



RABBIT FACT SHEET 2.

VHD: what every UK rabbit owner needs to know

What is VHD?

Viral Haemorrhagic Disease. It's a deadly disease that any rabbit can catch, and it kills most of those that get it. It first appeared in Britain in 1992 and was a notifiable disease until October 1996, when the MAFF (now DEFRA) lifted restrictions on affected premises - the disease had become so widespread that such measures were futile.

Only vaccination can control the spread of the disease in domestic rabbits. VHD is so deadly it has been released in Australia to kill wild rabbits with great success. The problem is, it kills pet rabbits too.

VHD is also sometimes referred to as HVD or RCD, particularly in Australia.

Is VHD the same as myxomatosis?

No. VHD is caused by a totally different virus and causes a totally different disease. Myxomatosis is caused by a virus from the Pox family, whereas VHD is caused by a member of the calicivirus family. Pet rabbits need to be vaccinated against myxomatosis and VHD.

Can humans or any other animals catch VHD?

D? No. Only rabbits get VHD, although hares can get a similar disease.

Does VHD affect wild rabbits in this country?

Yes, VHD is endemic (well established) in British wild rabbits, so they can help spread the virus around the country.

Which areas are affected?

VHD outbreaks have been reported across the entire UK, from the South coast to Scotland. Between 1992 and 1996 (the period when outbreaks were officially being monitored) the South West, Wales, and coastal areas were worst affected. However, in the decade since VHD ceased to be notifiable, we have had no way of knowing where VHD active, other than sporadic reports from rabbit owners and vets who come across the disease. Hopefully, this situation will soon improve, as a new national initiative attempting to monitor this, and other infectious diseases, was launched in February 2007.

Despite this, waiting for VHD to appear in your area before vaccinating may be too late for your rabbits... Using this "wait and see" strategy, someone's rabbits have to be the first to die, and we don't want it to be yours. Hence, the RWAf advises that all pet rabbits be vaccinated against VHD and their boosters kept up to date.

How can my rabbit catch VHD?

There are lots of ways your rabbits could pick up the virus:

- Food (e.g. hay) or water contaminated by infected wild rabbits.



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- Birds or insects may bring the virus to your rabbits on their feet or in their droppings, which your rabbits may eat if they graze on the lawn.
- The virus may be blown on the wind.
- You (or your dog or cat) might accidentally bring the virus home on your feet from infected wild rabbit droppings, and vermin around rabbit hutches might bring it along too.
- You might pick it up from other peoples' rabbits, for example at a show or even if another rabbit owner handles your rabbits.

The virus itself is extremely tough and can survive for many months in the environment, and can even resist temperatures of 60 degrees centigrade!

What happens to rabbits if they catch VHD?

Baby rabbits, under about 8 weeks of age, don't get ill at all. But VHD usually kills older rabbits. They may just die suddenly, with no sign of anything wrong. Or they may get very ill before dying, have difficulty breathing, go off their food, have a high temperature and bleed from the nose and bottom. A few rabbits only get mildly ill and then recover.

Can I prevent my rabbits catching VHD?

Yes! VHD is a preventable disease: there are several steps you can take to protect your rabbit.

Firstly, and most importantly, have your rabbit vaccinated against VHD. Bunnies need to be vaccinated against VHD every year as well as being vaccinated against myxomatosis. Myxomatosis booster vaccinations are needed every 6 to 12 months (depending on the risk of myxi in your area, and your rabbit's living arrangements) so talk to your vet about a tailor-made vaccination programme for your bunny.

Good hygiene is very important in reducing the risk of disease, so keep hutches/cages very clean. Ensure that vermin and wild birds can't get into outdoor hutches or runs. You might need to use weld-mesh with smaller holes! Make sure there is nothing attractive to wild mice and rats near your rabbits: sweep up any spilt food and bedding. Don't pick green foodstuffs from areas where wild rabbits live, and try to stop wild rabbits from getting into your garden. If this is not feasible, make sure it is impossible for wild visitors to have nose-to-nose contact with your pet rabbit.

Rabbits living indoors (house rabbits) are still at risk from VHD, so they definitely need to be vaccinated with boosters kept up to date.

What about myxomatosis?

Myxomatosis is still around and still dangerous. Your pet rabbit should be vaccinated against both diseases. This usually means two trips to the vets – no combined vaccines are available in the UK, and the RWAFA recommends following the manufacturer's advice to leave a two-week gap between the injections. Some vets will vaccinate against both diseases on the same day in very exceptional circumstances, such as in the face of a disease outbreak, but this is an "off label" use of the UK vaccines.

Information taken from the Rabbit Welfare Fund. www.houserabbit.co.uk