inability to regulate maternal behaviour	Inability to access or escape kits when needed	Does should be provided free access to their nest box, and the opportunity to avoid the growing kits, for example via a platform only the doe can reach for resting

Natural behaviour

Welfare Issue	Problem	Solution
Abnormal behaviours	Bar biting, hair pulling	Providing stimulating housing conditions with meaningful enrichment
Aggression	Aggression between adult does or bucks	Aggression between does should be minimised through keeping group stable, separating them around kindling and providing ample opportunities to escape aggressors. Bucks need to be kept in a group of does or apart, with visual contact
Restriction of species-specific behavioural expression	Social isolation	Does can be group housed, with careful management and sufficient space to prevent serious aggression