

RABBIT CALICIVIRUS

What is it and what does it mean for your pet rabbit?

Rabbit calicivirus (also known as rabbit haemorrhagic disease or RCD) was introduced into New Zealand in 1997 illegally by farmers in a bid to reduce the wild rabbit population. In the following 20 years, the wild population has developed increased immunity to this strain of the virus and so wild rabbit numbers have increased dramatically again. There has been an application to MPI to allow the release of K5 (a more virulent strain of calicivirus) into the South Island – this application was approved in February 2018 although the date of release hasn't been announced yet. It is expected that the virus will eventually spread throughout the whole of NZ.

What does this mean for pet rabbits? The vaccine Cylap RCD is available in New Zealand to provide protection against calicivirus in rabbits. Whilst no vaccine can offer 100% protection it is your rabbits best defence against infection. The vaccine is usually given to rabbits around 10-12 weeks of age as young rabbits are immune to the virus initially. Rabbits under 12 weeks of age will require a booster vaccination a month later but older rabbits only require one vaccination and then annual boosters.

How is the virus spread? Direct contact with infected rabbits isn't needed to spread the virus. It can also be spread on anything contaminated with urine/faeces or respiratory secretions from infected rabbits – this includes hay/straw, grass, clothing, shoes, peoples hands, hutches, used food/water bowls. Insects such as flies, fleas and mosquitos are also capable of spreading the virus. It is even thought it can spread via wind in certain conditions. Hay and straw should have been stored for at least 3 months before being used for rabbits to reduce the risk of virus spread. After handling other rabbits, owners should thoroughly wash their hands and change clothing preferably. Any cages and bowls should be thoroughly cleaned out with disinfectant or bleach before letting new rabbits use them.

What are the symptoms of disease? Sudden death is the most common sign seen. Most affected rabbits die within 2-3 days of infection and many show no other symptoms beforehand. Some rabbits will go off their food and appear lethargic.

What if I want to get a new rabbit after my previous rabbit died of possible calicivirus? Preferably wait at least 3 months before getting a new rabbit. All cages and equipment should be thoroughly cleaned with disinfectant such as Virkon, Trigene or bleach solution (contact time of 10 minutes needed). Ideally vaccinate your new bunny as soon as it is old enough and keep up annual vaccinations.

