

Advice Sheet for Pet Owners Experiencing the Sudden Death of a Rabbit



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Currently there is an outbreak of a nasty and fatal virus (RVHD-2) occurring throughout the UK. If you suddenly find that your usually healthy rabbit has died unexpectedly it may have been affected by the virus.

The virus is carried by insects (mosquitos, flies) mice, rats and birds and possibly on your footwear and clothing.

Although a rabbit is occasionally `off colour` before death (possible if you had had it vaccinated with the Joint Myxi/VHD vaccine). It may even have eaten all of its food and have seemed perfectly fine beforehand. The current vaccine may have provided some protection but does not prevent death as the virus has changed into a new strain.

Transfer the rabbit straight from the hutch to a bag and seal. Cover with a second bag and seal. Keep in a cool place but do not freeze. Clean hutch out, again double bag the contents, Spray with disinfectant, now wash hands well, change footwear and clothing before tending to other rabbits if you have any.

Who should I speak to? Firstly contact your Veterinary Practice if registered, You may, or may not, want to have a post mortem carried out to confirm the diagnosis but you should ensure even if you do not want one done, that the body is incinerated, rather than buried in your garden. This will reduce the risk to any future pet rabbit you might have.

If you have no registered practice your choices are: Any local practise or ALPHA (DEFRA that was). A post mortem is required which may not confirm diagnosis of RHD but would rule other causes out. Always request a fixed price before agreeing to a post mortem being undertaken. If the priority is purely to rule out RHD and costs are an issue ask for a price to open rabbit, obtain a sample of liver and send to a laboratory only. Confirmation is only possible from specific testing. A sample of liver contained in viral transport medium or a frozen sample is required. Please note samples should NOT be sent in formalin. Samples to: MORDUN for PCR testing cost: £40.60 plus VAT. Your Vet will be able to access this information online.

Can I re-use my Rabbit Hutch?

One of the most important things to understand is the importance of good disinfecting and leaving the hutch empty for a period.

As regards effective disinfectants, the first thing to do is sweep all remnants of wood shavings and bedding out, then thoroughly clean with hot soapy water (washing up liquid will do) Scrape muck off that is stuck to the floor and after washing rinse with clean water, then leave to dry.

Virkon is the only disinfectant which claims to be effective against RHD. This can be ordered online, however any viricidal used by your Vet is probably just as effective. You can just ask the practice to get you something.

Leave the hutch empty and out the in the sunshine if possible for several months.

Is there a vaccine available?

At the moment the vaccine for RHD-2 is not available in the UK but it can be imported by a vet from France or Spain. It is not available in single dose vials but your Vet may be willing to purchase some and hold a `Vaccination Clinic` for several pet owners on a single day. Should your vet need advice this can be obtained from the British Rabbit Council.

Am I a risk to my friends Rabbit?

It is wise to stay away from friend's rabbits and stores selling pet rabbits until four months have passed.