The Why’s and How’s of Rabbit Tattoos

My first-ever rabbit was named Bumper. And if I had put a name tag on him, he would have chewed it off. Immediately.

It wasn’t a big problem, because I wasn’t going to forget who my Bumper was. But what if I had taken him to a show, with lots of other opal Mini Rex? What if the judge had shuffled the bunnies around, and some stranger had claimed Bumper as theirs? How could I have proved that he was really mine? And what would I have done without my bunny?

All the sudden, Bumper needed a name tag.

And so I gave him one — but not one of those paper stickers that say “HELLO MY NAME IS.” This tag was a tattoo in his left ear — a permanently one, so that nobody could confuse my bunny with theirs.

Much like cattle ranchers put plastic tags in their cows’ ears, or like people microchip their pet poodles, rabbit breeders identify their rabbits through ear markings – also known as tattoos. This greatly helps with record keeping, and helps us keep our rabbits safe by not confusing them with one another. Although most breeders can tell their brood stock apart by looks, a permanent ear mark ensures that we keep it straight, and can track the health history for each bunny, or don’t accidentally breed rabbits that are too closely related.

If you want to show your rabbits, the American Rabbit Breeders Association requires that they have a permanent tattoo in their left ear. If you register your rabbit, the registrar will put an additional tattoo – either the registration number or that funny registered trademark symbol you see on packages — in their right ear.

How do you tattoo a rabbit? We’ve got a new answer.
When rabbit tattoos were first invented, the popular method was to use a pair of tongs called a clamp that you could slide tiles into. The tiles had needles in the shape of letters and numbers. You would puncture the ear, then spread ink in the holes, then seal it with petroleum jelly while it healed. Although it didn’t last long, this method caused a sharp, sudden pain to the rabbit. But now, thankfully, we have a new way to tattoo bunnies that is much less painful and much more safe.

We have the **battery operated tattoo pen**. This pen has a cluster of needles at the end which—with a very similar motion to that of an electric toothbrush—inserts ink just below the surface of the skin. The needles do not go all the way through the ear, and seem to cause no pain greater than a tickly irritation.

The process is very safe and controlled. If you have a partner hold the rabbit while you perform the tattoo, it’s very quick, and the result is usually much neater, cleaner, and more legible than that of a clamp tattoo set.

These battery-operated tattoo pens took the rabbit world by storm as soon as they were introduced. If you’d like to get one for yourself, there are a number of brands to choose from. If I may make a recommendation, I’d suggest the [Complete Tattoo Kit](https://www.premiumrabbits.com) from KBtatts, available at PremiumRabbits.com.

First of all, the KBtatts pen was designed by a tattoo artist/rabbit breeder team, so it draws on experience in both areas. Second, the complete kit comes with a pen, a replacement needle, ink, an inkwell, and multiple other accessories at a lower price than you could get them for separately. In fact the whole kit costs under $50.

If you’re new to the world of raising or showing rabbits, I want to assure you that—due to new and innovative equipment—tattooing rabbits is a humane and low-stress way to help keep them as safe as possible. If you’re an old hand at rabbit breeding, and are still using the clamp method, I’d strongly encourage you to check out the KBtatts kit. In addition to being safer and
neater, it gives you much more flexibility. You might even find yourself getting a little artsy! For instance, I tattooed a heart in Bumper’s right ear. I definitely loved him permanently.

Grab the KBtatts Complete Tattoo Kit from PremiumRabbits.com!

Be sure to watch for parts 2 and 3 of our series on rabbit tattoos, “Choosing your Rabbit’s Ear Number” and “10 Steps to a Great Tattoo.”
Choosing Your Rabbit’s Ear Number

Both new and old-timer rabbit breeders often scratch their heads wondering what to tattoo in their rabbits’ ears. Is there any system you need to follow? Are there things you can and things you can’t use as a rabbit tattoo? Well I’ve got good news for you:

You can tattoo anything you want in your rabbit’s ear. It’s your rabbit. You can tattoo a butterfly perched on a Ferrari in his ear – though I don’t in any way recommend it.

But if you’re going to show your rabbit, your options become slightly more limited. To explain, let me tell you a story.

Back in the early days of rabbit tattoos, people used clamps. The clamping tongs had a slot where you could slide in letters and numbers. Most people only had a set with one tile for letter and one or two tiles for each number – so their options for ear numbers were fairly limited. For instance, you didn’t have enough tiles to give your rabbit the ear number BOBBY.

But nowadays, most rabbit breeders (wisely) have switched from the clamp to the battery-operated tattoo pen. This electric pen is not only safer than the clamp, but it allows you to tattoo anything you’re capable of in your rabbit’s ear. And breeders loved it.

People started showing rabbits with all kinds of interesting tattoos. They sometimes used special characters – such as a heart or smiley face— that, if not practical, were definitely cute. The problem is that show secretaries had to enter those tattoos into their computer systems….and I can’t find the butterfly-perched-on-a-Ferrari key on my keyboard.

So the ARBA – that is, the organization that governs rabbit shows – made a new rule. A couple of years ago they came out with the rule that all rabbit tattoos have to be alpha-numeric for the
rabbit to be entered in an ARBA show. In other words, you can only use the letters A-Z and the numbers 0-9. (No bicycles, dollar signs, or hawks – sorry.) They also mentioned that the letters you choose can’t spell anything profane or distasteful – but hopefully not too many people were doing that anyway.

So the bottom line is that it’s up to you. You can tattoo your rabbit A1, Z9, OKLAHOMA5582684383, or anything in between – as long as you’re only using letters and numbers. (And as long as it will fit in your rabbit’s ear.)

Does the ARBA assign rabbits tattoo numbers?

So that’s it, you might ask. You don’t have to register your rabbit with the ARBA to get an official tattoo number? I wondered this myself when I was starting, but the answer is no. You get to choose your rabbits’ ear numbers. The ARBA does NOT assign which number goes in your rabbit’s left ear.

So you’re free to develop your own system. Many people like to spell out the rabbit’s name in the ear. Their tattoos look like LILY and LUCY and LOU. Other people like to use a fancy code that gives some information about the rabbit. A common example is that people use the parents’ initials in the tattoo, so like Fluffy and Puffy’s babies are FP1, FP2, and FP3. You might also use a number to indicate the month the rabbit was born, or whatever information is relevant to your breeding project.

The rules don’t say you can’t get fancy.

Even though you’re only allowed to use letters and numbers in your show rabbits’ ears, that doesn’t mean you can’t make the tattoos pretty. Some people will put flourishes on the letters, or, if they’re very talented, write the tattoos in a fancy font. (I mean, Lucida Calligraphy is going to exude more class than Arial any day.) So, if you’re a creative person, get creative. Its flexibility is one of the beauties of the battery-operated tattoo pen. My only caution is that you must not let your creativity get in the way of legibility. If the judge cannot clearly read your rabbit’s ear number, he or she is allowed to disqualify it from competition. Other than that, have fun!

Lastly, for those of you who don’t have an electric tattoo pen to play with, come and join us! I recommend the KBtatts Complete Rabbit Tattoo Kit. It contains the battery-operated pen (in a snazzy choice of colors), a replacement needle, and all the accessories you need to make your tattooing experience a breeze.
Grab the KBtatts Complete Tattoo Kit from PremiumRabbits.com!

This is part 2 of our series on rabbit tattoos. Don’t miss Part 1 – “The Why’s and How’s of Rabbit Tattoos” and Part 3 — “10 Steps to a Great Tattoo.”
How to Tattoo a Rabbit

How to Tattoo a Rabbit – A Step by Step Tutorial to walk you through the Rabbit Tattooing Process.

10 Steps to Tattoo a Rabbit Using a Battery-Operated Handheld Pen

A handheld electric pen is by far the best option for tattooing your rabbits. It’s much safer, neater, and less painful than methods used in earlier days. When done correctly, the battery-operated pen can give you wonderfully clean and legible tattoos. Here are ten steps – plus a special secret—to help your tattoos come out first-class the first time.

1. Prepare your kit. Before you even go get the rabbit, lay all your tattoo supplies out in easy reach. This ensures that the process will be as quick and fluid – and therefore as successful – as possible. You should have your ink in your inkwell, your inkwell in its spill-proof holder, your tattooing and stencil pens in easy reach, and your Bunny Balm open and ready to go. (You can get all these items in the Kbtatts complete tattoo kit.)

2. Prepare the ear. Rabbit ears, just like ours, can accumulate wax and dead skin. In order to get a clean tattoo, you want to clear all this away with cotton balls and alcohol before beginning your tattoo.

3. Secure the rabbit. Go and get Bunny from his cage, and then make sure he is held securely before you begin working. The best option is to have someone else hold him for you. You’re looking for a hold that is firm, but not too tight, and will not put too much pressure on Bunny if he starts to struggle. Rabbits feel safer if their heads are covered, so have your helper tuck Bunny’s head under his or her arm.
4. **Stencil the tattoo.** This is a step that many breeders miss, but it makes for a better tattoo in the end. Take a special skin marking pen and stencil the tattoo in the ear before you go over it in permanent ink. This way you can make sure it will all fit, and look balanced and neat. Remember, if a judge can’t read your rabbit’s tattoo, he or she can disqualify it from competition.

5. **Balm the ear.** Many breeders coat their rabbits’ ears in special balm or petroleum jelly after tattooing. But here’s the secret – balm the ear prior to tattooing also. The jelly will control the flow of ink, making it come out smoothly and evenly without running. Try it! You’ll be surprised at the difference.

6. **Ink your pen.** Once the rabbit is held securely, get your pen ready to go. (You don’t want to ink it too early or the ink will dry out.) Turn the pen on BEFORE dipping it in the ink well. This will get the ink all up in the needles evenly. Dip just the end of the needles into the well! The motion of the pen will draw the ink into the center of the needles, where it should be. Never dip it in so far that the ink gets on to the pen head.

7. **Tattoo Away!** Now you’re ready for action. Hold the rabbit’s left ear open and against something solid, like your finger. Hold the needle at a slight angle to the ear and tattoo with a gentle pressure. You do NOT want to push the needle all the way through the ear; you’re just trying to insert ink right below the surface of the skin. Re-ink your tattoo pen whenever it runs out until you’ve finished the tattoo.

8. **Smear the ear.** When you’re done, wipe away any excess ink. Then cover the tattoo with a balm or jelly to hold the ink in. Using a special all-natural balm, like KBtatts Bunny Balm, can help prevent infection as well.
9. **Clean your kit.** When Bunny is all settled back in his cage, it’s time to clean your kit. Always, always wipe the excess ink off of your needle right away; it will give it a much longer life. You can buy a special cleaning brush for the best results. Pack up the rest of your kit so it will be ready for next time!

10. **Record the tattoo.** After you tattoo a rabbit, write it down. Make note of every rabbit you tattoo – its parents, color, and date of birth. You may often find this list to be of great help down the road when a buyer contacts you about a certain rabbit, and you need to remember quickly which one that was. You can download free record keeping sheets from RabbitPedigrees.com.

I hope these steps gave you some pointers to help your tattoos come out better than ever. But wait, there’s one more step! If you haven’t purchased your tattoo kit yet, I guess you should start there! You can get all the supplies you need for successful tattoos from the KBtatts complete kit, which contains a pen, a replacement needle, ink, an inkwell, bunny balm, a cleaning brush, and more! Check it out on PremiumRabbits.com.

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*This is part 3 in our series on rabbit tattoos. Don’t miss Part 1 – “The Why’s and How’s of Rabbit Tattoos” and Part 2 — “Choosing your rabbit’s ear number.”*