

Rabbit Vaccinations

There are two major, fatal rabbit viruses present in Australia, myxomatosis virus and calicivirus or rabbit haemorrhagic disease virus (RHDV). Unfortunately, no vaccination exists for myxomatosis but vaccines are available to protect against calicivirus.

Both viruses are spread by biting insects such as mosquitos and biting flies, via transmission in oral or respiratory secretions, urine or faeces, through fomites such as grasses and via direct contact with infected wild or domestic rabbits.

There are multiple variants of calicivirus. The two main strains are RHDV1 and RHDV2. Both strains target the liver, resulting in liver failure, bleeding and almost invariably, death within 1-5 days. Symptoms may include weakness, lethargy, inappetence, breathing difficulty, nose bleeds or bleeding from other orifices or in many cases, sudden death.

There are two vaccines available for calicivirus in Australia. The older vaccine is Cylap. This is a killed vaccine. It has been available for several years and provides complete cover for RHDV1 strains but is poorly effective against for RHDV2 strains. This vaccine needs to be repeated every 6 months.

The current recommended protocol for the Cylap vaccine is as follows:

- 4 weeks old
- 8 weeks old
- 12 weeks old
- 6 monthly thereafter

If more than 6 months has lapsed between vaccinations then a booster in 4 weeks is recommended.

Possible adverse reactions from Cylap vaccine include:

- Lethargy and reduced appetite for 24-48 hours
- Limping on one front leg for 24-72 hours after vaccination
- Swelling at injection site (may not develop until 1-2 weeks after vaccination)
- Fur loss and scabs/crusts at injection site reaction (may not develop until 1-2 weeks after vaccination)

The Filavie vaccine has been approved for use in Australia in 2022 under an emergency permit. It provides complete protection for both RHDV1 and RHDV2 strains. As RHDV2 is the main strain affecting rabbits in Australia, this is the current recommended vaccine.

Rabbits should be vaccinated from 10 weeks of age and then once a year thereafter. If there has been a lapse of greater than 1 year between vaccination boosters then a second booster at 4 weeks is recommended.

Possible adverse reactions from Filavie vaccine include:

- Transient fever (increased body temperature) of up to 1.6C above normal for 24 hours
- Lethargy and reduced appetite for 24-48 hours
- Swelling at injection site (may not develop until 1-2 weeks after vaccination), may remain up to 2 months
- Anaphylactic /allergic reaction, which may be fatal (rare)

Vaccine reactions, if they do occur are usually transient and self-resolving. However, if you are at all concerned please contact us. Sometimes an anti-inflammatory and/or pain killer needs to be prescribed for a short period.

Other methods that can help to prevent virus transmission including keeping rabbits housed indoors, or for those that must spend time outdoors ensuring there is adequate insect proof screening over the enclosure, using an ectoparasite prevention such as Revolution® once a month and avoid allowing rabbits to spend time outdoors during dusk and dawn, when there are likely to be more mosquitoes around.

