



## **ANIMAL HEALTH ADVISORY**

### **Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease (RHDV): What Rabbit Owners Need to Know**

(10 June 2020)

Rabbit hemorrhagic disease (RHDV) is a highly contagious viral disease in rabbits with a high mortality rate. This virus is considered a foreign animal disease in the United States.

In the past few years, RHDV Serotype 2 (RHDV2) has been detected sporadically in North America in wild and domestic rabbits. In recent weeks, spread continues with the virus being identified in several states. The Indiana State Board of Animal Health advises rabbit owners to be aware of signs of the disease and take steps to protect their animals—especially as the season for fairs and exhibitions begins.

The two strains of this disease, RHDV and RHDV Serotype 2, are similar except RHDV2 affects both wild and domestic rabbits. **RHDV and RHDV2 do not impact human health** and is not known to affect other animals.

#### **Clinical Signs**

The most common sign of RHDV is sudden death with blood-stained noses caused by internal bleeding. Infected rabbits may develop a fever, be hesitant to eat, or show respiratory or nervous signs.

Some rabbits may be asymptomatic carriers capable of shedding the virus for up to 2 months post-infection. Rabbits who survive the virus may show signs of dullness and anorexia. They are carriers of the infection and can shed the virus for at least 42 days.

#### **Transmission**

RHDV can spread through direct contact or exposure to an infected rabbit's saliva, secretions from the eyes and nose, urine, feces, or blood. The virus can also be spread by contaminated materials such as carcasses, food, water, etc. People can spread the virus indirectly by carrying it on their clothing and shoes.

RHDV is very resistant to extreme temperatures. It can live in an environment for up to 15 weeks in dry conditions and can survive freezing. The virus is hardy in rabbit meat and can survive in frozen or decomposing meat for months.

#### **Protect Your Rabbits**

RHDV has no known cure and a vaccine is not readily available in the United States. Therefore, rabbit owners are encouraged to follow good biosecurity practices to keep rabbits healthy.

- Monitor rabbits daily for signs of illness.
- Before caring for rabbits, wash hands and change into farm-dedicated clothing and boots.

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- Minimize visitors to rabbit housing areas.
  - Provide disposable foot covers and gloves to visitors handling rabbits.
- Prevent contact with wild rabbits and areas where wild rabbits roam.
- Do not purchase rabbits from unfamiliar or untrusted sources.
- Do not collect and use wild plants as a food source.
- Store feed and bedding in tightly sealed containers to prevent contamination.
- Do not share equipment with other rabbit owners.
- Clean and disinfect equipment, waterers, feeders and other items that come in contact with rabbits regularly. Rinse waterers and feeders before filling.
- Remove manure regularly.
- Control rodents and insects.
- Isolate new rabbits and rabbits returning from a show for at least 30 days and monitor for signs of illness. To protect against rabbit hemorrhagic disease, isolate for 60 days.
  - Care for isolated rabbits only after caring for other rabbits. Practice proper hygiene after caring for rabbits.
- If possible, avoid traveling to areas experiencing a disease outbreak.

### **History of RHDV in Indiana**

In 2005, RHDV was detected in a rabbit colony in southwestern Indiana. This colony became infected after the owner purchased rabbits from a pet swap location in Kentucky.

The colony owner was a dealer who purchased rabbits from multiple, unknown sources and introduced them directly into his colony without first isolating and observing new rabbits for signs of illness. He also sold rabbits from his colony to businesses and individuals.

To contain and eradicate the spread of RHDV in 2005, all the rabbits in this colony that had not died of the disease were euthanized. Rabbits that were sold from this colony also had to be euthanized.

The source of infection was traced to a pet swap location in Kentucky. An investigation later pointed to a processing plant in Tennessee that had imported rabbit carcasses from China, which is believed to be the source of this disease. No other cases were found in Indiana.

### **More Information**

More information on RHDV is online: [www.in.gov/boah](http://www.in.gov/boah)

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