

How to tattoo a rabbit

What is a tattoo?

If you look at the tattoo set, you will see that each number and letter is made up of a bunch of small needles that form the single digit letter. When the tattoo pliers are closed on the rabbits' ear they make a series of small holes. Tattoo ink is then rubbed into the area. The tattoo ink that goes into the holes becomes permanent, while the ink on the ear surface wears off. You may be wondering if tattooing is painful for the rabbit. The answer is yes, but only for a very short time. Kind of like us humans getting our ears pierced.

Tattooing provides a permanent method to tell one rabbit from another. Tattoos are required for showing, but it is equally important for good record-keeping, and should be a regular part of your rabbitry management program. If you have a small breeding program, it may be impractical to spend money for tattooing supplies especially if you just starting out. Ask other breeders if they might be willing to tattoo your animals for you to begin with. Chances are that a 4-H leader or local club member will be willing to help you out.

Tattoos can be a number, a word, or a combination. Some breeders use short names like Jon or Pet, so that the tattoo names the animal as well as identifies it. Other systems tell more about each animal. For example, in one system, a letter stands for a certain buck, another letter stands for a certain doe, an odd number means that animal is a buck and an even number means it is a doe. So, if we had an animal with the tattoo "TB3", we would know just by looking at the tattoo that it was a buck whose father is named Thumper and whose mother is named Bambi. You can develop a tattoo system that works best for you. Most tattoo sets are limited to five numbers or letters per tattoo, so be sure you take this into account.



Learning to Tattoo

As your rabbitry expands, you will want to learn how to tattoo your own animals. Watch other breeders when they tattoo. Everyone develops his or her own way. There is no one right way.

Here are some tattooing tips you might find helpful.

- Practice by placing the numbers and letters into the tattoo pliers. Then clamp down on a piece of paper to check what you have in the pliers. It's very easy to have a 21 when you really wanted a 12. By checking on paper first, you will avoid many mistakes.
- Choose rabbits that are not show quality for your fist tattoos.
- Use a little rubbing alcohol to wipe out the inside of the ear before tattooing. This cleans the ear surface of natural oils and allows the ink to adhere better.
- Before you tattoo, look at the inside of the rabbit's **LEFT** ear. You should be able to see blood vessels that are just below the surface of the skin, find a place where no large vessels cross and try to place your tattoo there. Even with careful planning, you may hit a blood vessel. This will cause some bleeding, but applying some gentle pressure to the area can easily stop it. Bleeding can wash the tattoo ink out of the holes so avoiding blood vessels makes for a more better tattoo. Get a friend to completely restrain your rabbit while you clamp the tattoo pliers on the rabbits ear.
- Restraining the rabbit during tattooing is **VERY** important. The rabbit might pull away when the pliers are clamped, and the rabbit could be injured. If you have someone to help you one person can restrain the animal and the other can do the clamping. The holder should wrap the rabbit in a towel so only its head and ears slick out. The towel will keep the rabbit from moving and from scratching the person holding it.
- Clamping the pliers on the rabbits ear is the



hardest part because no one wants to hurt the animal and their afraid of clamping too hard. Try to take comfort in the fact that the pain lasts a very short time. Release your grip on the pliers immediately after you close them, and the worst is over. It is difficult to say exactly how hard to close the pliers to ensure a good tattoo. If you are tattooing young rabbits, their thin ears will need only the pressure used to pre-test the tattoo on paper. Older animals have thicker ears, and will need slightly more pressure when clamping.

Give the rabbit a few seconds to calm down, and then look inside the ear. Your tattoo should appear as a series of dots.

Now you are ready to apply the tattoo ink. An old toothbrush works for this and so do Q-tips. Most rabbits do not seem to mind this part of the procedure.

Don't worry about a little excess ink it will wear off normally or the mother may clean it by grooming her baby. If it has not worn away by the time your rabbit is entered in a show, you can remove the excess to make the tattoo readable. Use a tissue and a little petroleum jelly or baby wipes to wipe the excess ink out of the ear.

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