



NEST BOX EYES

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Your favorite brood doe has kindled, made a beautiful nest and has saved all eight babies on one of the coldest winter nights. You breathe a sigh of relief as you have been waiting on this litter by one of your new herd bucks. The litter is now three weeks old and beginning to make their first move to leave the nest. All eight babies are snow white and plump from mother's milk. But wait! For some reason their eyes are still closed. We all know that by twelve days of age a new born bunny opens their eyes for the first time. But these bunnies are three weeks old and their eyes still haven't opened. This scenario frustrates even the best of breeders during the cold days of winter. This sometimes frequent occurrence will cause blindness in half or more of the bunnies born in cold weather.

Nest box or matted eyes is caused by bacteria present in the nest box litter. A question you may have is why don't bunnies born in the spring and summer have this same problem? During the warm weather the bunnies tend to stay on top of the nesting material rather than burrow down underneath as they do in winter. This behavior of burrowing deep into the litter during the winter will keep the bunnies warm but also places them in direct contact with their own urine and fecal matter and its' associated bacteria.

My experience has shown, the trick or solution to the problem is to minimize the young rabbit's instinct to burrow into the litter. I have accomplished this by keeping a heat lamp on the litter from birth to four weeks of age. The heat lamp is secured by ringing the wire guard on the heat lamp shield to the top of the cage. Angle the lamp so it shines on the side of the nest box, rather than right over top. Getting a heat lamp too close can cause more harm than good. I use a 250 watt clear heat bulb. The warm environment created by the heat lamp, will make the young bunnies feel comfortable and reduce their instinct to burrow to keep warm. This will significantly reduce the incidence of nest box eyes.

Some other recommended management tips which can be used in place of or in combination with a heat lamp are as follows:

- * At birth remove all soiled litter, afterbirth, dead young and replace with clean nesting material. Sometimes a complete change of nesting material is necessary.
- * Use clean, non irritating nesting material. Examples include: straw, grass hay and shavings. I prefer shavings that are free from sawdust.
- * After the doe kindles, replace the nesting material 2-3 times per week.
- * Use the right size nest box. Oversize nest boxes tend to invite the doe to set up quarters along with her young.



- * Check the bunnies at twelve days of age to make sure all eyes are open. Physically open any eyes which are closed and check bunnies twice a day for a week or until their eyes remain open.
- * Make winter nest boxes deeper. This will allow you to place a layer of shavings then a piece of floor wire over top. You can then add your final layer of nesting material on top of the floor wire. The floor wire creates a barrier between the bunnies and the soiled litter below.
- * Use nursery boxes. When the bunnies are 2-3 weeks of age, remove them from their nest box and place them in a shallow sided nursery box. This allows for more air circulation and a cleaner environment for the young.
- * If you still encounter a case of nest box eyes, the use of eye drops and other ophthalmic medicinal compounds are available as rescue treatments. However their effectiveness is at best 50%.

Using the aforementioned management practices has nearly eliminated nest box eyes in my rabbitry. The one significant draw back to using heat lamps is the increased utility bill. Heat lamps must also be securely attached to the cage to prevent fire. Attaching the heat lamp to the top of the cage also eliminates the opportunity for the nesting material to come in contact with the bulb. I hope this information helps.