

Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease

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Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease

Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease (RHD) is a lethal disease caused by a calicivirus called RHDV. This virus has been present in Europe and Australia for decades, but until recently was not found in the United States. An outbreak of rabbit hemorrhagic disease virus type 2 (RHDV2) that began in New Mexico in March 2020 has spread rapidly to Texas, Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Mexico, and California. This outbreak is killing domestic rabbits as well as wild cottontails and hares.

Symptoms of RHD

Symptoms of RHD vary depending on how quickly the disease progresses. Rabbits with the acute form of the disease are often found dead with no prior symptoms. Other rabbits develop fever, lethargy, loss of appetite, breathing difficulties, blue colored lips, and bleeding from body cavities. If your rabbit is showing signs of illness and you are concerned please bring them to a rabbit-savvy veterinarian immediately. Reports estimate that about 75% of unvaccinated domestic rabbits that contract this disease are dying from it.

Disease Transmission

RHDV2 is very stable in the environment and can persist for months in carcasses and on fabric. It can be easily spread among rabbits, either by direct contact or by contaminated fomites such as hands, dishes, towels, and cages. The virus can also be spread by biting insects such as mosquitoes, fleas, ticks, and biting flies. Since the virus is present in wild rabbit populations it can be tracked into a home on shoes or other objects that are exposed to dirt. While indoor-only rabbits are less likely to get RHD than are rabbits that go outdoors, reports from Europe show that even indoor-only rabbits can contract the disease and die from it.

Vaccination

There are currently no vaccines against RHD available in the United States. We have therefore imported the RHDV2 vaccine Eravac from Spain. Eravac can be administered to domestic rabbits as young as 30 days of age. The vaccine is effective for 12 months, and yearly boosters are needed to maintain immunity. Common side effects from this vaccine include a mild fever that can last for a day or two, and a bump or nodule at the site of injection that can last for a week or two. More severe reactions, such as anaphylaxis, can occur with any vaccine but have not been reported.

Other Methods of Prevention

Since no vaccine is 100% protective, we recommend that you take measures to prevent your rabbits from coming into contact with RHDV2. Keep your rabbits strictly indoors, and remove your shoes and wash your hands when you enter your home. Keep all rabbits on a rabbit-safe monthly flea preventative such as Advantage® II or Revolution®. If you bring a new rabbit into your home quarantine it for at least 9 days and have it vaccinated at the soonest opportunity. Bleach diluted 1:10 in water is an effective disinfectant against RHDV2, as are Virkon™ S and Rescue™. If you see dead or dying rabbits outdoors do not touch them, but call the California Department of Food and Agriculture (for domesticated / pet rabbits) at (209) 491-9350 or the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (for cottontail rabbits or hares) at (916) 358-2790.

Additional Resources

More information about RHD is available from the California Department of Food and Agriculture at <<https://cdfa.ca.gov>> and on the House Rabbit Society's website at <<https://rabbit.org>>.