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Post-weaning care and management in Rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*)

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Introduction:

Rabbit and its domestication dates back to late Middle Ages/Medieval period and were spread throughout by the Romans, who reared them as game animal. Of late, rabbits have been gaining popularity as alternative source of animal protein for human consumption, owing to its attributes like shorter gestation interval, early maturity and large liter size. Rabbits can be fed on grass/hay, concentrates and are excellent converters of feed in to bio-mass. Rabbits attain rapid growth between 4-12 weeks of age and are marketed as "Fryers" for human consumption. The commercial viability of a Rabbitry depends on its ability to rear rabbits effectively during pre and post-weaning periods. This article focusses on important aspects of post-weaning care and management, to ensure growth and survivability of growing rabbits.

Nutrition and Feeding management:

Kits until weaning depend on doe for nutrition. The average lactation period in does range between 18-21 days. Hence, it is advised to introduce roughage and concentrates to the kits, at least a week prior to weaning. This helps in transition and acclimatization to concentrates and roughages fed during post-weaning. The concentrates fed should be composed of Maize, Ground Nut Cake, Wheat Bran and mineral mixture (in prescribed portions/fractions). The concentrate should be ground to coarse form and fed daily in a clean feeder, after clearing of the left over. The recommended Dry Matter Intake (DMI) for growing rabbits is 6-8% of body weight, whereas for adults DMI should be 5% of body weight. Clean water should be made available ad libitum in waterer or through nipple water drinking system. Feeding of lucerne (about 40-50 g) once, daily is advised as they are excellent source of protein and fiber. Care must be taken while feeding breeding males, as they tend to become obese through excess feeding, thus effecting the libido of the breeding males. Lactating does should be fed with extra amount of green roughage, apart from the standard feed offered. The waterer and feeder should be cleaned regularly to reduce contamination and spread of infection.

Housing:

Rabbits are usually weaned at the age of 28 days/4 weeks from doe and are ear tagged and sexed at the time of weaning. Tagging the weaned rabbits helps in identifying and recording/monitoring their individual growth for its utility as breeder/commercial stock. Rabbits post weaning is separated based on its sex and are reared individually in cages of dimension 1.8x1.8x1.8 ft (LxWxH) up to four months of age or marketing age. As a measure of growth, body weights are recorded at every 2 weeks interval. Further, estimates of average daily growth during post-weaning period helps in selection of breeders for future stock. Global feed conversion ratio of rabbits is 3.1 to 3.2 and focus on measuring the same, through recording of daily feed intake and left over for individual rabbits is advised. This helps in retaining rabbits with desirable FCR in the stock and culling of the others at an early stage of growth, thus enhancing the economic sustainability of Rabbitry. The optimum humidity and temperature of the rabbit shed must be between 50-60% and 15-22°c, respectively. Increase in temperature or humidity would affect the productivity of the rabbits, owing to stress. During summer care must be taken to mitigate the rise in temperature through, use of foggers or sprinklers over the roof of sheds and during winter it is advised to maintain the optimum temperature inside the shed through heaters or any another measures.

Disease/Infection Control:

Hygienic measures in the sheds ensure lower incidence of disease. Ear inflammation/Otitis, Mange/Skin infection are the

two common infectious conditions encountered in rabbitry. Isolation, followed by treatment is the suggested way to encounter and prevent further spread in the rabbitry. Apart from the above two common infections, pneumonia and diarrhea are also observed among growing rabbits. Contamination of feed, roughages, unhygienic cages & sheds are the probable reasons for incidence of pneumonia and diarrhea among rabbits. Regular cleaning of cages, daily disposal of feces, urine, daily cleaning of waterer, feeder are some of the essential management practices to be followed to control the spread of infection/diseases. Growing rabbits between the age of 6-10 weeks could often be observed to suffer from enterotoxaemia, due to high energy component in the concentrate feed offered. At times the symptoms are acute and result in sudden death of the animal and incidence of diarrhea among the others. It is always advised to ensure prescribed components of ingredients in the concentrate feed fed to rabbits and to provide green/lucerne to optimize the fiber content in the daily ration.

Conclusion:

Post-weaning management in rabbits play an essential role in determining the economic viability and sustainability of rabbitry. Rabbits exhibit rapid growth between 4-12 weeks of age and feeding optimum/recommended diet, reduced or minimal handling of rabbits, sanitized cages and shed, daily monitoring for symptoms of diseases and disorders would ensure sustained growth and survivability among rabbits.

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