

Q&As

What is RHDV1 K5?

RHDV1 K5 is the trade name for a virus used to manage pest European rabbits. It contains a new strain of Rabbit Haemorrhagic Virus Disease, 08Q712, also known as RHDV1a K5 (here after K5). It is a Korean strain of the existing RHDV1 virus already widespread in New Zealand and only affects the European rabbit.

What did the ACVM registration process involve?

MPI assessed the risks associated with the manufacture, sale and use of RHDV1 K5, as well as the risks associated with efficacy of the currently available vaccine, Cylap RCD Vaccine. This involved reviewing data (such as information on the strain, its formulation, efficacy, safety and animal welfare) supplied by the applicant. The process also takes into consideration of public submissions received on the application. This information is used in the appraisal to determine the risks and benefits of the product and whether appropriate conditions assigned to the product will manage the risks to an acceptable level.

How does the virus affect rabbits?

RHDV causes hepatitis and rabbits die from the rapid onset of multiple organ failure.

Studies have demonstrated that death is faster with the K5 strain of virus, compared to the RHDV1 strain already present in New Zealand. Death occurs within 2- 4 days of contracting the virus.

Will pet rabbits be at risk?

Yes. All European rabbits are susceptible to the virus strain in RHDV1 K5, including pet and farmed rabbits. We appreciate this is a concern for pet rabbit owners, however RHDV1 strains have been present in New Zealand since 1997 and a vaccine (Cylap RCD Vaccine) is readily available and already widely in use.

MPI encourages rabbit owners to continue to vaccinate against RHDV1 and to seek advice from their vet about ongoing vaccination protocols.

MPI considered whether the vaccine is effective against the new strain as part of the decision to allow registration of the new RHDV1 K5 trade name product. MPI determined the vaccine to be effective.

RHDV1 K5 was released in Australia in March 2017. Since its release in that country, there have been no reports of vaccinated domestic rabbits dying from the virus strain in RHDV1 K5. All samples submitted by domestic animal owners in Australia have tested negative for this strain. The vaccine available in Australia is the same as the vaccine marketed in New Zealand.

Will the vaccine available in NZ be effective at protecting pet rabbits?

Yes. Information made available to MPI indicates that the current New Zealand vaccine (Cylap RCD Vaccine) will be effective. However, like all vaccines, Cylap will not provide protection in all cases. Pet owners should continue to vaccinate rabbits and seek advice from their local vet clinic on additional measures to minimise the risk of RHDV infection.

How is MPI notifying pet rabbit owners that they need to vaccinate?

Strains of this virus have been in New Zealand since 1997, and so pet rabbit owners have been advised to vaccinate their rabbits with the Cylap RCD Vaccine since then.

However, MPI is also working closely with New Zealand Veterinarians Association and the Companion Animal Society to get messaging out to veterinarians and rabbit owners. These organisations have been promoting awareness of the need to vaccinate since the application was first lodged in 2017. Additionally, the registrant, Environment Canterbury, has actively informed industry bodies via direct letter with advice on the need to vaccinate. Subsequent notifications and media releases have also been undertaken since registration was granted.

Who pays for the vaccination of my pet rabbit?

Owners of pet rabbits will be responsible for the cost of vaccination, which is the same as when RHDV first appeared back in 1997. Costs per rabbit will vary between vet practices and owners should seek advice from their local vet clinic with regards to this. In addition to vaccinating their rabbits, pet owners should seek advice from their local veterinary clinic on additional measures to minimise the risk of RHDV1 K5 infection.

What can be done to protect rabbits younger than 10-12 weeks of age?

RHDV1 is already endemic in New Zealand. Young rabbits exposed to this virus between 6 to 8 weeks of age may acquire lifelong immunity. The opportunity for infection between natural resistance and maternal immunity is very short. Concerned pet rabbit owners should seek veterinary advice about getting their rabbits vaccinated.

Is there a delay in immunity after vaccination?

Immunity will take effect in between 7 and 28 days after vaccination. Veterinarians will be able to advise on alternative ways to protect unvaccinated rabbits such as maintaining hygiene, isolating or quarantining pet rabbits until vaccinations have taken effect.

How often are vaccinations required?

Advice on vaccinations should be sought from your veterinarian. MPI can advise that after initial vaccination booster shots will be required annually.

Is MPI going to monitor how the release goes, and whether any pet rabbits are infected?

Yes. Any adverse events relating to either the virus or the vaccine must be reported to MPI. We will be monitoring all of these reports and will investigate any reports of product failure. We will also be monitoring for compliance with the conditions of registration. Any new information that comes from monitoring or adverse event report trends must also be notified to MPI.

Will the virus be effective at controlling pest rabbits?

Yes. When used according to the label, the data shows that RHDV1 K5 will be effective at controlling pest rabbits. The main reason that the RHDV1 K5 strain was chosen from among many strains is that it can overcome immunity to a benign calicivirus strain which is present in many New Zealand rabbits, and which has been found to confer immunity to the current RHDV1 strain used for pest control.

How and when will the virus be used?

RHDV1 K5 may only be used according to the label directions, as a bait on carrots or oats which will be eaten by pest rabbits, and not during the spring breeding season when young rabbits might become infected or left to starve. The optimal time for release is March and April. The registrant, the Environment Canterbury, will require users to sign up to their Operational Protocol and use the product in accordance with the national Release Strategy developed by Landcare.

Was the welfare of the animals taken into consideration?

Yes, risks to animal welfare are always considered when products are registered under the ACVM Act 1997. The animal welfare risk to non-target rabbits (domestic and farmed), and the humaneness of the strain were two of the main concerns expressed in the public submissions MPI received.

Independent advice was sought from the National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee (NAWAC), the expert group that advises the Minister on animal welfare matters, on the animal welfare impacts of the virus in RHDV1 K5.

Animal welfare concerns that the target rabbits would suffer have been considered by NAWAC, and the Committee was of the view that the impacts of RHDV1 K5 are within the range of existing vertebrate toxic agents. However, NAWAC recommends that research into more humane pest management tools be continued.

Are there any risks to other animals?

RHDV1 strains are specific to the European Rabbit (the only species of rabbit present in New Zealand). There are no reported cases worldwide of RHDV1 strains affecting other animal species.

Are there any environmental risks?

The Environmental Protection Authority has already determined that the new strain does not constitute a new organism, so does not need approval under the Hazardous Substances and New Organisms Act 1996. There is a possibility that when pest rabbits become scarce as a result of the virus, predators, such as stoats, may look for other food sources, such as native birds. For this reason, the Department of Conservation (DOC) will be notified when releases are made in a region.

Are there any human health risks?

No, there is no known risk to human health. The virus in RHDV1 K5 is specific to European rabbits. There are no reported cases worldwide of any RHDV strain infecting or causing ill health in humans since its discovery over 30 years ago, even among workers producing the virus or in the countries where RHDV is endemic.

Will wild rabbits be safe to eat?

The virus in RHDV1 K5 only infects European rabbits. Humans (or other animals, such as dogs or cats) that consume an infected rabbit or carcass will not become infected with RHDV1. However, as with all wild animals, if an animal appears unwell they should not be consumed.

Who made the application?

Environment Canterbury. However, RHDV1 K5 may be used across NZ under Regional Council authorisation.

How long was the process?

Under the ACVM Act, the application was publicly notified for 30 working days after which MPI had up to 40 working days to make a decision. The Biosecurity Act application review took place in parallel during this time.

Why did it need a separate approval under the Biosecurity Act?

RHDV is classified as an Unwanted Organism under the Biosecurity Act 1993. The applicant needs permission under Sections 52 and 53 of that Act to be allowed to release the virus, and to propagate it or sell it. Without these permissions they won't be able to use it widely against pest rabbits.

MPI carried out a risk assessment, to look at the potential benefits and impacts to decide whether we needed to impose any conditions to reduce risks. Consequently, there are a number of conditions attached to the permission ensuring that the virus will only be securely transported and stored and used in accordance with the Operational Protocol.

As with all registered products, a biosecurity assessment was done to ensure that no exotic diseases or pests could be inadvertently introduced with the product.

What is RHDV2?

RHDV2 is a separate, distinct strain of the virus that is present in Australia but not New Zealand. It is not effectively controlled by the vaccine which is currently available. Testing has confirmed that the RHDV1 K5 product does not contain RHDV2.