

Rabbit Viral Haemorrhagic Disease

History

RVHD1 was first identified in this country in 1991. The viral infection had initially been seen in China and then spread across Europe, thought to have been passed on by the import of angora fur. Vaccines were developed and became available throughout Europe and the UK.

In 2015 large numbers of wild rabbits were found to be dying in Devon and Cornwall and it was discovered that the virus had mutated and was known as RVHD2. Whilst RVHD1 caused rabbits to haemorrhage from rectum and mouth, this was no longer the case with RVHD2, many animals just suddenly dying with no apparent symptoms. Some exhibitors have reported rabbits seeming of their food briefly before dying or fitting as they died.

Current Situation

A new virulent variant of RVHD2 has now been identified in Europe. The vaccines which have been available are no longer effective. We do not yet know whether any animals have been affected in the UK as testing is not yet carried out for this variant. HIPRA have developed a new vaccine, effective against RVHD 1&2 plus the new variant. This has been given Vet Medicine Directorate approval on September 27th and is licensed for use in this country. The drug company are manufacturing vaccine for use in the UK and hope to have it available within the next few weeks. As a prescription only medicine, it will only be available via Vet Practices in the UK. We have heard today (8th November) that the vaccine will be available for vets to order from the wholesaler from December 1st.

Action if you have any sudden deaths

There is no change to the advice or rules for previous variants. If you suddenly lose a previously fit rabbit – assume that it may be RVHD2. Wash hands and forearms thoroughly using the COVID guidelines. Change all clothes before touching another rabbit. Double bag the body and if possible, have a vet take a liver sample for testing. If testing is not easily accessible, please ensure that the body is incinerated. Burying the carcass will infect the area of ground where the body is buried. As far as we know now, incubation remains between 2 and 9 days. If you go on to lose further animals within the next 10 days, this will be confirmation that you are likely to have a RVHD2 outbreak. You must report the presumed outbreak to the BRC office and put all your stock in quarantine. You may not rehome any stock during the quarantine period of 4 months and should not bring any new stock in. New stock should be vaccinated before bringing into your shed after the quarantine period. Do not visit any other rabbitry or show.

Double bag any shavings and bedding removed from the dead rabbits' hutches. Ensure that all dust and muck has been removed from the hutch. Disinfect hutches with a 1 in 10 bleach solution and follow up when dry with Virkon which is known to be effective against the virus.

If your rabbits are in separate sheds and you have a friend, relative or partner, have one person only feed in the shed where deaths have occurred. The second person should feed the stock in any unaffected shed. This will reduce the risk of spreading the infection. If you have no help, always feed rabbits in the affected shed last. Wear different footwear in the affected shed. Change and wash clothes daily. Do not share feeding bowls or bottles between stock. Once you have had 10 free days with no deaths, this outbreak can be assumed to be over, however any rabbit which has survived an infection, will shed the virus in their urine and faeces for up to 2 months. Good infection control measures remain very important.

Further help and advice can be requested from a member of the Health and Welfare Committee.