



FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND CONSUMER SERVICES COMMISSIONER NICOLE “NIKKI” FRIED

Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease (RHD) Virus Vaccine FAQs

Is there a vaccine for RHD?

Yes, but the commercial RHD vaccines that are made in Europe are not licensed for use in the United States. Because of the current outbreak, the USDA Center for Veterinary Biologics is allowing veterinarians in states with diagnosed cases of the disease to import vaccine if they complete the federal application process and have the approval of the State Veterinarian.

The only vaccines that can be imported are killed RHD vaccines – FILAVAC and ERAVAC. There is a live RHDV2 vaccine that also contains myxomatosis, but that one is not allowed to be imported because of the potential impact to domestic and wild rabbits.

Vaccines for RHDVa do not protect rabbits from RHDV2 and vice versa. FILAVAC protects against both RHDVa and RHDV2, and ERAVAC only protects against RHDV2.

A vaccine specific to the strain identified in the SW US is currently being developed. Timeline for approval and commercial release is not known at this time.

When will the vaccine be available in Florida?

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services is providing guidance to veterinarians wishing to order vaccine for their clients. Once the vaccine is ordered, it can take several weeks for the vaccine to arrive. Because of the difficulty and expense of ordering the vaccine, we recommend that you talk to your veterinarian about working with other veterinarians to import the vaccine.

Can vaccinated rabbits spread RHD?

Possibly. The vaccines that are currently allowed for import are killed vaccines, meaning that the rabbit cannot shed virus from the vaccine. (Modified live vaccines, on the other hand, allow the virus to grow in the body and may be shed by vaccinated animals). However, studies on previous RHD vaccines (not on the two that are currently allowed to be imported) indicated that vaccinated rabbits could become infected and shed the virus for up to two months without showing clinical signs of disease.

Also, both vaccinated and unvaccinated rabbits can carry the virus on their feet, hair, or whiskers and move the virus (just like other animals, human feet, car tires, or equipment). It is important to practice good biosecurity whether your rabbits are vaccinated or not.



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Will the vaccine protect my rabbits?

No vaccine is 100% effective, so it is important to practice good biosecurity, even if your rabbits are vaccinated. The vaccine takes 7 days to provide full immunity from the disease, so be extra-vigilant during those 7 days. The two vaccines that are available for import are effective in protecting rabbits from clinical signs of RHD.

Do I need to give a vaccine booster?

The FILAVAC vaccine is effective for 12 months, and the ERAVAC vaccine is effective for 9 months, after which the rabbits require a booster. If the vaccine is used before 9 weeks of age, a booster may be needed because maternal antibodies (antibodies received from the mother before birth or after birth in the colostrum and milk) can interfere with the effectiveness of the vaccine.

How much will the vaccine cost?

Both FILAVAC and ERAVAC are expensive and difficult to import, and the total cost per dose will depend on the number of doses ordered and the cost of shipping. Florida is also requiring an examination and permanent identification (such as a microchip or ear tattoo) for all rabbits vaccinated with an imported vaccine. The final price will be set by your veterinarian.

Are there any side effects from vaccination?

Vaccine side effects may include lethargy, fever, digestive upset, nodules or swelling at the vaccination site, and an anaphylactic reaction. The effects of this vaccine on fertility and pregnancy have not been determined.

Is there a withdrawal time in meat rabbits?

Yes. The USDA requires a 21-day meat withdrawal period for rabbits intended for meat consumption.

Why do some people say that the RHD vaccine is cruel?

Unlike most viruses, RHD virus and other caliciviruses cannot grow in cell culture. Currently, to make the RHD vaccine, the companies must infect live rabbits and then euthanize them to harvest their livers to make the vaccine.

Where can I get more information about RHD vaccine?

USDA has a Frequently Asked Questions document about RHD vaccination at: https://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_health/downloads/faq-rhd-vaccine.pdf.