

# Rabbit exercise programme in a laboratory environment

PENNY MILLER and GARY ROTHWELL

Labcorp

Correspondence: penny.miller@labcorp.com

## Introduction

New Zealand White rabbits are descended from the European rabbit, a social species that typically lives in large warrens. Both rabbits exhibit many of the same behaviours such as chewing, rearing, hiding and playing. Group exercising allows rabbits to express a broader range of natural behaviours that are not always available to individually housed rabbits (Figure 1).

## Method

Rabbits are exercised twice weekly in groups up to five for approximately 20 minutes.

Once groups have been determined, each rabbit is positively identified and placed one by one into the exercise pen.



**Figure 1.** New Zealand White rabbit in an enrichment pen.

Behaviour and interactions between individuals are monitored throughout the exercise.

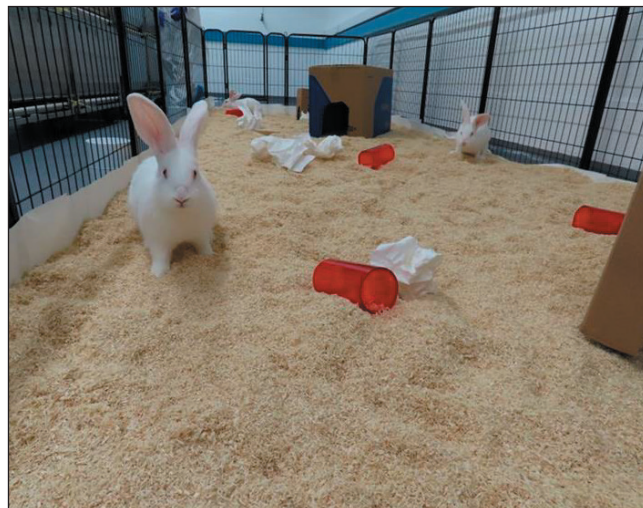
Pens are checked at the end of each exercise period to remove and replace soiled bedding and enrichment.

## Materials

A large pen lined with undertray paper and soft bedding is provided as a neutral environment to all animals.

Additional enrichment including toys such as tunnels and boxes to provide hiding and raised areas are placed into the cage (Figure 2).

Additional food items to encourage foraging behaviour, such as hay and apples can be provided.



**Figure 2.** Rabbit is surrounded by enrichment items.

## Elements to consider

Groups should be attained through trial exercising, moving animals to different groups if aggression occurs.

Animal health should be checked for good clinical condition prior to being placed into exercise pen.

The pen must be secure and enclosed to ensure the rabbits cannot escape. The pen should allow the technicians to always have access to the animals.

## Observations

Group-exercised rabbits have displayed a wide range of natural behaviours including:

- social interaction (Figure 3)
- explorative behaviour (Figure 4)
- gnawing and foraging behaviour (Figure 5)
- increased physical fitness (Figure 6)



**Figure 3.** Social interaction.



**Figure 4.** Exploration.



**Figure 5.** Gnawing and foraging.



**Figure 6.** Physical activity.

## Conclusions

Overall exercising has a positive effect on our stock rabbits.

On top of being able to express more natural behaviours, additional benefits related to this procedure have been seen.

Increased interaction with technicians makes procedures involving handling less stressful.

## Acknowledgements

Emily Jones, Stuart Hazelwood and Alice McNamara.