

Rabbit Handling



Disclaimer

A series of booklets has been developed by the Clinical Skills Lab team (staff, recent graduates and students) from the School of Veterinary Sciences, University of Bristol, UK. Please note:

- Each booklet illustrates one way to perform a skill and it is acknowledged that there are often other approaches. Before using the booklets students should check with their university or college whether the approach illustrated is acceptable in their context or whether an alternative method should be used.
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Equipment for this station:

- The booklet pictures show a real rabbit
- When practising in the Clinical Skills Lab (CSL) use a model rabbit
- Box/carrier
- Towel

Considerations for this station:

- There is a useful supporting document found on Blackboard; Animal Management 2 → Practicals → Exotics → Exotics Practical Handling Booklet
- Always be careful to handle rabbits safely; a rabbit may wriggle, take fright, can kick out with its powerful hindlegs and can injure itself and/or you.

Anyone working in the Clinical Skills Lab must read the 'CSL_I01 Induction' and agree to abide by the 'CSL_I00 House Rules' & 'CSL_I02 Lab Area Rules'

Please inform a member of staff if equipment is damaged or about to run out.



Clinical Skills: Restraining a Rabbit



1 Rabbits are generally nervous animals and care must be taken when approaching them to avoid startling them or causing unnecessary stress.

It is also important to remember that when nervous or feeling threatened, rabbits can give a powerful kick. They also have sharp incisors and can bite, and sharp claws that can cause deep scratches.



2 Approach the carrier, box or cage quietly, making no sudden movements. Carefully open the carrier, box or cage and stroke the rabbit gently if it allows, in order to calm the animal.



3 Lift the rabbit up from underneath, supporting the thorax with one hand and the hindquarters with the other hand. The hind feet should be flat in the palm of your hand or held between your fingers.

Be careful not to let the rabbit twist, jump or flip as they can seriously damage their spine.



4 The rabbit should then be held close to your body for security, with one hand supporting the thorax and the other supporting the hindquarters.

The rabbit's head should be tucked into the crook of your elbow or armpit area.



5 If a rabbit is aggressive, it can be helpful to place a towel over the rabbit prior to lifting.

Covering the eyes may also help to calm the rabbit, but be careful not to restrict breathing.



6 Place the rabbit on a table for examination.

Ensure a towel is on the table surface as this helps the rabbit feel more secure and prevents slipping.

Before examining the rabbit, allow it to relax and sit in a natural position for a short period of time.

N.B. Keep a hand on the rabbit at all times or ask an assistant to hold the rabbit.



Clinical Skills: Restraining a Rabbit

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For most of the examination the rabbit should be able to remain in a natural position on the table (see Step 6 on the previous page).

However, when examining the ventral area it is easier to have the rabbit in an 'upright' position.

8



Lift the rabbit while supporting the thorax with one hand and the hindquarters with the other hand. Then turn the rabbit so its rump is cradled into your hand with the dorsum (back) against your body. At this point, the rump can either remain supported in your hand or be placed down onto the table (ensure there is a towel on the table).

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Restraining a rabbit using these techniques can be useful when you need to:

- Examine the ventral perineal area e.g. flystrike
- Clip a rabbit's claws
- Determine the sex of a rabbit (see next page)

N.B. It is important to have the rabbit's dorsum gently but firmly against your body to prevent wriggling and excessive movement.

10



Wrapping a rabbit in a towel can be a useful technique for restraint e.g. when administering medication or examining the head of a nervous or aggressive rabbit.

First, select an appropriate size towel and laying it out flat on the table.

11



Place the rabbit in the middle of the towel with the longer ends either side of it.

12



Wrap one side of the towel over the rabbit's dorsum (back) and then tuck it under the rabbit's ventrum on the opposite side.



Clinical Skills: Restraining a Rabbit



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If there is enough of the towel free at the rump area, fold it up and over the lumbar spine.



14

The remaining side of the towel is then brought over the dorsum and tucked under the ventrum on the opposite side. While doing this, ensure the front feet are secured within the folds of the towel.

Only the rabbit's head should be visible.



15

Practise the techniques described on a model rabbit first. Then when confident with the technique have a go on a live rabbit e.g. one in the Live Anatomy Barn.

It is sometimes helpful to perform the towel wrapping with the rabbit facing towards you, especially if it is particularly wriggly.



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There may be a rare situation where it is necessary to restrain a jumpy or aggressive rabbit by the scruff to avoid injury. However, it is important to remember that holding a rabbit by the scruff can be stressful and so should be avoided unless absolutely necessary.



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When **scruffing** a rabbit, hold the scruff with one hand and support the body and hindquarters with the other hand and arm. Place the head in the crook of your elbow or armpit area (see picture in Step 4).



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Dorsal immobility response, or 'trancing', is a method of restraint that was used in the past. However, it has now been shown to be stressful for the rabbit and therefore should be avoided wherever possible.

This method can however, be useful in some situations where restraint is crucial and some stress is unavoidable.



Clinical Skills: Sexing a Rabbit



Sexing a rabbit: The rabbit should be securely restrained (see Step 7).

With your hand over the genital area, part the fur and apply gentle pressure on either side of the genitals.

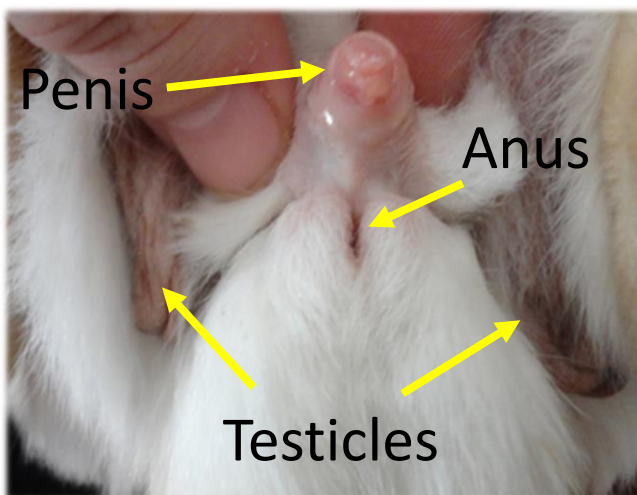
If male, the penis will protrude as a round pink tube with tiny hole at the end.

If female, the structure is oval with a long slit-like opening.

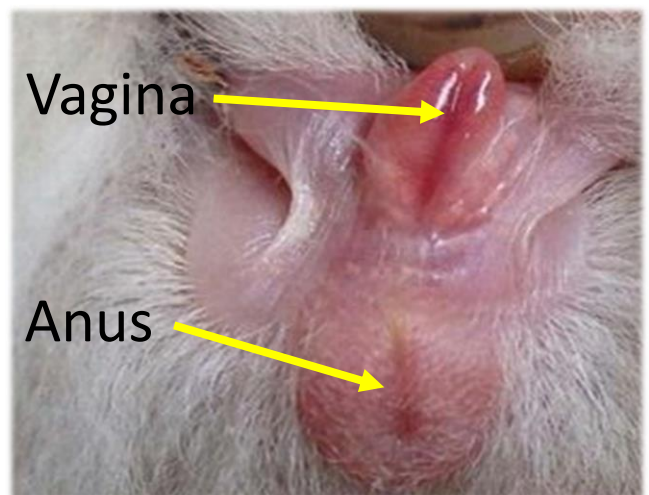
In adult rabbits, the differences between males and females are usually quite clear.

Most rabbits can be accurately sexed from about six weeks of age.

However, care must be taken when sexing younger animals as mistakes can be made.



This is a **male rabbit**. The testicles are visible. The penis is protruding from the penile sheath as a circular shaped tube with a pointed tip and a small opening at the end (urethra).



This is a **female rabbit**. The visible genital structure is the vulva which is oval shaped with a long slit-like opening - the entrance to the vagina. In female rabbits, the urethra opens into the vagina.



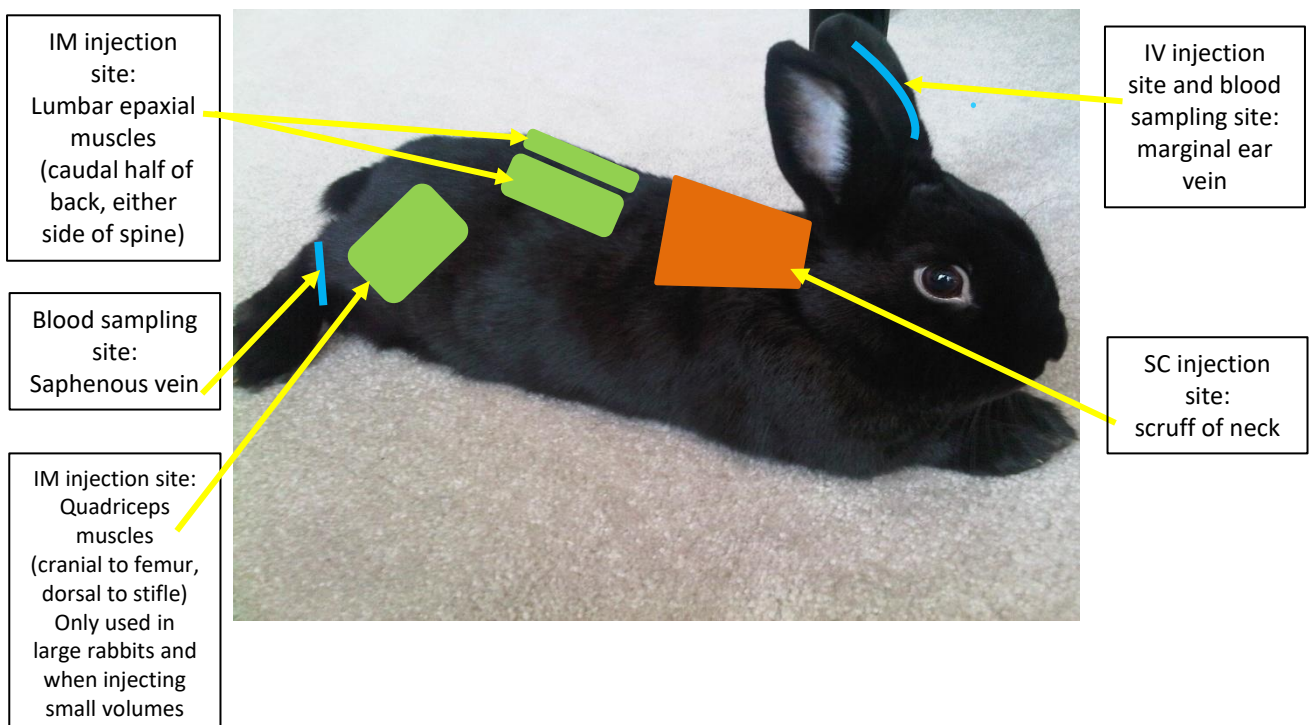
Rabbit Handling Injection sites

Injection sites for rabbits include:

- **Subcutaneous** - scruff of neck
- **Intramuscular** - lumbar epaxial muscles or quadriceps (*only large rabbits and when injecting a small volume*)
- **Intravenous** - marginal ear vein
- Intraperitoneal – with EXTREME caution due to risk of puncturing gastrointestinal tract.

Blood sampling sites:

- Marginal ear vein - most commonly used
- Lateral saphenous vein
- (*Jugular vein*)
- (*Cephalic vein*)





- Rabbits are not rodents they are lagomorphs.
- Male: Buck
- Female: Doe
- Young: Kittens or kits
- Oestrus: Prolonged in the absence of a male. Ovulation is induced by presence of a male.
- Pseudopregnancy can occur
- Gestation: 30-32 days
- Birth weight: 30-150g depending on the breed
- Size of litter: 4-12
- Stage of development at birth: Young are born with eyes closed ('blind') and hairless
- Eyes open: 8-10 days
- Weaning age: 5-8 weeks depending on breed and litter size
- Breeding age: usually female 4 months; male 6 months or potentially from time when testicles descend (approximately 3 months)
- Adult weight: 1-6kg depending on breed
- Breeding life of female: 2-3 years
- Breeding life of male: 3-5 years
- Life expectancy: 5-10 years
- Rectal temperature: 38.5 – 40.0 °C
- Heart rate: 150 – 300 beats/min
- Respiratory rate: 30 – 60 breaths/min (potentially higher if stressed)



- Covering the eyes can help to keep a rabbit calm, so can applying gentle pressure applied along the dorsum (positive thigmotaxy)
- It is sometimes a good idea to have the rabbit's head facing towards you when beginning a clinical examination; this is because a rabbit may try to run away from you and/or towards its owner.
- Sexing young rabbits (before 6 weeks of age) can be difficult and mistakes can be made. Therefore, it is best to wait until the rabbits are at least 6 weeks old.
- If in doubt when sexing a rabbit, ask a colleague to check.
- It is important to sex rabbits as early as possible (*but when old enough to be certain*) as rabbits can start breeding from as young as 3 months old.