

How to handle a rabbit:

Practice makes perfect!



Courtesy of:
Ontario Rabbit Education Organization
www.ontariorabbits.org

APPROACHING YOUR RABBIT

Begin by stroking the top of your bunny's head. Do not offer your hand for a bunny to sniff the way you would to a dog. Many rabbits may find this gesture offensive and may attack (a fast lunge with a snort). Most rabbits do not like having the tips of their noses or chins touched.

HANDLING YOUR RABBIT WITH CARE

Rabbits are incredibly cute and everyone wants to hold them! The problem with this is that being lifted and carried can be a frightening sensation for a rabbit. A rabbit's primary means of defense is being able to run away when in danger. When a predator captures a rabbit in the wild, that predator picks the rabbit up and carries it off. With all four feet suspended off the ground, a rabbit has no way to escape should something scare him, so it is instinctual to fear being picked up.

Does that mean you should never pick up your rabbit? No, but it does mean you need to use patience, sensitivity and the right handling technique to reduce or eliminate fear in your rabbit. In time, many rabbits do learn to enjoy being held and cuddled.

LIFTING YOUR RABBIT

Bunnies should never be lifted by the ears. It is up to you to teach your pet to accept being picked up. He may run away, hide or struggle at first and, when caught, he may even kick or launch into space. A normally affectionate bunny may wriggle, stamp his feet or nip you as he attempts to retain solid ground. So be prepared before you lift! The key to safely handling your rabbit is to position him within a few inches of you to shorten the suspended-in-air stage.

The easiest starting place is a small area accessible from the top, such as a top-opening carrier or cage, pen or small room with no hiding places. If your rabbit is underneath something like a piece of furniture, try coaxing him out with food first.

BACK END FIRST

If you must pull a rabbit out of a hiding place, try the backwards method. Pet your bunny firmly. Turn him around so his bottom is facing the door you must get him through. Take his chest in one hand to prevent forward movement and, with the other hand, maneuver his hind end towards you. Once you have the hind feet out, the hard part is over.

THE BEGINNER LIFT

1. In a kneeling position, pet with one hand, while sliding the other hand down your bunny's side.



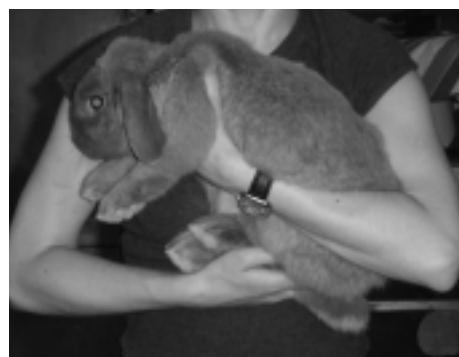
2. With your arm at bunny's side, slide it under his torso while your petting hand moves towards his backside.



3. Support the bunny's chest with your hand and his torso with your arm. Lift while the other (unseen) hand supports the rear end.



4. Once your bunny is lifted, hug him securely against you with one arm, supporting his body and the other arm supporting his hindquarters.



PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

The more you practice, the more confident you will be, and the more readily your rabbit will accept being lifted. If you repeat the beginner lift several times in a row, setting your bunny down immediately and rewarding him with a treat, his apprehension will decrease.

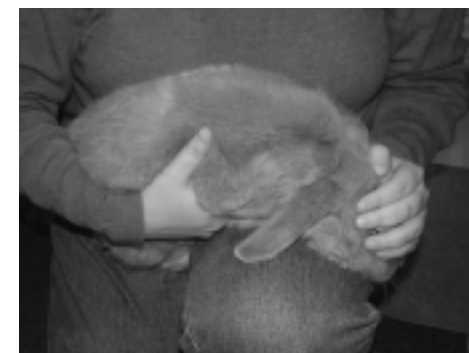
Rabbit skeletons are light and very fragile and therefore easily susceptible to trauma from falling, twisting and kicking. If you are lifting or carrying a rabbit and he begins to struggle, try not to let it go: instead, hug the rabbit to you using your body as a splint. This will protect the rabbit as well as prevent him from hurting you.

If you cannot keep the rabbit from getting away, then fall on your knees to keep the rabbit from falling too far to the ground.



RELEASING YOUR RABBIT

Prevent injury by squatting down before you release your bunny, turning him around and setting him down facing you. You may also try to cover your rabbit's eyes with your hand - if he can't see freedom coming, he won't fly into space.



MIX AND MATCH

There are several methods for lifting and handling your rabbit safely, depending on the size and temperament of your rabbit and what feels right. Each rabbit has its own preference, so if you are having trouble handling your bunny, try a different technique. Ask our volunteers about their preferred method of handling. Even free range house rabbits can benefit from lifting drills followed by treats so you are both prepared when grooming, traveling or medicating are needed.