

Lazarus Babies

(Resuscitating Frozen Newborn Rabbits)

Article Courtesy of Theresa Wooden, Brightside Woolies

Disclaimer: I am not a vet. The following advice is only what I have learned through personal experience and research and it is what works for me. You should always contact your veterinarian for professional advice and assistance.

Anyone who has been breeding rabbits for any length of time has had to deal with the situation of “frozen” newborns. Whether the doe failed to pull wool to insulate the litter, scattered the litter on the floor instead of using a nesting box, or a baby somehow fell out of the box, it is always heartbreaking and frustrating to find lifeless babies left in the cold.

The technical name is “*Hypothermia*”, a condition in which the body temperature has dropped below that required for proper organ function. The physiological processes slow down and the need for oxygen is reduced. Circulation can even be stopped for long periods of time.*

This means that a kit can appear completely lifeless but is actually still alive.

“*A victim is not dead until they are warm and dead,*” is an old medical saying that applies to baby bunnies as well.*

Hypothermia can be broken down into three categories: Mild, Moderate and Severe* If you should find a kit suffering from mild to moderate hypothermia (see below) you have a very good chance of bringing it back around and returning it to a healthy litter. You may be able to bring a kit suffering from severe hypothermia (see below), back to consciousness. However, the complications in such a case make it questionable as to the logic in proceeding with the therapy (see below).

Mild Hypothermia in Newborn Kits

You will find the kit alive, possibly even still in the nesting box. When you pick it up to examine it, you will see that it moves its legs and body as if it were in slow motion. The kit will feel cool to your touch, instead of the toasty warm of a healthy kit. This situation is especially likely to arise when there is only one kit in a litter. Without litter mates, the kit loses body heat and can not stay warm.

At this stage, you can easily save the kit just by keeping it warm in your hands or against your tummy for half an hour or more, until it becomes lively and warm again. You could also use the water therapy as listed with moderate hypothermia (see below).

The key here is that you must apply some type of external heat source, since the kit is unable to raise its own body temperature. Don't just drop it back into the nesting box or it may continue to spiral downward into hypothermia again. Even if a healthy litter is

available to return the kit, I would still warm it first. Dropping a frozen kit into a small litter of warm kits could result in a whole litter of cold kits.

Moderate Hypothermia in Newborn Kits

In this case you are usually finding a kit or kits that have been scattered on the wire floor of the cage. When you pick them up to examine them, you may or may not see any movement of the legs or body at all. They may appear to be dead.

Immediately take the kit inside your house and fill a bathroom sink or bowl with **lukewarm** water.

Place the kit into a baggie and spread the top open. Place the baggie into the water and let the kit float in this little “boat” in the water for fifteen to twenty minutes while you watch for signs of movement. I usually let the baggie fold around the kit and pull it down into the water slightly so that the entire surface of the body is in contact with the warm water. **Just don’t let any water enter at the top of the baggie!** As the water cools, you may add more warm water to keep it just warm but not hot.

It is important to state that you do not want to place the kit into extremely warm or hot water. You must raise the body temperature slowly to avoid shock. You must not allow any water to get into or around the newborn kits nose/mouth/head. Some people hold the kit under running water but in my opinion, the chance of aspirating water into the lungs would be too high.

After five to fifteen minutes you may begin to see a leg or foot move slowly. As the kit becomes warmer it will move more actively. You may need to increase the temp of the water slightly once the kit begins to come around, still remembering to make it only warm, not hot.

You need to allow a hypothermic kit at least an hour or more of warming before returning it to the nest box and a warm litter. It takes time for the body systems to stabilize after the trauma and for the core temperature to rise to normal.

If you do not see any movement after fifteen or twenty minutes, then the kit is either severely hypothermic or is dead.

Severe Hypothermia in Newborn Kits

These are kits suffering from major exposure. They may have been in the cold for hours or all night before you find them. The body may be stiff or may be somewhat limp. When they are put into the warm water therapy you will not see life signs in fifteen minutes. However, if you check again in an hour you may see them begin to come around.

The problem is that the only safe way to re-warm this type of hypothermia is with internal therapy (IV fluids, warm air lung ventilation). They need to be warmed at the core first, then warmed to the extremities.*

Applying external heat sources will warm the muscles and legs, but that sends cold blood circulating to an already extremely low core temperature and causes an overload on the heart and results in shock:*

The baby will appear to come around for a few hours, but then begins to cry in pain and goes into seizures and eventually death results. It is heartbreaking and I have personally decided not to continue with therapy on kits that I believe are severely hypothermic. If they do not respond to the water therapy in fifteen minutes or so, then I let them pass on. If you decide to take on a case of severe hypothermia, then you absolutely must seek veterinary help. The prognosis is usually very poor.

Follow Up Care

Once the kit is warmed and returned to a nesting box with a healthy litter, you'll just need to keep an eye on it. If it was only suffering from mild hypothermia, then it should have absolutely no problems. If it had been brought back from moderate hypothermia, then you may want to watch it for a few days to make sure it is getting along.

I have found that kits which come out of moderate hypothermia are more likely to become dehydrated. This is partly due to the trauma itself and probably partly due to the fact that they are weaker after the trauma and may not compete as well at nursing time.

To check for dehydration: Pull up a section of skin over the kits back or side; if it remains pulled up after you release ("tenting") instead of snapping back, it is dehydrated. The kit will also appear wrinkled instead of fat and glossy. It may act weak and move slowly.

If a kit is dehydrated, you may need to force the doe to nurse it on its own, or you may want to use a syringe (w/o needle) to give it a few drops of Pedialyte a few times a day. Seek veterinary's advice.

***Research source: Hypothermia in Animals by Dr. J. S. Tuli, B.V.Sc., M.V. Sc., Phd.**