



Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease

Although it is uncommon in the United States (U.S.), there have been cases of Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease (RHD) in Iowa (2000), Utah (2001), Illinois (2001), New York (2001), Indiana (2005), Minnesota (2010), and Canada (2011). It is considered endemic to Australia, New Zealand, Cuba, parts of Asia and Africa, as well as most of Europe. Outbreaks have been experienced in the Middle East, North America, and South America.

What is Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease (RHD)?

RHD, also known as viral hemorrhagic disease, is a calici viral disease that affects rabbits in the genus *Oryctolagus*. The incubation period is 24 to 48 hours, and it can cause liver inflammation (hepatitis) and prevent the blood from clotting. Rabbits may die without showing any outward signs of illness, or may show:

- Fever,
- Inappetance,
- Lethargy,
- Spasms,
- Breathing difficulties,
- Blue colored lips or mucous membranes, and/or
- Bleeding from body cavities.

Death is due to massive internal hemorrhaging and liver impairment. Of susceptible rabbits, 80-100% that develop the disease may die.

Can people or other animals get RHD?

No; the virus only affects rabbits of the genus *Oryctolagus*. This genus includes most show, pet, and laboratory rabbits. Wild rabbits in the U.S., including the cottontail and jackrabbit, are not in the genus *Oryctolagus*, and are not susceptible to RHD. Other types of calici viruses have been found in people, cattle, sea lions, and cats.

Controlling the Spread of RHD

This virus persists in the environment and can be transmitted through direct contact with infected rabbits or by indirect contact with objects (cages, feeders, grooming equipment, etc.) or people and their clothing that have been contaminated by rabbit secretions or excretions. Transmission may occur following consumption of contaminated water and food, or exposure to rabbit products (meat, fur skins, offal). Vermin, such as insects or rodents, or domestic animals and birds may also become contaminated with the virus and transfer it to rabbits. The virus may be inhaled, ingested, or absorbed through scrapes and wounds.

As a standard precaution, follow appropriate biosecurity guidelines to prevent the spread of diseases to your facility. Biosecurity measures safeguarding the health of your rabbits include:

- Avoid unnecessary contact with other people's rabbits. If you must have contact with other people's animals, wash your hands or shower and change your clothes prior to handling your rabbits,
- Restrict visitors to your rabbitry and limit the handling of the animals by visitors,
- After visiting a show, fair, or meeting where rabbits were comingled, shower and change clothes before handling your rabbits,
- Know the health status of the rabbitry from which you purchase rabbits,
- Control insects, birds, rodents, and other wild animals, which may carry disease to your facility,
- Be aware of visitors from countries with endemic disease and take appropriate precautions,
- If you are planning to travel internationally, be aware of the disease status of the country you are visiting and take steps to avoid introducing RHD to your rabbits, and
- Be aware of the country of origin of any equipment or supplies that you are purchasing.

Can I vaccinate my rabbit against RHD?

RHD vaccines have not been approved for use in the U.S. The use of an RHD vaccine would make it harder to identify animals with the disease due to the presence of disease-specific antibodies after vaccination.



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