

Animal Research Review Panel Guideline 27-M

Research Animal Rehoming Guideline – Rabbits

Introduction

This guide is designed to support the implementation of the Research Animal Rehoming Guidelines and can be used by everyone involved in the use of rabbits for recognised research purposes. It provides specific guidance on the assessment of research rabbits for rehoming. This guide aims to:

- assist in the assessment of whether the physiological condition and behavioural attributes of the rabbits indicate that they can be rehomed with only minimal, transient impact on their wellbeing
 - prioritise the welfare of the rabbits and the safety and satisfaction of the public
 - ensure rabbits being rehomed are fit for their intended purpose, healthy and up to date on all standard preventative care
 - ensure rehoming conforms to national, state, and local legislation and regulations.
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Approach to rehoming

Research establishments may institute their own rehoming program, or they may partner with one or more external rehoming groups. Before assessing animals for rehoming, it is essential to decide on the avenues for rehoming, taking into consideration:

- internal resources to manage the rehoming of the animal
- agreements in place with external rehoming groups
- availability of a suitable owner or responsible organisation to:
 - maintain the animals
 - provide routine husbandry procedures
 - assist with special needs of individual animals
- the capacity (number of animals) that can be rehomed via the research establishment's own rehoming program and via external rehoming groups.

Establishing good communication with rehoming groups can be beneficial as they can provide advice on:

- the likely success of rehoming
 - best methods of rehoming (e.g. attempt to rehome rabbits so they are held as compatible male/female pairs)
 - preparing the animals before they are released from the research establishment
 - identification of special cases and care strategies where an animal may need assistance to transition from the research environment
 - information/animal profiles needed to assist in rehoming.
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Eligibility for rehoming

If an animal is healthy or has manageable health or behavioural issues it should be considered for rehoming.

Where animals are eligible for rehoming, assessment for rehoming should consider:

- the animal's age and life expectancy. These are not usually primary determining factors
- the animal's general and physical health and wellbeing
- the procedures the animal has been involved with and any ongoing sensitivities that may have resulted with respect to animal handling, feeding and general care. Appropriate consideration of these may include behaviour modification to improve the animal's response and/or notifying the new owners of the animal's specific sensitivities
- whether the rehoming process is likely to have minimal, transient impact on their wellbeing.

Rabbits are commonly kept and thus suitable food, care information and veterinary services are available. It is strongly recommended that male and female rabbits be desexed prior to rehoming. It assists in managing male behaviour and preventing uterine cancer in females.

There are situations where rehoming of an animal is not an available or appropriate option. These situations should be identified in your accredited research establishment's rehoming policy.

Some of these situations will be clear before research commences, for example:

- the AEC has approved the reuse of the animal for research
- the AEC has approved the humane killing of animals for essential sample collection or testing
- laws and regulations that prohibit rehoming, for reasons such as risk to public health, biosecurity and the environment. For example, there may be restrictions on releasing animals that are genetically modified or that have been treated with certain substances (e.g. drugs, chemicals, infectious agents) and devices.

Other situations may only become apparent during the research project, or at its conclusion, for example:

- the AEC and institutional designated staff responsible for rehoming have good reason to believe that rehoming would not be in an animal's best interests, with consideration given to the quality of life and life expectancy of the animal, including instances where the cumulative impact from use could have negative welfare outcomes for an animal
- when the behaviour of an animal indicates that it may pose a risk to public safety.

It is recommended that the research institution, rehoming organisation and prospective owner review the relevant legislation prior to any rabbits being rehomed. Current NSW animal welfare legislation is available on the NSW DPI [Animal welfare regulation](#) webpage. Possessing, moving and releasing of wild/feral European rabbits is generally prohibited by the [Biosecurity Regulation 2017](#), as is the use of [live vaccines](#) on any rabbit.

During the research project

Planning for the eventual rehoming of animals involved in research should be integrated into the animals' care plan from the beginning of their involvement in any study. The rehoming coordinator should ensure that appropriate monitoring of the programs of socialisation, habituation, environmental enrichment and training are occurring during the research project to increase the chance of successful rehoming. These programs should be outlined in the accredited research establishment's procedure for the preparation of animals for rehoming. The rehoming coordinator

should ensure early remedial action is taken, if possible, where an animal is deviating from the desired outcomes of those programs.

Periodic behavioural assessments should be carried out and recorded by animal care staff during the research project. There may be benefits for team morale in involving staff in the rehoming process – e.g. by forming a small rehoming committee. Staff should record individual animal behavioural observations, to be used when assessing the suitability of animals for rehoming. Where these observations reveal animals are stressed, efforts should be made to remove or reduce the stressors if possible.

Rabbits should receive all applicable routine prophylactic treatments.

Following conclusion of use

If animals are to be desexed and this has not occurred prior to the commencement of, or during, the research project, then determination of whether this is required should occur at the conclusion of the research project.

A final assessment of animals should not be undertaken until the animals have been given time to recover in a suitable environment that provides for normal species-specific behaviours.

Prior to making a final assessment, efforts should also be made to rehabilitate animals with known problem behaviours or health conditions that temporarily make them unsuitable for rehoming. It should be noted that rehoming organisations may be prepared to take on or assist in rehabilitating such animals.

Physical assessment of rabbits

Rabbits should be assessed by a veterinarian as being physically healthy before rehoming. A physical assessment should consider:

- general demeanour
- movement and mobility: should walk and hop with normal mobility and range of movement
- neurological soundness: general reflexes (sight, hearing), not ataxic (uncoordinated)
- body condition score, for example, a score out of 5:
 1. Emaciated – ribs, spine and hip bones obviously visible
 2. Thin – ribs and top of vertebrae visible, with obvious waist. No palpable fat on rib cage
 3. Ideal – well-proportioned muscle and fat over the ribs, spine and hip bones
 4. Overweight – ribs, spine and pelvis palpable with difficulty. Waist not obvious. Fat obvious on spine and base of tail
 5. Obese – ribs difficult to feel under fat. Obvious belly
- coat and skin: look for signs for alopecia, ectoparasites, inflammation, lumps, growths, signs of infection, lesions, trauma, faecal matting and abnormal grooming
- respiratory tract: coughing, sneezing, nasal discharge
- eyes: should be clear, have symmetrical and normal pupil response, and be free of discharge
- eyelids and gums: pink colour rather than pale or grey
- dentition: no obvious issues with teeth, bite or chewing, including excessive overgrowth of teeth
- ears: should have no discharge, inflammation or foul odour
- general heart and lung field auscultation/exams: no issues

- limbs and feet: no obvious lameness, swelling or pain on palpation. Feet are normal
- nails: trimmed and neat
- mid-section: not swollen or bloated
- faeces: pelleted rather than runny or loose
- any history of diarrhoea, inappetence or unusual drinking or urination
- any other abnormality.

The significance and appropriate management of any abnormal findings must be determined with veterinary advice. Base rehoming decisions on the expected impact on the rabbit's long-term quality of life.

Behavioural assessment of rabbits

Rabbits assessed as physically sound should be behaviourally assessed prior to rehoming, to gauge their likelihood of adapting to post-research life.

It is important to consider the context in which this behavioural assessment takes place. For an animal that has little experience of novel environments and unfamiliar people it would be reasonable to expect it will find many environments unsettling. If it recovers quickly and is actively engaged with its normal behaviour towards humans and their environment, it may be more resilient and therefore more suitable for rehoming.

Where possible, assessment of animals should take place in an environment outside normal territory and housing. Where possible, conduct behavioural assessments on animals that are not stressed to better understand their suitability for rehoming.

This assessment should be undertaken by people that are familiar with species-typical behaviour (usually a suitably qualified animal care staff member and a veterinarian). It should take into account the history of behavioural assessments carried out and recorded over time by animal care staff since the commencement of the research project.

Reasons for conducting behavioural assessments include:

- assessing animals for rehoming
- assessing what kind of environments may be suitable for the animal (e.g. homes where they can be separated from small children or other animals)
- understanding the temperament and needs of the animal
- exploring whether the animal displays any behaviours that have bearing on their rehoming.

A behavioural assessment should consider whether the rabbit:

- interacts positively with a variety of people who are familiar
- allows you to approach it without running away
- approaches your hand
- eats food from your hand
- allows you to pat it
- allows you to pick it up without trying to bite
- sits on your lap for several minutes without attempting to escape
- grooms when sitting on your lap
- attempts to bite or kick when being picked up
- has a history of positive interactions with other rabbits in the animal research establishment

- tolerates other rabbits
- is able to be held in a group or in pairs (most research rabbits are rehomed as compatible desexed pairs).

Presence or absence of one of these behavioural characteristics should not by itself ordinarily preclude rehoming. Potential recipients who are aware that an animal does not possess preferred behavioural characteristics may still wish to rehome it.

It is the responsibility of the establishment to decide on the applicability of specific temperament assessment tools to its situation.

The response of an animal is best recorded as a description of behaviour (e.g. bites or kicks), rather than an interpretation of the behaviour or emotion (e.g. angry, scared, excessively reactive or aggressive) so that the animal is judged as objectively as possible.

A rabbit with undesirable behaviours can often be rehomed satisfactorily when the recipient has been informed and is prepared to accept such behaviours. Experienced recipients often have the capacity to improve such behaviours.

Fear of humans can be reduced if rabbits have regular positive interactions with animal carers.

Behaviour can change dramatically after rehoming. Stressors tend to be reduced living outside of a research establishment - mostly due to the fact that animals can usually exhibit a greater range of natural behaviours in the rehoming environment and housing.

References

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