



Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Where did the virus come from?

The RHD virus was first detected in China in the winter of 1983-84. Outbreaks occur periodically throughout the world and continually in some countries but have been quite rare in North America. In the U.S., sporadic cases have occurred in nine states between 2000 and 2019.

In March 2020, RHDV2 was detected in wild and domestic rabbits in Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. RHDV2 was confirmed in Colorado on April 17, 2020 in wild cottontails in Alamosa county. Epidemiology has not yet shown how the virus was introduced to this region.

What is Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease?

Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease Virus Serotype 2 is a highly contagious and fatal disease of domestic rabbits and wild rabbits. This is a foreign animal disease (FAD) and is of high concern at the state and federal levels. The recent involvement of wild cottontails and hares is of particular concern.

Clinical signs: Often the only signs of the disease are sudden death and possibly blood-stained noses caused by internal bleeding. Infected rabbits may also develop a fever, be hesitant to eat, or show respiratory or nervous signs. Many of the rabbits confirmed with RHDV2 recently in Arizona and New Mexico have shown no clinical signs or gross pathology other than sudden death.

Transmission: RHDV2 can be spread through contact with infected rabbits, their meat or their fur, or materials coming in contact with them. Scavengers and birds may play an important role in indirect transmission of the RHD virus.

Prevention: A vaccine for RHDV2 is not currently available in Colorado. Rabbit owners should practice good biosecurity measures to protect their animals from this disease, such as washing your hands before and after working with rabbits and not sharing equipment with other owners. Rabbit owners should also avoid contact with wild or feral rabbits.

What is the concern with RHDV2 in the United States?

The U.S. rabbit industry is estimated to be worth between \$2.2 billion and \$2.3 billion, of which 80 to 90 percent are represented by the value of pet supplies and care of over 6.7 million pet rabbits (primarily domestic European rabbits) in approximately 2.9 million



households. The presence of RHDV2 in the U.S. domestic rabbit industry and in the wild rabbit populations could potentially impact the pet rabbit industry; 4-H, FFA, and other hobby groups; exhibitions; laboratories; and the meat, pelt, and hunting sectors.

In addition, wild rabbits and hares serve an important role in ecosystem function with impacts on both plant and animal communities. They serve as prey for numerous wildlife species; including golden eagles, coyotes, and lynx to name a few. Locally, their die-offs could impact the survival and reproduction of predators and cause them to seek out alternative prey.

How many cases of RHD have been confirmed in CO?

The State Veterinarian's Office is tracking the cases of RHDV2 in Colorado on CDA's [Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease webpage](#). The color-coded map indicates which counties RHDV2 has been detected in either wild rabbits, domestic rabbits, or both.

How long can RHD persist in the environment?

The virus can survive for long periods outside the host. Environmental temperature and protection by organic material are important factors in the survival of the virus. Viable virus has been detected for as long as 105 days on a fomite at room temperature, has been found in decaying tissue of infected carcasses for up to 90 days, and may persist in chilled or frozen rabbit meat. The virus can remain viable for 22-35 days at 72°F. It also survives freeze-thaw cycles.

Can rabbits that have been exposed and recover or never become ill become carriers of the virus for life?

Exposure to a virus does not mean infected with a virus. Some rabbits will just be exposed; others will be exposed and become infected and either die or recover. Rabbits that may recover can continue to shed the virus and infect other rabbits. Therefore, it is recommended that affected premises depopulate all rabbits on-site before importing any new rabbits onto their facility.

How can I tell if my rabbit has RHD?

Only laboratory tests can confirm for sure. However, RHD should be considered if a rabbitry experiences illness in most/all rabbits, high fevers, poor appetites, depression, inactivity, bloody discharges, and/or sudden death. Call your veterinarian right away if you have any concerns about your rabbit's health.

What should I do if I find a dead rabbit?

If an owned rabbit dies and RHD could be the cause, double bag the body in plastic bags and refrigerate it until given more instructions. Do not freeze it. Always wear disposable gloves when handling a dead animal; dispose of them when done and wash your hands.



Owners: Rabbit owners who have questions about the disease should contact their veterinarian.

Veterinarians: Veterinarians must report suspected RHDV2 cases in domestic rabbits to the State Veterinarian's Office at 303-869-9130. Disease investigations will be completed by a Foreign Animal Disease Diagnostician.

Wildlife: To report suspect cases (sick or dead wild rabbits, hares, or pika), contact your local Colorado Parks and Wildlife office.

Can humans, dogs or other animals contract RHD?

RHDV2 is not infectious to people or domestic animals other than rabbits. However, multiple dead or sick rabbits can also be a sign of tularemia or plague, diseases that can cause serious illness in people. Do not handle or consume sick or dead wildlife, and do not allow pets to contact or consume wildlife carcasses.

