

Bovine Tuberculosis

Background Information

Bovine tuberculosis (bovine TB) is a bacterial disease of humans and animals. In the UK it is most commonly found in cattle, deer and badgers, but is also found in alpacas, llamas and cats.

Organism

Mycobacterium bovis (bovine tubercule bacillus)

Incidence and Transmission

The current risk of bovine TB in humans in the UK is very low, accounting for less than 1% of all human TB cases. However, over recent years rates have been rising in the UK cattle herd and the disease is endemic in the badger population, particularly in South West England.

The disease can be passed between animals, from animals to humans and between humans. Inhalation of aerosolised bacteria is the most common route of infection. Bovine TB can be transmitted by hand to mouth contact or by consuming unpasteurised milk or possibly undercooked meat from infected animals.

There can be person to person spread.

Occupations and processes where bovine TB presents a risk

Occupational exposure to bovine TB may occur in those who:

- are in contact with infected animals or humans; or
- work with materials or products from infected animals.

Occupations where there may be a risk of occupationally acquired bovine TB include:

- cattle and dairy farmers;
- deer farmers;
- alpaca and llama farmers;
- zookeepers;
- veterinary surgeons;
- abattoir workers, meat processing plant workers and butchers;
- dairy workers; and
- healthcare workers.

Clinical Information

The incubation period is generally several months, although the disease can remain dormant and become active again many years later.

The clinical symptoms of bovine TB are similar to other forms of TB and can include a persistent cough, fever and weight loss. Anyone with these symptoms who has been in contact with cattle or their products should seek medical attention. Bovine TB can be confirmed by laboratory tests and needs to be treated with a six month course of antibiotics.

Control

The following control measures reduce the risk of infection:

- Anyone who has received the BCG immunisation should be protected against bovine TB.
- Herds should be routinely screened for bovine TB and any positive animals culled.
- Good occupational hygiene practices should be followed, especially washing with warm water and soap.
- Cuts and abrasions should be covered with waterproof plasters.
- Suitable protective clothing should be worn, including respiratory protective equipment where there is a risk of aerosolisation.
- A suitable disinfectant should be used.
- Unpasteurised milk or undercooked meat products should not be consumed.

Further Information

[Public Health England - Bovine Tuberculosis](#)

[World Organisation for Animal Health - Bovine Tuberculosis](#)