

VIRAL HAEMORRHAGIC DISEASE OF RABBITS

Viral Haemorrhagic Disease 1 (VHD1 or RHD1) in rabbits is an invariably fatal disease caused by a calicivirus. It was first recognised in 1984 in an outbreak in China that lasted nine months and killed an estimated fourteen million domestic rabbits.

The virus has an incubation time of 16 hours to three days. Rabbits are usually found dead with haemorrhages from the nose and mouth. The virus infects rabbits greater than 6 weeks of age (rabbits of 4 – 6 weeks may become infected and survive).

The virus is passed on through direct contact or on fomites such as bedding, hay and clothing. It can be transmitted via insects such as fleas; birds may also play a part in the spread of the virus.

Rabbits that contract the virus may show signs such as respiratory distress, fever, reduced appetite, lethargy, convulsions and bleeding from the nose before dying. Although the virus usually results in 100% mortality - a small number of rabbits (5 – 10%) can overcome the initial infection and go on to develop liver disease. These rabbits present with jaundice, anorexia and weight loss and die after a few weeks from a severe hepatitis (inflammation of the liver) and internal haemorrhages.

The virus is very stable in the environment – persisting for over 100 days at normal temperatures, for 2 days at 60° C and up to 225 days at 4° C. The virus can also survive freeze/thaw cycles. This means the virus is very difficult to get rid of once it has been found in an area.

Viral Haemorrhagic Disease 2 (VHD2 or RHD2)

In recent years a new strain of this virus called VHD2 has been responsible for the deaths of rabbits across the UK. The new strain of this virus is less virulent (kills less rabbits) but is capable of infecting and killing young rabbits who normally would not have succumbed to VHD1. It has a slower incubation period of 3 – 9 days and unlike VHD1 it does not kill every rabbit it infects. Some rabbits will survive if hospitalised for aggressive supportive care.

Preventing VHD 1 and 2

- The most important step in preventing VHD is annual vaccination of your pet rabbit. Vaccines are advised for all rabbits, even those kept indoors as the virus can be spread indirectly on bedding or clothing.
- There is a combined VHD1 & 2 and myxomatosis vaccine available.
- Vaccines can be started from 5 weeks of age and protect against VHD 1 and 2 and myxomatosis for a period of ~12 months – **please speak to any of our team for more information on getting your rabbit vaccinated**

