*Eastern cottontail, USFWS*

# Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease

## OVERVIEW

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. RHDV2 is highly contagious and, unlike other rabbit hemorrhagic disease viruses, it affects both domestic and wild rabbits, including hares, jackrabbits and cottontails. The threatened New England Cottontail (*Sylvilagus transitionalis*) and Eastern Cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) are susceptible to infection and mortality. **RHDV2 does not impact human health.**

As of May 12, 2020, RHDV2 has been confirmed in Vancouver Island, Canada and nine U.S. States (Ohio, Washington, New York, New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, Colorado, Nevada and California). Once RHDV2 gets into our wild rabbit populations it will be very difficult to manage or eliminate, as it took less than 2 years to spread across Australia to all states and territories in 2015-2016 (https://jvi.asm.org/content/92/2/e01374-17). The outbreak in the southwest U.S. is a different strain than the outbreak in the Pacific northwest and New York, which suggests at least two separate introductions.

## SYMPTOMS

Many times, the only signs of the disease are sudden death 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.

## TRANSMISSION

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.

*The New England cottontail, a Species of Greatest Conservation Need in Rhode Island,is susceptible to infection and mortality from RHDV2.*

## PREVENTION

A vaccine for RHDV2 is not currently available in the U.S. Until a vaccine is available, the implementation of sound biosecurity measures is the only means to minimize risk of infection. Biosecurity means taking simple steps every day to keep germs and viruses away from your animals.

## RECOMMENDED BIOSECURITY PRACTICES

- Do not rehabilitate wild rabbits if you keep or accept domestic rabbits. RHDV2 can be spread by handling infected rabbits, cages or bedding then later handling uninfected rabbits.
- RHDV2 is resistant to many common disinfectants, freshly prepared 10% household bleach solution is the most readily available disinfectant that is effective for inactivating RHDV2.
- Do not allow people who keep domestic rabbits to have any contact with your wild cottontail rabbits.
- 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.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

https://www.northeastwildlife.org/disease/rabbit-hemorrhagic-disease
https://www.aphis.usda.gov/publications/animal_health/fs-rhdv2.pdf
https://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_health/downloads/rhdv-cleaning-guidance.pdf
https://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_health/downloads/rhdv1.pdf
https://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_health/downloads/faq-rhd-vaccine.pdf

## FOR REHABBERS AND BREEDERS

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

Here are some actions you can take to minimize the risk impacting domestic and wild rabbit populations:

- 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 OR UNUSUAL MORTALITIES TO:


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