

Rabbit Calicivirus

(Rabbit Haemorrhagic Virus Disease)

Pet rabbit owners should be aware that a new variant of the Rabbit RHVD virus (K5) will be released in Canterbury, Otago and Marlborough in Autumn 2018. It is expected to spread beyond these regions over time.



What is RHVD?

RHVD is caused by a calicivirus and is an acute, usually fatal disease which can cause organ failure and haemorrhage, often manifesting as sudden death.

The incubation is 1-4 days.

The virus is very resistant to environmental conditions and can survive many months.

Infection is easily transmitted between infected rabbits by oral, nasal or conjunctival routes. Flies are an important vector, and can travel long distances spreading the disease far and wide. Spread from feral (wild) rabbits is therefore a very important source of the virus for pet rabbits.

What can Rabbit owners do to protect their pets?

Vaccinations

We strongly recommend that pet rabbits are vaccinated against RHVD. There is one vaccine available (Cylap) which is registered for protection against the original strain of virus but not the new K5 strain.

However a pilot study, and information from Australia indicates that although not registered for the K5 strain, Cylap will protect against K5 as well as the original strain, with a modified vaccination protocol.

There are possible side-effects with the Cylap vaccine which include skin reactions, poor appetite and malaise.

The recommendation for vaccination with Cylap (with the owner's consent to use it "off-label") are:

- For rabbits less than 12 weeks old: Vaccinate from 10-12 weeks of age. Give one "off-label" booster 4 weeks later
- Then give annual booster vaccinations
- For rabbits older than 12 weeks: Give one vaccination then booster annually ("on-label" recommendation)

Immunity takes up to 21 days to develop after vaccination so it is important to make sure your rabbit is immunised BEFORE any outbreak occurs.

Husbandry

- Control insects- especially flies and fleas
- Remove uneaten food daily
- Keep your rabbit indoors where possible
- Rabbit-proof your backyard to prevent access by wild rabbits
- Regularly decontaminate equipment and materials (eg cages, hutches, bowls) with either 10% bleach or 10% sodium hydroxide; with 10 minutes contact time, then rinse
- Limit contact with and handling of unfamiliar pet rabbits
- Use good biosecurity measures - wash hands, shoes, clothing after handling other peoples' rabbits
- Avoid cutting grass & feeding it to your rabbit if there is any risk of contamination from wild rabbits

