

# Bovine Tuberculosis in Domestic Pets

What this means for you



Department of  
**Agriculture, Environment  
and Rural Affairs**

[www.daera-ni.gov.uk](http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk)



**INVESTORS  
IN PEOPLE**

## 1. Who is this leaflet for?

The purpose of this leaflet is to advise owners of cats and dogs with suspected or confirmed tuberculosis infection, caused by *Mycobacterium bovis* (the causative agent of tuberculosis in cattle).

**“ ... only a small number of *M. bovis* infections in pets have been recorded in the UK - mostly in cats”**

## 2. What is tuberculosis?

Tuberculosis (TB) is a chronic, mainly respiratory infection caused by *Mycobacteria*. TB can affect nearly all mammals, including farmed animals, wildlife, pets and humans.

The bacterium that causes TB in cattle is called *M. bovis*. The disease in cattle is called bovine TB, but *M. bovis* can infect most mammals. *M. bovis* can cause TB in people, however the vast majority of cases of human TB are caused by a different bacterium called *M. tuberculosis*.

Each year, thousands of cattle are diagnosed with bovine TB as a result of a compulsory disease control programme, but only a small number of *M. bovis* infections in pets have been recorded in the UK - mostly in cats. A small number of cats have been confirmed as infected in Northern Ireland. *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’ refer to infection with *M. bovis*.

### 3. How can my pet get TB?

Pets can become infected through bite wounds, either from being bitten by an infected animal (e.g. rodents) or if a wound gets infected by bacteria present in the environment.

Pets can also become infected by drinking unpasteurised infected cow's milk or eating carcasses of infected animals; or by breathing in *M. bovis* when in close contact with infected farm animals, wildlife or other infected pets.

### 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 longstanding 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 symptoms 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 can be submitted to AFBI (Agri-food and Biosciences Institute) for laboratory analysis. This testing will be provided by DAERA (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs), although it is likely your own vet will charge for arranging for the collection and submission of samples from your pet.

The law requires that diagnostic laboratories identifying *M. bovis* in a sample taken from any mammal (except humans) must notify DAERA without delay. There is also a legal requirement to report all suspicions of TB infection in the carcasses of farmed animals and pets to DAERA. Normally your vet will inform DAERA if there is a positive result from laboratory testing or a post mortem examination.

## 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 DAERA office, your GP and the Public Health Agency (PHA), as well as your own vet, will provide you with advice and support depending 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, DAERA will inform the Public Health Agency so that any health risks to those in contact with the pet can be investigated if necessary. 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.

## 6. Management of TB infection in your pet

The decision to treat a pet is a difficult one. Treatment can only be carried out legally if a licence to do so is granted by DAERA.

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 could 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.
- 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.

If, in consultation with your vet, you decide to apply for a licence to allow treatment, your vet should contact the local DAERA office.

## 7. What happens next?

Your local vet, DAERA office and your GP, or the Public Health Agency, 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 DAERA office will 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. 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 DAERA has established that they are not infected. Cattle in the neighbourhood of a pet diagnosed with *M. bovis* infection may also be tested as a result.





ISBN 978-1-84807-942-7



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