



Eric J. Holcomb, Governor
Bret D. Marsh, DVM, State Veterinarian

INDIANA STATE BOARD OF ANIMAL HEALTH

Office of the State Veterinarian
Discovery Hall, Suite 100
1202 East 38th Street
Indianapolis, IN 46205-2898
Phone: 317/544-2400

ANIMAL HEALTH ADVISORY Rabbit Owners Need to Stay Vigilant About RHDV2 (August 2023)

As the number of states with diagnosed cases of rabbit hemorrhagic disease virus 2 (RHDV2) grows, the Indiana State Board of Animal Health (BOAH) encourages rabbit owners to continue to be aware of signs of disease and take steps to protect their animals.

RHDV2 continues to be a disease of concern in the United States. After spreading through multiple Western states, the virus has been identified in a handful of states east of the Mississippi River, including Alabama, Georgia, New York, Florida, Tennessee, Kentucky and—most recently—Illinois. This disease has been detected in both wild and domestic rabbits.

Rabbit owners can ***learn more about this disease and subscribe for email/text updates*** from BOAH regarding rabbit disease information on the BOAH website. If RHDV or another significant health issue is detected in Indiana, BOAH will send the latest information to subscribers. Subscribe online: www.in.gov/boah/species-information/rabbits/

Vaccine Availability

In October 2021, BOAH approved the use of a vaccine in Indiana to deter RHDV2 transmission. This vaccine is the only one approved by the US Department of Agriculture for use in the United States, and must be administered subcutaneously in two doses, 21 days apart. Owners should allow 14 days after the second dose for full immunity to develop.

The vaccine is available through Medgene Labs. While individuals may vaccinate their own rabbits in Indiana, the company is currently limiting sales of vaccine to veterinarians. BOAH advises rabbit owners to contact a private veterinarian about obtaining the product.

Rabbit Disease and Biosecurity Videos

BOAH veterinarian Dr. Melissa Justice has recorded two different educational presentations on rabbit biosecurity and diseases. Both presentations are available online.

- **Rabbit Biosecurity:** www.youtube.com/watch?v=qm1-zq69H4g
- **Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease Virus 2 (RHDV2):** www.in.gov/boah/species-information/rabbits/

Traveling with Rabbits

As the number of cases of RHDV2 grows, anyone traveling with rabbits, especially for exhibitions, should contact the state-of-destination about pre-entry requirements before leaving home. Many states are requiring a certificate of veterinary inspection (CVI) to accompany the animals.

About Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease (RHDV)

RHDV is a highly contagious viral disease in rabbits with a high mortality rate. This virus is considered a foreign animal disease in the United States.

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Prior to the outbreak in 2020, RHDV Serotype 2 (RHDV2) had been detected sporadically in North America in wild and domestic rabbits. In the past 3 years, the virus has been identified in 27 states. BOAH advises rabbit owners to be aware of signs of the disease and take steps to protect their animals—especially as fairs and exhibition season continues.

The two strains of this disease, RHDV and RHDV Serotype 2, are similar except RHDV2 affects both wild and domestic rabbits. **RHDV and RHDV2 do not impact human health** and are not known to affect other animals. RHDV has no known cure. Preventive measures for the disease include vaccination and strict biosecurity.

Clinical Signs of RHDV

Many times, the only sign of RHDV is sudden death with blood coming from the nostrils or mouth caused by internal bleeding. Infected rabbits may develop a fever, be hesitant to eat, or show respiratory or nervous system signs.

Some rabbits may be asymptomatic carriers capable of shedding the virus for up to 2 months post-infection. Rabbits who survive the virus may show signs of dullness and inappetence. They are carriers of the infection and can shed the virus for at least 42 days.

RHDV Transmission

RHDV can spread through direct contact or exposure to an infected rabbit's saliva, secretions from the eyes and nose, urine, feces, or blood. The virus can also be spread by contaminated materials such as carcasses, food, water, etc. People can spread the virus indirectly by carrying it on their clothing and shoes.

RHDV is very resistant to extreme temperatures. The virus can live in an environment for up to 15 weeks in dry conditions and can survive freezing. The virus is hardy in rabbit meat and can survive in frozen or decomposing meat for months.

Report Suspect Cases of RHDV

While RHDV2 has not been diagnosed in Indiana, Hoosier rabbit owners should be prepared to know what to do if signs consistent with RHDV2 are identified.

- Domestic or pet rabbits: Contact a veterinarian or BOAH for guidance.
- Wild rabbits with signs consistent with RHDV2 (such as bleeding from nose, mouth, or rectum): report to the Indiana Department of Natural Resources at <https://reportsickanimal.dnr.in.gov/report>

Testing

Currently, no easy, reliable test exists for use in live rabbits. Contact BOAH if clinical signs are observed in domestic rabbits. A veterinarian will collect samples from potentially infected animals to send to designated laboratories.

Protect Your Rabbits

Rabbit owners are encouraged to follow good biosecurity practices to keep rabbits healthy at home as well as at exhibitions.

- Monitor rabbits daily for signs of illness.
- Before caring for rabbits, wash hands and change into dedicated clothing and footwear.
- Minimize visitors to rabbit housing areas. Provide disposable foot covers and gloves to visitors handling rabbits.
- Prevent contact with wild rabbits and areas where wild rabbits roam.
- Do not purchase rabbits from unfamiliar or untrusted sources.
- Do not collect and use wild plants as a food source.
- Store feed and bedding in tightly sealed containers to prevent contamination.
- Do not share equipment with other rabbit owners.
- Clean and disinfect equipment, waterers, feeders and other items that come in contact with rabbits regularly. Rinse waterers and feeders before filling. Verify the disinfectant used is labeled for RHDV2.

Pay attention to the amount of time the disinfectant must be left on the surface to neutralize the virus (contact time).

- Remove feces regularly.
- Control rodents and insects.
- Isolate new rabbits and rabbits returning from a show or breeding for at least 30 days to 45 days and monitor for signs of illness. To protect against rabbit hemorrhagic disease, isolate for 60 days.
 - Care for isolated rabbits only after caring for other rabbits. Practice proper hygiene after caring for rabbits.
- If possible, avoid traveling to areas experiencing a disease outbreak.
- When taking rabbits to exhibitions, exercise extra caution and biosecurity:
 - Do not handle other peoples' rabbits or equipment.
 - Maintain separation or distance between cages. Consider use of plastic or cardboard barriers between cages.
 - Wash hands frequently while at the show, especially after touching common surfaces (doorknobs, counters, tables, etc.).
 - Consider bringing your own carpet square to place under the animal while at the show table. Show organizers should consider using materials on the show table that can be adequately cleaned and disinfected after contact with every animal.
- Vaccinate all rabbits that are 4 weeks of age or older.

More Information

More information on RHDV and rabbit biosecurity is online: www.in.gov/boah/species-information/rabbits/