



RABBIT HAEMORRHAGIC DISEASE RHD

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

RHD is a deadly disease of rabbits and hares (lagomorphs) that has not been reported in South Africa before 2022.

What causes rabbit haemorrhagic disease?

RHD is caused by Rabbit haemorrhagic disease virus (RHDV). Three distinct groups of RHDV have been identified that cause severe disease, of which the emerging RHDV2 is currently circulating in most European countries, Australia, nearly half the USA and Canada. This variant has a variable mortality rate (5-70%). It also affects hares, unlike the original variant of the virus.

Which animals in South Africa may be susceptible to RHD?

Apart from domesticated pet and production rabbits (konyne) related to the European rabbit, South Africa has two indigenous hare species, Cape hare (vlakhaas) and the scrub hare (kolhaas), as well as two indigenous rabbits, namely red rock rabbits (rooiklipkonyne) and the critically endangered riverine rabbit (Oewerkonyn), of which only hundreds are left. We do not know yet which our indigenous species are susceptible.

What are the signs of RHD in rabbits and hares?

Sudden deaths, with almost no clinical signs, is the most striking sign. However, possible clinical signs include fever, neurological and respiratory signs, depression, inactivity and poor appetite. Death usually occurs 12-36 hours after the onset of fever.

How do animals get RHD?

RHD is present in faeces and urine of infected rabbits and transmitted through either inhalation or ingestion. Apart from contact with an infected animal, contaminated feed, bedding or equipment are possible sources of RHDV, as it is highly resistance to physical and chemical inactivation, particularly when protected by organic material. It can survive for months in carcasses and possibly in feed.

Can rabbits recover?

There is no specific treatment for this disease. If an animal survives, they will have immunity to related virus strains. They can shed virus for over a month, so it is important to isolate sick and recovering rabbits.

Last updated: November 2022



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Can humans and other animals get RHD?

No, the disease is specific to rabbits and hares.

How can RHD be prevented in animals?

There are currently no vaccines available in South Africa. Like many diseases, RHD can be prevented from entering a herd by practicing good biosecurity:

- Do not buy in/ introduce any rabbits until there is a better idea of the disease's distribution in South Africa
- Do not allow other rabbit owners onto your property
- Do not allow any possible contact between pet rabbits and wild hares or rabbits
- Do not touch any rabbits or hares belonging to anyone else
- Disinfect any potentially contaminated equipment or other objects, after removing all dirt, with bleach diluted to 200 ml per litre of water, allowing at least 10 minutes contact time.

What should be done with dead hares and rabbits?

Notify your local state veterinarian of the species, number and location, take photographs and bury carcasses at least 1,5m deep. Complete burning is an alternative.

How do I contact my state vet and get more information?

Visit <https://www.elsenburg.com/veterinary-services/animal-health-and-disease-control/> to find your state vet's details.

