

VHD has been recorded all over the UK: all pet rabbits should be vaccinated. There is no way of predicting where the next outbreak will strike, and no practical way of shielding your pet rabbit from all the possible sources of infection.

HOW CAN I PROTECT MY RABBIT FROM VHD?

VHD vaccines are incredibly effective. Your rabbit can be protected with a single injection anytime from 10-12 weeks of age, then a booster every 12 months.

If you are about to obtain a young rabbit that hasn't yet been vaccinated:

- Follow the advice given above, in the myxomatosis section
- Don't use second-hand hutches or equipment without finding out what the previous occupant died from.

VACCINATION FAQs

Can my rabbit have both vaccinations on the same day?

It's not recommended. The UK vaccines are not licensed for use together: the manufacturers advise a 14-day gap.

I'm thinking of having my rabbit vaccinated, but there's no VHD or myxomatosis in the area. Is vaccination really necessary?

We would still recommend vaccination:

- It's impossible to predict when and where diseases will strike. If you wait for a local outbreak of VHD or myxi, your rabbit might be the first to die.
- Many boarding establishments and insurance policies require rabbits to have up-to-date vaccinations.

My rabbit has chronic health problems. Can they still be vaccinated?

You need to discuss this with your vet. In general, vaccines should only be given to healthy animals, whose immune system can mount a proper response to the vaccine. However, if your rabbits' condition is stable, it may be possible to vaccinate them.

Do VHD and myxomatosis vaccinations have side effects?

Like all drugs, vaccines can have side effects, although problems in rabbits are very unusual. Skin reactions are occasionally reported at the site of injection, and some bunnies are quiet for a day or two after vaccination.



This leaflet is brought to you by the Rabbit Welfare Fund - the charitable wing of the Rabbit Welfare Association.

If you love rabbits, please consider supporting the Rabbit Welfare Fund. You can make a donation, or you may like to join the RWA. As well as fund-raising activities, most RWA members kindly make a small donation to the RWF in addition to their annual RWA membership fee. RWA members receive a fabulous quarterly magazine packed with health, behaviour and care advice to help you to build a wonderful relationship with your bunny - whether she/he lives indoors or out.

To contact the RWA/Rabbit Welfare Fund:

Ring the RWA National Helpline on 0844 324 6090

Write to us at PO Box 603, Horsham, West Sussex RH13 5WL.

Log onto our websites

<http://www.rabbitwelfare.co.uk>

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Contact the National Helpline to order bulk supplies of leaflets or send SAE for single copies.



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Write to us at PO Box 603,
Horsham, West Sussex RH13 5WL.
e-mail: hq@rabbitwelfare.co.uk
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DEADLY, BUT PREVENTABLE:

What rabbit owners need to know about myxomatosis & VHD



Vaccination can protect pet rabbits from two killer diseases.

Crossing your fingers won't.

Like every responsible pet owner, you want your bunnies to live a happy, healthy life. So have you had your rabbits vaccinated?



MYXOMATOSIS ("MYXI" OR "MYXO")

Myxomatosis decimated the wild rabbit population when it arrived in Britain 50 years ago. It is still deadly today. Myxomatosis starts with severe conjunctivitis. Next, affected rabbits develop swellings around the head and genital regions; become increasingly weak; go blind; and eventually die.

If an unvaccinated pet rabbit catches myxomatosis, it is doomed. Most vets advise euthanasia as soon as the diagnosis is made because the outlook is so bleak, even with intensive treatment.



HOW CAN PETS CATCH MYXOMATOSIS?

The main route of infection is via insect "vectors" (e.g. fleas and mosquitoes) that have previously bitten an infected rabbit. Midges and mites have recently fallen under suspicion, and research (sponsored by the RWF) is underway to clarify the role of these potential vectors. Direct contact with infected rabbits can also spread the disease.

All pet rabbits - indoors or outdoors - are at risk. Rabbits living outside (especially if wild rabbits enter the garden) are at especially high risk.

HOW CAN I PROTECT MY RABBIT FROM MYXOMATOSIS?

Vaccination is the keystone of a package of measures you should take to protect your rabbit. Rabbits can be vaccinated from 6 weeks of age. The Myxi vaccine is a single injection, part of which is given into - rather than under - the skin. Boosters are needed every 6-12 months.

Vaccination cannot guarantee absolute protection: vaccinated rabbits occasionally catch myxomatosis. However, in vaccinated rabbits, the disease is usually milder, sometimes just a single skin lesion, or transient illness. Vaccinated rabbits with myxi usually survive, whereas unvaccinated rabbits almost always die.

AS WELL AS REGULAR VACCINATION:

- Buy hay & straw from farms free of myxomatosis
- Feed dust-extracted hay or kiln-dried grass
- Fit insect screens to outdoor hutches and runs

- Eliminate standing water (where mosquitoes might breed) from your garden
- Treat your cats and dogs for fleas, otherwise they may bring rabbit fleas home. Talk to your vet about flea control: some products are toxic to rabbits
- Try to stop wild rabbits from getting into your garden. If this isn't feasible, make it impossible for wild visitors to have nose-to-nose contact with your pet.
- Make sure there's nothing to attract vermin and wild birds to hutches/runs; use small-hole mesh on hutches/runs to keep unwelcome creatures out!

VIRAL HAEMORRHAGIC DISEASE (VHD OR HVD)

WHAT IT DOES

VHD arrived in Britain in 1992, although many people have not heard of it before.

VHD is a swift and efficient killer - almost all rabbits who catch VHD die within a day or two. The virus causes massive internal bleeding. Some rabbits bleed from the nose and back passage before death, others die so quickly there may be no outward sign of disease at all. Owners often think their rabbit has died of "fright", a "heart attack" or (in summer) "heatstroke". Most cases are never diagnosed: VHD is only suspected when several rabbits die in quick succession.

HOW CAN PET RABBITS CATCH VHD?

VHD is spread by direct contact with infected rabbits, or indirectly via their urine/faeces. The virus can survive for months in the environment, and is terrifyingly easy to bring home to your pets. For example:

- Hay may have been in contact with infected wild rabbits as grass growing in the field
- Birds or insects may transport the virus on their feet (or in their droppings) to your rabbit grazing on the lawn.
- The virus may be blown on the wind.
- You might bring the virus home on your feet (or car wheels) from infected wild rabbit droppings.
- You could bring the virus home on your hands or clothes.