

Rabbit haemorrhagic disease



Prostration (extreme physical weakness)



Dyspnoea, bloodstained frothy nasal discharge



Neurological signs (paddling, convulsions, paralysis)



Mucous membrane congestion and death

WHAT IS RABBIT HAEMORRHAGIC DISEASE

Rabbit haemorrhagic disease (RHD) is a very contagious and deadly viral disease for rabbits and hares. RHD occurs in wild and domestic rabbits and hares and does not infect other animals or people. There are different strains of this disease that all can have extremely high illness rates (almost 100%) and varying death rates (5%–70%). This disease was first confirmed in South Africa in November 2022 and the type of RHD that was identified is called Rabbit haemorrhagic disease Virus 2 (RHDV2).

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF RABBIT HAEMORRHAGIC DISEASE?

Rabbits of all ages can be infected. Clinical signs are grouped depending on the course of the disease:

- **Acute infection:**
 - Fever (death usually occurs 12–36 hours after onset of fever)
 - Anorexia (inappetence/poor appetite/reluctant to eat)
 - Lethargy (laziness and dullness)
 - Respiratory signs (difficulty breathing, bloodstained frothy nasal discharge)
 - Neurological signs (paddling, convulsions (fits) or paralysis)

For technical queries contact: Directorate: Animal Health

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agriculture, land reform & rural development

Department:
Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



- Prostration (lying flat, extreme physical weakness)
- Mucous membrane congestion (reddish discoloration of eyes and inside mouth)
- Rapid death.
 - **Subacute infection:**
 - Signs like acute infection, but milder.
 - Chronic, persistent infections are usually asymptomatic, but the following signs may be seen:
 - Severe and generalised jaundice (yellowish appearance of mucous membranes in eyes and mouth)
 - Loss of weight and lethargy
 - These animals often die one to two weeks later.

Any rabbit or hare presenting with suspect clinical signs must be isolated immediately to prevent the spread of the disease. Please contact your local state veterinarian should you observe any of these clinical signs.

PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES AND BIOSECURITY

Rabbit owners are advised to practice good biosecurity, ensure that their rabbits are securely confined, and must prevent any contact with other rabbits or hares. It is also advisable that you do not allow people into your rabbit enclosure if they recently had contact with other rabbits or hares. Section 11 of the Animal Diseases Act, 1984 (Act No. 35 of 1984) states that it is the responsibility of the owner of animals, and the owner and manager of the land on which animals are kept, to prevent disease from entering the animal population and if already present, to prevent the further spread thereof.

Vaccination against RHD will be considered based on the specifications made by the Directorate: Animal Health of the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development. (DALRRD). There are inactivated vaccines available internationally which produce good immunity and are considered effective in protecting rabbits that have not previously been exposed to RHD. The DALRRD is actively working with the relevant bodies – SAHPRA and the Registrar of Act 36 of 1947— to make provision for the legal use of such vaccines in



South Africa. Only legally imported and registered vaccines approved by SAHPRA/Act 36 may be used. For further information on the relevant import permits, interested parties are advised to contact SAHPRA (<https://www.sahpra.org.za/key-contacts/>) and Agricultural Inputs Control (Act 36 – <https://www.dalrrd.gov.za/Branches/Agricultural-Production-Health-Food-Safety/Agriculture-Inputs-Control>).

FOLLOW THESE RECOMMENDED BIOSECURITY

PRACTICES:

- Do not allow pet, feral, or wild rabbits to have contact with your rabbits or gain entry to the facility or home.
- Do not allow visitors in rabbitries or let them handle pet rabbits without protective clothing (including coveralls, shoe covers, hair covering and gloves). Clean and disinfect protective clothing after use.
- Always wash hands with warm soapy water before entering your rabbit area, after removing protective clothing and before leaving the rabbit area.
- Do not introduce new rabbits from unknown or untrusted sources, or from sources that mix rabbits from multiple origins.
- Disinfect all equipment and cages moved on or off premises before they are returned to the rabbitry.
- Recommend disinfectants.
 - 10% Sodium hydroxide, 1%—2% formalin, citric acid, 1% solution potassium peroxymonosulfate and 20% household bleach. Contact time for proper disinfection is 5 minutes, but 10 minutes for potassium peroxymonosulfate. Rinse surfaces with fresh water following treatment with bleach solutions.
 - Wear nitrile, silicon, or rubber gloves, protective clothing, and eye protection when mixing and handling bleach or bleach solution and work in a well-ventilated area.
 - The RHD virus is resistant to ethers and chloroforms.
 - Isolate and quarantine new rabbits for 14 days and monitor them for signs of disease.

- Establish a working relationship with a veterinarian to review your biosecurity practices for identification of potential threats and closure of possible biosecurity gaps.
- If you are a breeder or grower who purchases live rabbits, even if you have existing biosecurity measures in place, you should review your practices and take steps to strengthen your protective measures given the higher risk profile since RHD has been identified in South Africa.
- Try not to source fodder or food (lucerne, hay or bedding) if you know these originate from an area where RHD outbreaks have occurred recently. It is the owner's responsibility to remain informed of, and verify, the disease risk with food suppliers. You can also contact your veterinarian and local state veterinarian regarding area disease information.
- Keep record of all activities occurring on your premises.

NB: IF YOU LIVE NEAR OR VISIT AN AREA WHERE THIS DISEASE WAS CONFIRMED:

- Destroy any wild rabbit carcasses you may see, following necessary environmental and municipal legislation requirements.
- If you see multiple dead wild rabbits, report it to state veterinarian officials.
- If you own domestic rabbits, never release them into the wild or allow them to roam freely because they may endanger the disease status of wild endangered rabbit and hare species.
- If your rabbits appear ill or suddenly die off, contact your veterinarian.

Contact your nearest private/state veterinarian or animal health technician for further information. Follow these instructions on the www.dalrrd.gov.za website to access provincial state veterinarian contact details:

Left side column: Branches > Agricultural Production, Health & Food Safety > Animal Health > contacts > provincial veterinary services

