

# Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease Information Sheet - for Pet Rabbit Guardians

## What is Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease?

Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease (RHD) is caused by a virus in the calicivirus family. RHD was first reported in B.C. in February 2018 in the Nanaimo area of Vancouver Island. Follow-up laboratory work identified an RHD virus. Since then, the disease was confirmed in BC in 2018 and 2019 (limited to the Island and Lower Mainland) in feral European or domestic rabbits. In 2020, a different strain of RHD began spreading rapidly across the United States and Mexico. In addition to domestic rabbits, this strain can also infect wild rabbits, such as cottontails. RHD was not reported in BC in 2021 or 2022, but it was reported in AB in May and September of 2022. The September outbreak affected wild rabbit as well as several colonies of feral rabbits. In February 2023, RHD was confirmed as the cause for a mass mortality event of feral rabbits in Courtenay, B.C. RHD is a serious and extremely contagious disease with high mortality rates. Most infected rabbits will die. The disease does not affect humans or other species including dogs and cats. The virus can persist in the environment for several weeks and may survive both heat and freezing.

## How does RHD virus spread?

RHD virus spreads easily between rabbits through direct contact with bedding, feed and water as well as feces and body fluids. It can also spread between areas through contaminated materials (food, bedding, water, surfaces, human clothing/hands, vehicles), dead rabbits, insects and wildlife (flies, birds, mammals) that have contacted or fed on infected rabbits.

## What are the symptoms of RHD?

The virus causes hemorrhages by affecting the blood vessels and attacks the liver and other organs. Most affected rabbits die suddenly, but can show signs of listlessness, lack of co-ordination, behavioural changes, or trouble breathing before death. There is often bleeding from the nose at the time of death. Once infected, signs of illness usually occur within 1-9 days.



## How can I protect my pet rabbit?

- **Minimize exposure to the virus**
  - Limit human visitors who have been in areas where the disease was reported and avoid your travel to these areas.
  - Avoid taking your rabbit to shows/fairs or introducing any new rabbits into your home.
  - Ask visitors to remove footwear before entering your home and wash their hands before handling your rabbit.
  - Use designated clean clothing (washed and dried in a dryer) that has not been outside when caring for your rabbit.
  - Clean and disinfect any rabbit supplies entering your home (see below).
  - Use only high-quality commercial feed from manufacturers with good quality control.
  - Don't use wild plants or vegetables or grass grown in areas accessed by feral rabbits or other wildlife, as food.
  - Remove or tightly secure anything outside (feed, garbage) that could attract feral rabbits, wildlife, or flies.
  - Exercise rabbits outdoors only in secured areas with no possibility of contamination.
  - Do not allow cats or dogs who go outside to potentially contaminated areas to access your rabbit's housing area.
- **Monitoring and prevention**
  - Vaccinate your rabbit. Ask your vet about vaccines available to BC veterinarians on a special government permit.
  - Monitor your rabbit daily for signs of illness and contact your veterinarian immediately with any concerns.

## How do I clean and disinfect rabbit supplies?

Feeding and housing supplies should be cleaned with soap and water, and then disinfected with a disinfectant that is effective against caliciviruses following manufacturer instructions. *Most household cleaners are not effective* against this type of virus. Advised to be effective: bleach (1:10 dilution), potassium peroxymonosulfate (Virkon), accelerated hydrogen peroxide (Prevail, Accel, and Peroxigard). The latter disinfectants are more user-friendly than bleach and may be obtained from your veterinarian.



## Who do I contact with questions?

Contact your local veterinarian with questions about your rabbit. If you find a dead rabbit or rabbits outside, do not handle the rabbit(s), and contact your local animal control.

Veterinarians and shelters have access to additional professional resources and support.

For more information, visit [www.sPCA.bc.ca/rhd](http://www.sPCA.bc.ca/rhd).

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