
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, such as cats and dogs, with suspected or confirmed tuberculosis infection due to *Mycobacterium bovis* (*M. bovis*, the causative agent of bovine tuberculosis). Livestock animals such as goats, camelids (alpacas and llamas), pigs, horses, donkeys and sheep) 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 leaflet: 'Reducing the risk of human *M. bovis* infection – information for farmers' available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mycobacterium-bovis-mbovis-reducing-the-risk-of-human-infection>

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 livestock 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 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 is only possible to confirm the infection by laboratory testing.

In Scotland, private vets will submit suspect TB samples from cats and dogs to private laboratories who will undertake appropriate laboratory investigation and tests for which you will be charged. If the private laboratory suspects *M. bovis* they will continue to investigate further by submitting material to the APHA laboratory at Weybridge for identification and confirmation at government expense.

In Wales, private vets can request laboratory investigations into pet animals with suspected TB at an APHA laboratory or the Wales Veterinary Science Centre, Aberystwyth. Where clinical signs of TB are suspected in the live animal, all costs will be paid for by the Welsh Government. For other cases in dogs and cats, where TB may be one possible cause of death, the Welsh Government will pay only for the costs of the culture, not the post-mortem, for which you will be charged in most cases. Private vets are not advised to carry out the post-mortem themselves. If samples have been sent to a private laboratory and they suspect TB, they can send samples for culture to APHA Weybridge for disease confirmation. In this instance, the Welsh Government will pay only for the costs of culture.

In England, there is a charge for TB laboratory testing of samples (including culture to confirm the identity of bovine TB) taken from pets in the local APHA laboratories and central laboratory at Weybridge, unless the pet is kept on a farm with livestock susceptible to bovine TB. Alternatively, your vet may choose to send samples from your pet for testing at a private laboratory where a charge will be incurred. It is likely your own vet will charge you for collecting and submitting appropriate samples from your pet to a laboratory for TB testing. Collection and submission of samples from your pet for TB testing is not mandatory and cannot be done without your consent.

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 APHA 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, APHA 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: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/tuberculosis-screening>.

6. Management of TB infection in your pet

The choice to treat or euthanise (humanely put to sleep) your pet if it develops TB is a decision for you to make in consultation with your vet (unless it is one of the species of livestock animals kept as pets described above which will be treated the same as farm livestock). 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. See more information on [antimicrobial resistance](#).
- 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, APHA 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 APHA 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 APHA 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. Livestock animals kept as pets

In the event that a livestock animal kept as a pet becomes infected with *M. bovis*, it

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 livestock 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.
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9. Further information

APHA: <http://www.gov.uk/apha>

Public Health England: <http://www.gov.uk/phe>

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.

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