

Bovine tuberculosis in domestic pets

What this means for you

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1. Who this leaflet is for

The purpose of this leaflet is to advise owners of domestic pets, specifically cats and dogs, with suspected or confirmed tuberculosis infection due to *Mycobacterium bovis* (*M. bovis*, the causative agent of bovine tuberculosis). Goats, camelids (alpacas and llamas), pygmy pigs, horses, donkeys and lambs are sometimes kept as pets, but if these animals are infected with *M. bovis* they will be managed as their farmed counterparts (see final section of this leaflet).

See also the information leaflet: 'Reducing the risk of human *M. bovis* infection – information for farmers' available at: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/ahvla-en/files/AG-TBPH-01.pdf>

2. What is tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis (TB) is a chronic, primarily respiratory infectious disease caused by a group of bacteria within the *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* complex. TB can affect nearly all warm-blooded mammals, including farmed animals, wildlife, pets and humans.

One of the causative agents of TB is called *M. bovis*. The disease caused by *M. bovis* in cattle is often called bovine TB, as cattle are a natural host for *M. bovis*, but the bacterium can infect most mammals. Although people can also succumb to TB caused by *M. bovis*, the vast majority of cases of human TB are caused by a related but different mycobacterium known as *M. tuberculosis*. In Great Britain, bovine TB is mostly found in cattle in the West Midlands, South West England and Wales, but badgers in those regions, as well as other wildlife species, can be infected with *M. bovis*. Other types of mycobacteria can also cause a TB-like infection in animals.

Each year, thousands of cattle are diagnosed with bovine TB as a result of a mandatory disease surveillance and control programme, but only a small number of *M. bovis* infections in pets, mostly cats, are recorded. *M. bovis* infection is rarely recorded in dogs. Cats, dogs and other pets can sometimes develop TB caused by other mycobacteria but this advisory leaflet is mainly concerned with TB caused by *M. bovis*. Any further references to 'TB' in this leaflet refer to infection with *M. bovis*.

3. How can my pet get TB?

Pets can become infected in a number of ways including ingestion (by mouth), for example by drinking unpasteurised infected cow's milk or eating carcasses of infected animals; and aerosols (breathing in) which could arise from close contact with infected farm animals, wildlife or other infected pets. Pets can also become infected through bite wounds, either from being bitten by an infected animal or if a wound gets infected by bacteria present in the environment.

4. How do I know if my pet has TB and what can I do to check?

TB infection in pets can cause a serious long-standing disease. If your pet is infected with TB it may show signs of disease which include coughing, wheezing and/or weight loss. Lumps, abscesses or bite wounds which fail to heal, especially those around the head and neck, can also be caused by TB and are most frequently seen in infected cats. The clinical signs of TB infection in pets are not unique and can be similar to other infections.

If your vet suspects that your pet has TB, it may only be possible to confirm the infection by laboratory testing. Tissue samples will be submitted to the Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency (AHVLA) for laboratory analysis. This testing is a free service provided by the AHVLA, although it is likely your own vet will charge for arranging for the collection and submission of samples from your pet. Collection and submission of samples from your pet for TB testing is not mandatory and cannot be done without your consent.

There is a legal requirement to report all suspicions of TB infection in the carcasses of farmed animals and pets to AHVLA. This would normally be something your vet will do after a positive result from laboratory testing or a post-mortem examination. Additionally, the law also requires that diagnostic laboratories identifying *M. bovis* in a sample taken from any mammal (except humans) must notify AHVLA without delay.

5. Risks to me, my family and other animals

The diagnosis of TB in your pet may cause you and your family to feel anxious, but your local AHVLA office and Health Protection Team, as well as your own vet, will provide you with advice and support based on your individual circumstances.

TB can be spread from animals to humans but the risk of you or your family becoming infected from your pet is considered to be very low.

If TB caused by *M. bovis* is confirmed in your pet, AHVLA will inform your local Health Protection Team so that any health risks to those in contact with the pet can be investigated. Depending on the nature of the animal's disease and the degree of human contact, TB screening may be offered to owners or friends and family with close contact with the infected pet. Further information on human TB screening is available at:

<http://www.hpa.org.uk/Topics/InfectiousDiseases/InfectionsAZ/Tuberculosis/TBScreening/>.

6. Management of TB infection in your pet

The choice to treat or euthanise (humanely put to sleep) your pet with TB disease is a decision for you to make in consultation with your vet. However, before deciding to attempt treatment of your pet, a number of important factors need to be considered:

- There are no drugs licensed in the UK for treating animals for TB. The drugs which would be used to treat your pet have not passed UK animal-specific safety testing and therefore may not work and may carry a risk to the health of your pet.
- The treatment requires prolonged use of multiple drugs, the administration of which can be very difficult to achieve in pets. This may result in the dosage required for successful treatment not being met and a risk of developing antibiotic resistant strains of bacteria which is a concern for both human and animal health.
- Inadequate dosage of your pet may mean that your pet remains infected, often without any signs of disease. In this circumstance, the risk of infection for humans and other animals in contact with the pet would continue.

7. What happens next?

Your local vet, AHVLA office and Health Protection Team will provide you with advice on how best to minimise the risk of getting infected from your pet. You will also be given guidance on the risks to your pet and to other animals, and will be given support to make any necessary decisions.

Your local AHVLA office will also need to consider the implications for other animals which may have contact with your pet. An appropriate disease control strategy may be needed, especially if you have livestock on the premises or keep goats, camelids, pigs or lambs as pets. You may be asked to test these other animals for TB infection and restrictions may be put in place to prevent them being moved off your premises or having contact with other animals until AHVLA has established that they are not infected. Cattle in the neighbourhood of a pet diagnosed with *M. bovis* infection will normally also be tested.

8. Farmed animals kept as pets

Farmed animal species kept as pets most often include goats, camelids, pygmy pigs and lambs. In the event that any of these animals become infected with *M. bovis*, they will be treated as livestock and the particular method of disease management applied will be dependent on the species involved

Where *M. bovis* infection is found in farmed animals, the infected animal would, if still alive, be slaughtered and other animals in the flock or herd would usually be tested for infection with TB. A legally-binding restriction notice (TN02) would be served on the owner, if appropriate, to:

- prevent him/her moving other animals, that can become infected with TB, on to or off their premises, and
- to keep his/her animals under control to prevent contact with other susceptible animals on neighbouring premises.

9. Further information

AHVLA: www.defra.gov.uk/ahvla

Public Health England: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/public-health-england>

Public Health Wales: <http://www.publichealthwales.wales.nhs.uk/>
<http://www.wales.nhs.uk/sitesplus/888/page/43877>

Health Protection Scotland: <http://www.hps.scot.nhs.uk/>

Welsh Government: www.wales.gov.uk/?lang=en

Scottish Government: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/>

Since devolution, the responsibility and powers in regard to animal health legislation has meant that there are significant differences in the policies regarding bovine TB in England, Wales and Scotland. The Defra, Scottish Government and Welsh Government websites, providing up to date detail on these policies, can be accessed from the AHVLA website.

Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency is an executive agency of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and also works on behalf of the Scottish Government, Welsh Government and the Food Standards Agency.

www.defra.gov.uk/ahvla



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