

Rabbit Alert!

Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease

In the past two years, the United States has experienced three outbreaks of Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease (RHD), the latest occurring in New York in December, 2001. With the latest outbreak still under investigation, officials admit they have yet to determine the origin of the first two outbreaks. Therefore, rabbit owners should take necessary precautions to protect their rabbits from possible exposure to the disease. With no biosecurity measures being applied at our borders, and no available vaccine for the disease, rabbit owners must take action to protect their own.

Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease is an extremely contagious virus that is transmitted via direct contact with infected rabbits, and indirect contact with contaminated objects. The death rate is 90%. Infected animals may experience an acute fever, and the disease may result in enteritis, lymphoid necrosis, hepatic necrosis, and may be followed by massive hemorrhage of at least one major organ. Rabbits die suddenly within 6 to 48 hours of onset. Other rabbits may simply show sign of distress and die. Five to ten percent of the infected rabbits may develop a chronic or subclinical variety of the disease. Symptoms of the disease may include sudden death, loss of appetite, weight loss, upper and lower respiratory distress, spasms, lethargy, congestion, high temperature, blue color of the lips and mucous membranes, jaundice, bleeding from the nose, rectum, and mouth. In the chronic form, rabbits may develop diarrhea with mucous. Those rabbits who contract the chronic form of RHD normally die within one to two weeks.

Transmission of RHD is occurs through oral or respiratory contact, or through scrapes or abrasions. Sick and dead animals, the feces of infected animals, and objects that have been infected, are all means of disease transmission. A 10% bleach solution or disinfectants that target Parvo viruses are effective in disinfecting surfaces. When using bleach solutions, allow the solution to work for ten minutes before rinsing. Commercial disinfectants should be used according to their directions.

The disease does not affect rabbits under 4 weeks of age. Each rabbit exposed to the disease becomes a carrier for approximately 4 to 8 weeks. Some members of the rabbit community believe that RHD may have been present in our country for sometime without being reported. Several accounts exist of breeders attending shows, returning home, then losing large portions of their herds to an unknown disease, with few or no symptoms. The USDA does not quarantine, or require health certificates for rabbits. Shipment of rabbits, wool, and yarn, as well as other rabbit products, are often imported from infected countries with current outbreaks. While available in other countries, the United States has yet to approve a vaccine against this disease.

To protect your rabbits from RHD, start by notifying your veterinarian to be sure he/she is aware of the disease. Then practice the following good production practices:

- Keep rabbits indoors. This prevents contact with other rabbits.
- Monitor your food sources. If you buy hay from local farmers, be certain they do not have rabbits. The same is applicable to all rabbit feed.
- Avoid contacts of any kind with other rabbits. This includes pet stores, shelters, people and equipment. Do not allow visitors without using strict biosecurity measures.
- Thoroughly sanitize your hands, shoes, clothing, etc. before handling your rabbits. Disinfect any areas that may have been exposed to the virus using a bleach solution of 1 part bleach to 9 parts water (10% bleach solution). Remove all feces from cages daily.
- Keep dogs, cats, birds, insects, and wild animals away from your rabbits.

If you have any questions, additional information may be obtained by contacting your veterinarian or the RHD In the US Coalition at (800) 906 – 2445, or at their website: www.vhdcoalition.org.

This article was written by Mike Yoder, Director of Companion Animal Programs at North Carolina State University, and is a synopsis of information supplied by the RHD In the US Coalition. February 19, 2002.