

# Factsheet

## Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease

Rabbit hemorrhagic disease is a fatal disease in rabbits and is considered a foreign animal disease in the United States. This disease is caused by several virus strains. Animal health officials detected one of these strains, Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease Virus Serotype 2 or RHDV2, in North America in the past few years.

### Cases of RHDV2 in North America

RHDV2 is highly contagious and, unlike other rabbit hemorrhagic disease viruses, it affects both domestic and wild rabbits, including hares, jackrabbits and cottontails. Many times, the only signs of the disease are sudden death frequently and blood stained noses caused by internal bleeding. Infected rabbits may also develop a fever, be hesitant to eat, or show respiratory or nervous signs. RHDV2 does not impact human health.

The first detection of RHDV2 in North America was on Delta and Vancouver Island, Canada in feral rabbits in February 2018. The disease was later confirmed in a pet rabbit in Ohio in September 2018. More recently, RHDV2 was detected in a pet rabbit and feral rabbits on Orcas Island in San Juan County, Washington. The Canadian detections are within 20 miles of Orcas Island, Washington.



*Photo Courtesy of Canva*

### How RHDV2 Spreads

The RHDV2 virus is very resistant to extreme temperatures. It can be spread through direct contact or exposure to an infected rabbit's excretions or blood. The virus can also survive and spread from carcasses, food, water, and any contaminated materials. People can spread the virus indirectly by carrying it on their clothing and shoes.

### Protect Your Rabbits with Biosecurity

A vaccine for RHDV2 is not currently available in the U.S. Instead, it will be up to you as the owner to protect your rabbits by practicing good biosecurity. Biosecurity means taking simple steps every day to keep germs and viruses away from your animals. These actions will significantly reduce the chance of RHDV2 or other contagious diseases affecting your rabbits.

Follow these recommended biosecurity practices:

- Do not allow pet, feral, or wild rabbits to have contact with your rabbits or gain entry to the facility or home.
- Do not allow visitors in rabbitries or let them handle pet rabbits without protective clothing (including coveralls, shoe covers, hair covering, and gloves).

- Always wash hands with warm soapy water before entering your rabbit area, after removing protective clothing and before leaving the rabbit area.
- Do not introduce new rabbits from unknown or untrusted sources. Do not add rabbits to your rabbitry from animal shelters or other types of rescue operations.
- If you bring outside rabbits into your facility or home, keep them separated from your existing rabbits. Use separate equipment for newly acquired or sick rabbits to avoid spreading disease.
- Sanitize all equipment and cages moved on or off premises before they are returned to the rabbitry. We recommend disinfecting with 10% bleach or 10% sodium hydroxide mixed with water.
- Establish a working relationship with a veterinarian to review biosecurity practices for identification and closure of possible gaps.

If you are a breeder or grower who purchases live rabbits, even if you have existing biosecurity measures in place, you should review your practices and take steps to address potential gaps.

### **Other Steps to Prevent Disease Spread**

The goal is to prevent this disease from impacting domestic and wild rabbit populations. To minimize the risk, here are some actions you can take to help:

- If you live near or visit an area where this disease was confirmed, do not touch any dead wild rabbits you may see. You may contact your local veterinarian, state and federal animal health officials to learn if RHDV2 has been detected in your area.
- If you see multiple dead wild rabbits, report it to [state wildlife officials](#).
- If you own domestic rabbits, do not release them into the wild. If your rabbits appear ill or die suddenly, contact your veterinarian.
- If you volunteer at animal shelters or wildlife rescue facilities, be aware that this disease has been found in feral rabbits. If rabbits appear ill or die suddenly, contact the facility's veterinarian.
- Anyone working with rabbits should always practice good biosecurity. This includes basic steps like washing your hands before and after working with rabbits and not sharing equipment with other owners.

### **Report Suspicious Cases**

Rabbit owners who have questions about this disease should contact their veterinarians. Rabbit hemorrhagic disease is a reportable disease. Veterinarians should immediately contact the [USDA APHIS Area Veterinarian in Charge](#) of your state and/or the [state veterinarian](#) if a case is suspected.

### **For more information, contact the emerging issues team at:**

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