

RHD Quick Facts

RHD, (Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease), was first recorded in 1984, in China. Since that time it has spread across the globe, to all continents except South America, killing between 50 and 90 percent of its hosts, the European Rabbit. It has been completely eradicated in Mexico, due in part to the efforts of the USDA, (US Department of Agriculture), which assisted the Mexican Government. Other countries, such as China have virtually eliminated it, though there are no guarantees that this will hold true. The virus is virtually impossible to eradicate in Europe, Australia and New Zealand because of the wild Rabbit populations there. The Australian government plans deliberate releases of the virus to curb wild Rabbit population. The first reported outbreak of RHD in the US was announced on April 10, 2000. Canada was not affected. Twenty-five died through infection and two others were euthanized to prevent spread. On August 17, 2001, a second outbreak was confirmed in Utah, which effected rabbits in Idaho, Illinois, and Montana. Eradication efforts claimed the death of over 4000 rabbits. A third outbreak was reported on December 11, 2001 at the Wildlife Conservation Society's Queens Zoo/Wildlife Center in Flushing New York involving 4 Rabbits.

RHD is still being studied by Scientists, who are not positive of the exact virus responsible or the creation of RHD. The main virus is accepted as being part of the Calici Virus family, though some studies have indicated that the Parvo Virus is involved. It is concluded, by some, to be a combination of the two.

The symptoms, mortality rate and pathology of the disease differs in various outbreaks. Factors such as the amount of exposure create incubation periods between 18 and 48 hours. The different mortality rates are unaccounted for. The disease does not affect Rabbits under 4 weeks old. The mortality rate seems to be lower in Rabbits over 8 years old, though any Rabbit exposed does become a carrier for an estimated 4 to 8 weeks. Symptoms range from sudden death, lethargy, loss of appetite, upper and lower respiratory jaundice, congestion, high temperature, spasms, blue color to the lips and mucous membranes, bleeding from nose, rectum, and mouth. The cause of death is massive internal hemorrhaging of one or more organs. Chronic and subacute versions result in death in two weeks and have effected 5 to 10% of rabbits infected in outbreaks. Chronic versions symptoms may also include diarrhea, with mucous present in feces. All incidents include lesions on the liver.

The means of transmission are oral, respiratory and through scrapes and abrasions. RHD is highly stable in the environment. It remains a viable infecting agent for 105 days when kept at 68 degrees and 2 days at 140 degrees when placed dry on clothe. Infecting agents can therefore become anything that comes in contact with it. Sick and dead Animals, as well as the feces of those who are infected are all agents of transmission. In China during initial outbreaks, the disease was thought to have been spread by merchants traveling from facility to facility, distributing yarn made from Rabbit wool.

Vaccines are available elsewhere in the world. There are no vaccines approved for use in the US. Most Veterinarians and Scientists, in fact all that we have spoken to, indicate that vaccines would not be an effective front line defense. The USDA has no authority in the US to eradicate the disease, though individual states may or may not have such. Any effort would be planned on a case by case basis depending on contact with potential carriers.

Education regarding the prevention of RHD, as well as information regarding the existence of the disease is not readily available in the US. RHD is not a reportable disease in individual states nor is it a Federal Reportable Disease. There are no precautions against allowing RHD into the country. The USDA does not quarantine, or require health certificates for, Rabbits. Shipments of Rabbits, wool and yarn, and other products are often imported from infected countries.

Though not considered a zoonotic disease; recent studies show that RHD could pose a health threat to humans. People who have been exposed to the disease have had an increase above norm of illness ranging from flu symptoms to headaches. The Center for Disease Control is monitoring the health of humans exposed in the U.S.

For Information About RHD And To Help Keep The US RHD Free
Visit www.vhdcoalition.org, or call 800.906.2445