

Tuberculoses – Technical Factsheet

Nature & Occurrence

TB is a contagious bacterial disease affecting both humans and animals and is a “notifiable” disease.

Mycobacterium tuberculosis is the main cause of TB in humans and Mycobacterium bovis (M. bovis for short) is the bacterium that causes TB in cattle and badgers. It leads to a loss of condition and ultimately the death of the animal.

When milk was drunk raw (untreated); M. bovis was the major source of tuberculosis in humans. To counteract this, pasteurisation (heat treatment) of milk was introduced and continues to this day. Untreated milk can still be sold but must carry a health warning.

Transmission

TB in cattle is transmitted via the respiratory system and by badgers, which can contract the disease and spread it through contact with cattle.

Treatment

Treatment is not attempted because of the nature of the disease and the public health hazards. Animals suspected of being infected are slaughtered.

Testing

There is a national programme of the testing in which cattle are routinely tested at intervals of between 1 and 4 years. The length of the interval depends upon the history of TB at the farm and the locality. Various pre-movement and post-movement testing regimes operate within the UK.

The current principal test is the “skin test” where two types of TB bacteria are injected into an animal. These produce swellings that are measured 3 days later and the comparative sizes of the reactions dictate the outcome of the test. Where the difference exceeds the threshold, the animal is classed as a “reactor”. A smaller difference is classified as an “inconclusive” and if there is no difference the animal is “clear”.

If all animals are “clear” no action is needed and the herd remains on routine testing.

Control & Eradication

If any reactors are found the herd has failed the test, this is commonly known as a herd breakdown. The infected animals (reactors) are valued for compensation, slaughtered and subjected to laboratory analysis to confirm the presence of TB.

Normally only the infected animals are slaughtered it is rare for the whole herd to be slaughtered.

Movement restrictions are applied to the farm and movement of animals on and off the farm is only allowed in very limited circumstances and under strict licence. The farm ceases to be on routine testing and is moved to a much more frequent programme of testing until the disease is eradicated and it can again be declared TB free.

The fate of any inconclusives depends upon individual circumstances. They are isolated from the rest of the herd, re-tested after 6 weeks and may be slaughtered then if they remain inconclusive.

Current Situation

Bringing the disease under control is a major priority for the Government and has been for a number of years. Because of the extent of the disease, the annual cost to both farmers and tax-payers and the frequently changing situation, the Government has created a central point of information about all aspects of the disease and the campaign to control it. See www.tbhub.co.uk

Insurance

Insurance has been freely available in the past, on a consequential loss basis, to top up the Government market value compensation. However, the continued spread of the disease has caused major problems for insurers as losses have escalated.

Any requests for cover must be referred to Underwriters with the full herd history.