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

Currently there is an ongoing outbreak of a nasty and fatal virus (RHD-2) occurring throughout the country. Incidence of rabbits infected has increased since the weather improved.

If you suddenly find that your usually very fit rabbit has died unexpectedly it may have been affected by the virus.

The virus is carried by insects (mosquitos, fleas), rats, mice and birds and possibly on your shoes or clothes.

Although the rabbit is occasionally 'off colour' before death, (possible if you had had it vaccinated with the joint myxae/VHD vaccine) it may have eaten all of its food and have seemed perfectly fine beforehand. The vaccine may have provided some protection but does not prevent death as the virus has changed into a new strain. There are no proven incidences of RHD1 in this country since the start of RHD2 cases.

Transfer the rabbit straight from 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 clothing and shoes before tending to other rabbits if you have any.

Who should I speak to? Firstly contact your vet 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 no registered practice your choices are: any local practice or APHLA (DEFRA that was). A post mortem 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 sample of liver and send to 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: PALS or BATT Laboratories for PCR testing. Your vet will be able to access this information on-line.

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 any 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 on line, 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 in the sunshine if possible for several months.

IS THERE A VACCINE AVAILABLE?

YES there are two vaccines available in this country: filavac and erevac. Your vet will be able to obtain vaccine from their normal supplier. Should your vet need advice this can be obtained from the BRC.

AM I A RISK TO MY FRIEND'S RABBIT?

It is wise to stay away from friend's rabbits and stores selling pet rabbits for the immediate future as the virus can live on your shoes and clothes for several months.