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Easter Rabbits & Disease, A New Combo

Every spring Humane Educators and Rabbit Advocates educate the public regarding the realities of rabbit care and rabbit overpopulation issues at animal shelters. This year the job is a bit harder. After three outbreaks of Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease, RHD, in the U.S. in the past two years, educators must now also warn potential rabbit caretakers to be on the lookout for, and protect their rabbits from this dangerous viral disease.

RHD suddenly appeared in China in 1984. In four years it reached rabbits across three continents, killing ninety percent of the rabbits it infected within twenty four to forty eight hours of contact. RHD is an extremely contagious virus transmitted by direct contact with infected rabbits, or by indirect contact with objects contaminated by the virus. The virus can live outside a host for 105 days at 68° and for 2 days at 140°. Fatal infection can cause high fever, lethargy or no symptoms at all. In the acute form rabbits die due to a massive hemorrhage of at least one major organ. However there are two other forms of the disease. In one form, rabbits show some distress and recover. This is especially true for rabbits under 4 weeks, because rabbits under this age are not susceptible to the virus. The mortality rate is low in rabbits between the age of 4 and 8 weeks, as well as in rabbits over 6 years old. Rabbits who recover become carriers for a period thought to range from 4 to 8 weeks.

A third symptomology is now being reported from countries that have experienced repeating epidemics. This is caused by both a chronic and a subclinical form, characterized by jaundice, weight loss and lethargy. Death due to liver failure occurs in 2 weeks with these forms. These forms effect 5% to 10% of infected rabbits.

The domestic rabbit of the U.S. is an ancestor of the European Rabbit, the only species that experiences severe illness and death as a result of infection by RHD. Dr. David Matson, Head of the Infectious Diseases Section at the Center for Pediatric Research in Norfolk, Virginia, examined a health survey and serological evidence gathered by Australian scientists and found evidence that humans who come in contact with the disease sometimes develop flu like symptoms. The Center for Disease Control is monitoring the health of people in the U.S. who come in contact with the virus. There is additional evidence that other animals can become infected, and should be monitored if exposed.

The first official outbreak of RHD in the U.S. occurred in Iowa in March of 2000. Two additional outbreaks have occurred. An outbreak in Utah in August of 2001 claimed the lives of over 4,000 rabbits, primarily through eradication efforts. This outbreak reached as far east as Illinois where a rabbitry which had purchased rabbits from the Utah facility lost approximately 300 rabbits, half to the disease. The third outbreak came in December of 2001 at the Queens Zoo. Eight rabbits were lost in that incident.

Rabbit caretakers and potential rabbit caretakers are asked to have rabbits necropsied by their Veterinarian in the event of sudden and/or unexplained death.

Kind Planet, an internet based humane education program, has joined with the RHD in the U.S. Coalition to get the word out to rabbit caretakers and potential rabbit caretakers. The Coalition is a group working to stop the spread of RHD. Kind Planet urges people to adopt a rabbit only after careful consideration of the care it will need throughout it's life span of up to twelve years. With RHD now in the U.S., rabbit caretakers have the added responsibility of keeping rabbits safe from this deadly virus. For additional information please contact us at 800.906.2445 or visit our websites at www.kindplanet.org and www.vhdcoalition.org