

Rabbits and the cold of Winter

August 2019

Will your rabbit survive, tolerate or be comfortable in the cold?

It is winter in South Africa, and with temperatures often dropping in some parts of the country to below zero, *RabbitCare South Africa* receives many enquiries about the minimum temperature a rabbit can survive in. However, at RCSA and the *Little Bunny Sanctuary*, we approach this issue from a slightly different angle. To us, there is a difference between the lowest temperature a rabbit can tolerate and being comfortable. There is also a difference in how you take care of indoor rabbits compared to outdoor rabbits. Our primary concern is to keep the rabbit comfortable. A comfortable rabbit will survive the cold. It is as simple as that.



Cold weather

Rabbits are vulnerable to extreme temperatures - whether hot or cold. Although they cope better with the cold than heat and can endure lower temperatures than humans, placing them in a damp and draughty cage outside can be detrimental.

Also keep in mind that the smaller your rabbit is (including dwarf breeds), the more susceptible it is to low temperatures as its smaller body mass cannot retain as much heat than that of a larger rabbit. In the wild, rabbits dig burrows. Deep in these tunnels, the temperature is usually very stable, even cosy as the rabbits snuggle up together!

Indoor rabbits and cold weather

The Royal SPCA in Britain advises an ideal temperature range of between ten and twenty degrees Celsius for domestic rabbits. At ten degrees, humans would start to complain and turn the heat up to beyond twenty degrees. Therein lies the problem for indoor rabbits - what is comfortable for us, may not be comfortable for them, especially during the winter when they grow a thicker coat.

With this in mind, carefully consider a living area for your indoor rabbits. First, the area should be away from draughts and kept dry. Do not use heaters, whether those emitting convection or radiant heating. Never direct heaters at your rabbits. Also, refrain from using electric blankets for rabbits. They may chew on it and shock themselves, causing injury or even death. When the rabbits' living area becomes very cold, and the temperature drops below zero, a good alternative is to place a heated cloth bag in the pen. These bags, which you can easily make at home, are filled with uncooked rice and heated to a lukewarm temperature in the microwave. Regularly check that your rabbit is not chewing through this bag.

Rabbits will also consume more food and water in winter as they instinctively fear their food supply will become scarce in the cold.

Outdoor rabbits and cold weather

Caged outdoor rabbits face more significant challenges during winter. Additional precautions must be taken to keep them comfortable and healthy. If your outdoor rabbits live in an enclosed camp, where they are on the ground, they may naturally dig tunnels. However, you will still need to ensure that those tunnels do not flood during rains and that the rabbits can hop onto a raised platform, should the camp be wet and muddy. If they are not digging tunnels, you need to provide shelter.

When using a cage, move it somewhere warmer, preferably to an enclosed space such as an unused¹ garage, an outdoor building or your covered patio or porch. If this is not available, place the cage somewhere sheltered under trees, for example, where it is protected from wind and rain.

There should be no gaps in the cage walls through which cold air, wind and rain can enter. Also, ensure that wooden cages have no damp or rot. Tell-tale signs are water stains or marks on the inside of the cage. In an emergency, line the inside of the walls with a newspaper. To prevent damp, the roof should be watertight and in a good state of repair. A sloped roof that allows water to run off, is preferable. Also, cover the roof with a plastic sheet. Newspapers and a blanket can be placed between the roof and the plastic layer to create excellent insulation. Allow the blanket and plastic sheet to hang down the sides and back of the hutch for extra protection. Prevent floor damp in the cage by placing it on bricks. Raising it off the ground will keep rainwater from rotting the wooden base of the hutch. It will also stop frost from freezing the cage floor.



Additionally, use a cardboard box inside the cage to keep the rabbit more insulated. This snuggle box² must be closed on all sides with a single opening big enough for the rabbit to get through.

¹ Car exhaust fumes can be fatal. Car and garage door noise can be stressful to the rabbits, causing health problems.

² Or should this “snuggle box” be called a “cuddle box” where there are more than one rabbit? :-)

Fill the box with hay for comfort and insulation. However, consider the size of the box as the rabbits must still have enough room in the rest of the cage to move and stretch.

Inspect the bedding daily to ensure it is clean and dry. Urine in the toilet area can freeze in the cold and make the living area unpleasant.

Line the floor of the cage with newspaper and a thick layer of hay and straw (straw is better for insulation). Change it regularly for optimum health. Try not to use blankets on the floor as rabbits may chew on them, which causes internal blockages.

See that the water in the water bottle or bowl outside is not frozen or too cold for the rabbits to drink. Avoid this by simply pulling a thick sock over the bottle! Be careful though, because even when the water remains in a liquid state, the spout of the water bottle (usually made of metal) may ice up.

Check your rabbit's bottom for flystrike, a painful and sometimes fatal condition caused by flies laying eggs on animals, which hatch into maggots. Flystrike can happen even in winter as flies seek out the warmth of the cage.

Remember that fresh air and good air circulation must be maintained for your rabbit's health. Although a cage cover must protect from the cold and harsh weather, it should still allow for fresh air.

If you decide to move the cage indoors and give them some floor time, you will need to rabbit-proof the area.

Rabbits are very social animals and enjoy the company of other rabbits and humans. Owners may be prone to visit the hutch less in cold weather but keep it up as continued interaction is essential to rabbits.

Rabbits never hibernate. Sluggishness, not eating and weight loss can indicate health issues. These symptoms can unintentionally or easily be overlooked when you see your outside rabbit less.

As you may have guessed, indoor rabbits have it much easier during winter. They are socially more involved, and you can spot any health issues much faster. That is why *RabbitCare South Africa* always recommends that your rabbits share your home with you. We never recommend caging rabbits, but we do realise that for some rabbit parents, this option is inevitable.

We trust that these pointers will help to keep your rabbits comfortable during winter. Stay warm!

Have questions? Need some advice?

Our contact details are on the next page.

RabbitCare South Africa (RCSA)

"for the happiness, health and general wellbeing of your pet rabbit"

RabbitCare South Africa (RCSA) is a non-profit group helping rabbit owners take proper care of their pets. We promote the welfare of domestic rabbits and believe rabbits should be treated as companion animals and never be permanently caged. *RabbitCare South Africa* believes most abuse is the result of ignorance. We therefore distribute free educational material and provide tips and advice for the happiness, health and general well-being of pet rabbits. Rabbits are not easy pets - they are exotic pets with very special needs.

Contact RCSA:

- RCSA website for articles and herbal remedies: www.rabbitcaresouthafrica.org
- Follow RCSA on Facebook®: www.facebook.com/rabbitcare.southafrica
- Follow RCSA on Twitter®: <https://twitter.com/RabbitCareSA>
- Text, phone, *Whatsapp*® or *Telegram*® RCSA on: 0797562454
- RCSA email address: contact@rabbitcaresouthafrica.org
- *RabbitCare South Africa* operates in association with *Little Bunny Sanctuary* (a registered NPC)

Little Bunny Sanctuary (LBS)

Little Bunny Sanctuary is a non-profit organisation who has saved abused, neglected and abandoned rabbits. We strive to give the rescued bunnies the TLC that they have been deprived of. We have beautiful bunnies waiting to be adopted.

Contact LBS:

- Follow *Little Bunny Sanctuary* on Facebook®: www.facebook.com/LittleBunnySanctuary/
- Email *Little Bunny Sanctuary*: info@littlerabbitsanctuary.co.za
- Text, phone or *Whatsapp*® *Little Bunny Sanctuary* on: 0617178601
- *Little Bunny Sanctuary* operates in association with *RabbitCare South Africa*

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