

Fleas

If your rabbit seems to have only a few fleas, the safest way to get rid of them is to use a flea comb. A thorough combing should be done daily. Kill the fleas by dipping the comb in warm, soapy water. Rinse the comb thoroughly before continuing to comb.

If you have other animals in your home, first try treating **them** with topical or oral products and use the flea comb approach for your rabbit. Usually, once you have eliminated the fleas on your other animals, your rabbit's problem will go away as well.

If the flea problem is more severe, you can dust your rabbit with 5% carbaryl insecticide (a common brand name is 5% Sevin Dust). Using your hands, gently work the dust down through the fur to the skin. As always, consult your veterinarian **before** using this product and advise her immediately of any changes in your rabbit's behavior after application. **Do not allow your rabbit to be given a flea bath or flea dip.**

Several prescription flea control products have become available for dogs and cats in the last few years. **It is important to realize that none of these products have been formally tested or approved for use in rabbits.** However, most have been tried on rabbits with the following results:

- Advantage® — Many top rabbit veterinarians have reported success using a kitten dose of Advantage (imidacloprid). There have been some deaths reported, although the deaths have not been directly attributed to Advantage. Advantage should not be used for very young (less than six months), elderly (six years or older), or compromised rabbits. It is also wise to remember that your rabbit may have an asymptomatic and thus undiagnosed condition that could make Advantage a dangerous choice.
- Program® — Program (lufenuron) is being used by many top rabbit veterinarians in the country. Program is an oral chitin inhibitor. (Chitin is the material that makes up the exo-[outer]skeleton of the flea. Mammals do not make chitin or have an exo-skeleton and therefore are not affected by lufenuron). Program keeps new eggs from hatching. It does not affect adult fleas, so animals with severe infestation may also require treatment with the insecticidal products discussed above.
- Revolution® — Revolution (selemectin) is now being routinely used by some rescue groups (and their veterinarians) on rabbits who come to them from shelters. Revolution kills adult fleas and prevents eggs from hatching. It is also effective against several types of mites and ticks. Like Advantage and Program, it should be used with caution, especially on rabbits who are older or may have other health problems.

Never use the following products on a rabbit:

- Frontline® — The country's top rabbit specialists strongly advise that Frontline (fipronil) **is not safe for rabbits.** Several rabbits have died or experienced seizures after receiving treatment with Frontline. Although the active ingredient is not supposed to cross into the central nervous system of mammals, the number of rabbit deaths reported suggests this is not true for rabbits.
- Sentinel® — Some veterinarians have switched from Program to Sentinel for dogs. Sentinel has the same active ingredient as Program, along with a heart-worm preventative for dogs and should not be used on rabbits.

As always, let your trusted veterinarian help guide you to the best treatment choice for your rabbit. She should have access to the latest information on safety and effectiveness of the latest prescription treatments for fleas.

If you have had more than a minor flea problem, you may need to treat your rabbit's environment as well. You can treat carpets annually with sodium polyborate (boric acid) or fenoxycarb (an insect growth regulator in the form of a synthetic hormone). The boric acid product made by Flea Busters is safe for both rabbit and owner and has been reported to be very effective by many rabbit parents. You can also try salting your carpet with common table salt. The salt acts as a desiccant when it comes in contact with flea eggs or larvae — the same effect that salt has on slugs or snails. Salt should be reapplied after vacuuming.

For linoleum and other washable surfaces, clean with Murphy's Oil Soap, a natural, vegetable-based soap with a pleasant fragrance that also acts as a flea repellent. Wash bedding, small rugs, and other washable fabrics in hot, soapy water.



Harrison arrived in foster care with a severe case of fleas. (Photo by Kristi Cole)