

Using Tellington TTouch® for Rabbits

By Lauren McCall, Instructor
Newberg, OR

A series of two articles on how to apply simple
TTouch techniques
for common health and behaviour issues.
(Or “How to keep your bunny happy and hopping healthy”)

Series Overview

If you are reading this article you probably have at least a passing interest in rabbits, or in learning more about how to work with small animals. Some of you will be dedicated “rabbit people”. You know who you are. You have stories to share about bonding challenges or nod sagely when someone talks about the ravages of E. cuniculi. Whether you are a small animal lover or someone who regularly works with rabbits, I have written these two articles for you. The first article will focus on general tips and behaviour issues, and the second on health concerns.

Some of the general principles of working with small animals most certainly apply to working with rabbits (i.e. sensitive nervous systems, applying TTouches to small areas, gentle handling and so on). There are, however, issues both health and behaviour related that are more particularly common among rabbits. These would include health concerns like head tilt, gastrointestinal (GI) hypomotility/stasis, shock and malocclusion. Behaviour difficulties might include bonding with other rabbits, biting, stress thumping, and shyness.

The basket of TTouch tools I will refer to are generally well-known and include: the Coiled Python, Lying Leopard, Clouded Leopard, Raccoon, Chimp, Llama, hair slides, ear and mouth work and Tiger TTouches. I will also refer to belly lifts, and body wraps. Though I will briefly describe how to do the belly lift and body wrap, this article assumes a certain basic knowledge of TTouch. If you feel like you need a brush up, please refer to any of the excellent books written by Linda Tellington Jones, and the All Wrapped Up book for pets by Robyn Hood.

General Tips on Working With Rabbits

One of the key aspects of working with rabbits is being able to determine their level of stress. A rabbit who is hunched up, head down and ears flat back is probably not a happy bunny. A frightened rabbit will sometimes shut their eyes, willing the perceived threat to go away. While body posture is a useful indicator, I prefer to keep an eye on the respiration rate. Rabbits have a higher respiration rate than many species, about 30-60 breaths per minute. It’s tough to count breath rate in a rabbit, so I use a rather non-scientific tool I call “the wiggle rate”. Try to observe how fast your bunny’s nose wiggles, or twitches as they breathe when they are relaxed doing their normal routine. This is a good visual baseline. When stress is present, the wiggle rate on the nose will increase quickly and markedly. When I am working with a rabbit, I am actually keeping an eye on it’s nose! Most animals ultimately find the TTouch tools calming, but occasionally the uncertainty of what you are doing



Photo: Lauren doing
TTouch on one of her
rabbit friends.

can cause a slight increase in the respiration rate of a bunny. This is nothing to worry about. It may mean that you need to change what you are doing (try a different TTouch for example) or perhaps give the bunny a short break, or touch the rabbit in a way that you might normally interact with them (petting, scratching, etc.) incorporating the occasional TTouch as you go along. I have found that rabbits generally settle very quickly into whatever TTouches I am doing with them.

One of the keys to working with rabbits (all animals in fact) is for you to be relaxed using soft joints and having a normal wiggle rate yourself. Rabbits like most animals are sensitive to the signals you are

giving off while you are around them. If you are stiff and holding your breath, the bunny will be inclined to suspect that you are up to something and they will be watchful and tense. Set a good example and model the relaxed state you are looking for in your bunny. Whether working with a rabbit on a table, on the floor or in my lap, I prefer to work from behind them so that we are both facing the same direction. This keeps them from backing away from me and enables me to lightly contain the bunny with my forearms. I am usually “asking” the bunny to stay with me by placing my thumb at the shoulders and my four fingers lightly stretched across the bunny’s chest with my non-working hand (the other hand doing the TTouches). Alternate left and right hand from containing hand to working hand as needed.

In my experience rabbits are like many other animals in terms of which TTouches they find relaxing. I tend to start at the shoulders with back of the hand TTouches like Chimp or Llama. Bunnies often enjoy hair slides especially around the neck and head (though all over is just fine too). I have a rabbit, Meredith, who is part Lion Head and she has a long haired mane around her neck. She loves hair slides there. Coiled Python, Clouded Leopard and Lying Leopard are also popular choices among buns. For rabbit TTouches I have found the 1 – 3 pressure range most comfortable for them. The relatively long ears of rabbits lend themselves beautifully to long mindful ear slides. Remember to start where the ear attaches to the head, sandwiching the ear between your thumb and index finger. Slide from the base to the tip in parallel lines until you cover the whole ear. If you are working on a lop eared rabbit, slide your fingers down or to the side with the ear, if your bunny’s ears stand up, then slide upward. If you are working with a giant breed like an English lop, support the underside of the ear with one hand while doing the slides with your other hand. You have a lot more ear space to work with and you may find it easiest to use your middle as well as your index finger and thumb to do the slides. Try a little experimentation and find out



Photos: Be gentle when stroking the ears. With a lop eared rabbit, support the ear with one hand, and stroke with the other.



what your bunny enjoys. Just remember to watch the wiggle rate as well as the body posture to determine how things are going.

Like any animal, how long you work on a bunny is a very individual determination and will vary not only on the rabbit but how they are feeling at any given time. Having said that, rabbits have sensitive nervous systems and will only tolerate a certain amount of touching of any kind. You may find at the outset that a couple of minutes of TTouch on your bunny will give them enough to think about and process in their body before they need a break. Once your bunny is used to TTouch you should be able to work up to 10 or so minutes fairly rapidly.

Behaviour Issues

Stress: Biting and Thumping

Rabbits are sensitive little beings and they get stressed easily. What sets them apart from many other species is that extreme stress can kill a rabbit fairly quickly. I have often wondered if the expression “dying of fright” started with rabbits. Rabbits can manifest stress in various ways, biting and thumping the ground with their back feet are common.

Ouch! Rabbits can bite hard. And though they need to chew to keep their ever growing teeth worn down, they can chew/bite inappropriately. Go into the home of most house rabbit people and you’ll see chair and table legs nibbled at bunny height. Rabbits are given hay to free feed on in addition to what ever pellets and veggies are in their diet so they have plenty of opportunity to chew. To them, anything they can get their teeth on is pretty much fair game and excessive chewing can become a nervous habit. Rabbits do carry stress in their mouths (in human terms, mouth stress would include teeth clenching, over-eating, lip licking, talking too much, etc.) and they will bite when stressed or annoyed.

General body work will help reduce overall stress and relieve tension patterns, which is where the rabbit holds its stress in the body. The most effective TTouch for biting and general reactivity is the mouth work. Cradling the jaw with my non-working hand, and resting my thumb gently on top of the bunny’s head, I begin my TTouches at the back of the jaw and work my way forward. A rabbit’s mouth is small, so use just one or two fingers. Curl the fingers not being used inside your

hand so they don’t stick out the sides making all of your fingers stiff and “pokey”. When you are working around the whiskers, flatten them onto the cheeks so that they aren’t bent in different directions, and do the circular movements right on the whiskers. You may only be able to do three or four TTouches on each side. That’s fine. A little bit of mouth work goes a long way. It is better to do a little bit of mouth work 1-2 times a day than stress your bunny while you insist on doing “just a few more circles”. Daily mouth work for a rabbit that bites is a must.

I try to interrupt biting behaviour on the spot by doing some circles on the mouth as the rabbit is attempting to bite. I will also do some general body work at that time if the situation permits. Reprogramming behaviour means training the bunny to think and respond in a way other than biting. Just one or two circles can interrupt the biting behaviour and obviate the desire to use their mouth.

I make a habit of working on my rabbit’s mouth even if there is nothing in particular I want to address. I consider it to be like a “tune up”. Given that rabbits frequently carry tension in their mouths, I think keeping their mouths as relaxed as possible is a great way to keep them more relaxed in general. After a while I find that the cellular memory built up in the mouth from the TTouch work means that I can quickly and easily relax my rabbits even in stressful situations like visits to the vet. Rabbit mouths can be the first body part to get tense, and therefore the first to relax.

Rabbits thump their hind legs on the ground to warn potential predators or when they are annoyed. Thumping in itself isn’t a bad thing but it is symptomatic of varying levels of stress or fear. When working with a rabbit who thumps I think about the bunny’s overall level of physical, mental and emotional balance and well-being. I don’t have a specific TTouch for thumping, I apply a basket of TTouches, including tail work and perhaps a body wrap until I find a combination that seems to help the bunny relax.

As prey animals, rabbits are naturally wary. They rely on their back legs and their speed to get them away from dangerous situations. They also kick with their hind legs when fighting or defending themselves. It is no surprise then that when they are uncertain or upset, their hindquarter muscles tense and twitch rapidly. In situations of habitual stress, some rabbits don’t do well around other rabbits or in shelters for example and they develop very sensitive back ends. I typically use Coiled Python starting at the shoulders and working my way down the back all the way around the hindquarters. I emphasise a long slow release. I also use Clouded Leopard and Raccoon TTouches around and on the hind feet, often adding a lift at the end of each circle to ease the tension held in the muscles.

Body wraps can be wonderful for bunny stress. I generally stick to a half wrap unless I have a good reason to use a full wrap. Rabbit physiology is such that with a full wrap extending around the hind end the bunny often gets tangled up in the wrap as they hop around or thump. The half wrap is often an effective and easier choice even though it does not have the benefit of influencing the hind legs. Leave the wrap on the bunny a

Photo: This is a half-wrap Body Wrap,



short time and observe the response and respiration rate. It is common to have to give the rabbit a minute or two to get used to the feeling of having the wrap on before they begin to move around. If the rabbit seems comfortable with the wrap, leave it on 3-4 minutes to start with gradually working into longer period of time, perhaps up to 15 minutes. As with many things TTouch, little and often is often better than one long session. It gives the nervous system a chance to process the information you have been putting into it.

Shyness and Rabbits You Can't Touch

As with many animals, I have found that rabbits sensitive to touch are also often shy (the flip side of that is that they can also be reactive). Aside from managing environmental variables like loud noises I find that doing the TTouches and perhaps using a body wrap very helpful. Shy rabbits are usually hunched up with their head down. They may use their front paws to slap at your hand when you attempt to touch them. General TTouch body work, ear work and mouth work are the goal with these quite reserved buns. So how do you work on a rabbit that doesn't like to be touched?

Rabbits who are tense, like people, are sensitive to touch. It literally feels uncomfortable. Some rabbits find hands in general alarming, and may have a fear of being grabbed. You can try stroking any part of the rabbit with the back of your hand. Try using back of the hand TTouches like Chimp or Llama. If that is too much, you can use a small paint brush to put more distance between your hand and the rabbit. The bristles of the brush are soft and soothing. You can stroke along the head, mouth or body to do circles, just think of the brush as an extension of your hand. A cotton or wool hiking sock or rubber grooming tool can cushion the contact between you and the animal. If the bunny likes to be covered, use a towel over the body and head, and do the TTouches on the towel. The key to success in working with a shy rabbit is to find a way in. Find one TTouch they like and build, however slowly that needs to happen, from there. Avoid the temptation to do too much. End on a good note with the bunny waiting more rather tipping over the edge into telling you they have had enough by having to bite or thump.

Bonding

My illusions about rabbits being cute, harmless fluffy little critters was shattered when I watched a rabbit rescuer try to bond two of her rescue rabbits. I had never seen two animals fight so fast or so ferociously. Rabbits either like one another, or they don't. Having said that, rabbits are social creatures and people prefer to have them live in pairs for company. The process of putting two rabbits together is called "bonding". After adopting my first rabbit from a shelter many years ago, I was somewhat

mortified to hear that the way people traditionally bonded rabbits was to put them into stressful situations so that they would huddle together for safety. This included setting the washing machine on the spin cycle and putting the bunnies on the top of the washer presumably to spin and vibrate their way to happiness (ugh) or to put them in the back of a car and drive around curves.

As a budding TTouch person I rejected any such notions and experimented with what I consider to be more respectful, gentle and effective TTouch solutions. Bonding is a very big deal among rabbit people and rescue groups. Here is a process using TTouch and some effective rabbit management techniques that I have had success with. Parts of this process works best with two people.

1. Know, that unless the rabbits happen to like each other immediately, bonding can take days or even weeks. Be patient.
2. Have the rabbits (spayed and neutered as applies) get to know each other and their scent by having them next to each other in separate cages or pens for 2-3 days. Do TTouches on each bunny to keep them relaxed.
3. If the rabbits seem to be getting along and not fighting in their respective cages/pens, have one person take one rabbit and another person take the other rabbit to opposite ends of a room or hallway. I suggest the space be 4-5 meters (13 – 16 feet) long if possible. If possible have both people doing TTouches on the rabbits. The rabbits should not at this stage be facing each other.
4. Turn one of the rabbits toward the other. Continue with TTouch work including mouth work. If there is no particular reaction, turn the other rabbit so they are facing each other. Use really yummy food to reinforce positive responses (non-reactivity) and to stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system. (Note: The rabbits will not eat if they are nervous.) If there is reactivity, turn the reactive bunny away. Do TTouches until calm, call it a day.
5. Try the hallway stage again, consider adding a half wrap especially if either or both rabbits were reactive. Wrapping the reactive bunny is most important but please make sure the rabbit is already used to the wrap prior to using it in a bonding situation.
6. Once the rabbits are doing well at that distance, move them gradually closer. The variables are whether they are both looking at each other and how close they are to each other.
7. When they are able to comfortably be near each other in the hallway or other neutral space, try putting them in the same pen but it MUST BE A NEUTRAL PEN/CAGE. Rabbits are territorial. Until they are good friends, use a neutral space.

TTouch is wonderful for rabbits and behavioural issues. Remember that TTouch can and should be an everyday part of how you connect with your bunny.

Next time: TTouch for Health Issues.