

## Actions UK should take to end the overuse of antibiotics in farming

The Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics is calling for all political parties to include strong measures to tackle the growing crisis of antibiotic resistance, and the overuse of antibiotics in farming, in their party-political manifestos for the upcoming 2024 general election.

The UK has reduced its use of antibiotics in livestock farming over the past decade by 59%. Furthermore, new regulations introduced on 17 May 2024 prohibit certain misuses of antibiotics in farming in England, Scotland, and Wales. Despite this welcome progress, far greater reductions in antibiotic use are achievable and are needed to help control the spread of antibiotic resistance.

To reduce antibiotic use in animal agriculture, and help tackle antibiotic resistance, while avoiding any adverse effects on animal welfare, a future Government should:

- **End all preventative group treatments with antibiotics.**
- **Introduce statutory antibiotic-use data collection by animal species, as the EU has already done. Antibiotic-use data should also be published by farming system (e.g. indoor, free-range, organic, pasture-fed).**
- **Ban the importation of animal foods produced with antibiotic growth promoters.**
- **Set a target to reduce farm antibiotic use by 40% by 2030. Antibiotic use in 2022 was 25.7 mg of antibiotic per population correction unit (PCU). This should be reduced to 15 mg/PCU in 2030.**
- **Set a target to reduce group treatments with antibiotics to 30% of farm antibiotic use by 2030. In 2022, group treatments accounted for about 75% of farm antibiotic use.**
- **Introduce key improvements to minimum animal-husbandry standards to achieve higher levels of animal health and welfare, so that the need for antibiotics is minimised<sup>1</sup>.**

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<sup>1</sup>Key improvements to animal husbandry that are needed to reduce the need for antibiotics include improving hygiene, reducing stocking densities, providing access to the outdoors, increasing the minimum weaning age of piglets, ending routine tail docking of piglets, using appropriate breeds and improving diets. For a full summary see <https://saveourantibiotics.org/media/2141/how-to-end-the-misuse-of-antibiotics-in-farming-exec.pdf>

## Background information

### Antimicrobial resistance – the scale of the problem

According to World Health Organization (WHO), antimicrobial resistance<sup>2</sup> “is one of the biggest threats to global health, food security, and development” which “threatens to unwind a century of medical progress”. A growing number of infections – such as pneumonia, tuberculosis, gonorrhoea, and salmonellosis – are becoming harder to treat as the antibiotics used to treat them become less effective.

A study published in the Lancet, a leading medical journal, estimated that in antibiotic resistance directly causes 1.27 million deaths a year worldwide and is associated with 4.95 million deaths a year. For the UK alone, it is estimated that 7,600 deaths a year are directly due to antibiotic resistance and a total of 35,200 deaths are associated with antibiotic resistance.

A 2015 review, commissioned by the UK Government, found that, unless effective action is taken, 10 million people a year could be dying of antimicrobial resistance by 2050, and the cumulative cost to the global economy would be \$100 trillion by 2050. The cost of each superbug outbreak in an NHS hospital is estimated to be about £1 million.

Antimicrobial resistance occurs naturally, but the WHO says the misuse of antibiotics in humans, animals and plants is the main driver in the development of drug-resistant pathogens. Furthermore, according to the WHO, antimicrobial resistance threatens farm productivity and food security.

The WHO has called for actions in the human-health, food-production, animal and environmental sectors to tackle antibiotic resistance. Urgent action is therefore needed to reduce antibiotic use in farming.

### UK reductions in farm antibiotic use

Like many other countries in Europe, the UK has made significant cuts to its farm antibiotic use over the past decade. Antibiotic use per population correction unit (a measure of the size of a livestock population being treated) has fallen by 59% since 2014.

This is very welcome and has helped control some types of antibiotic resistance. However, much larger reductions in antibiotic use are still needed and are achievable.

At present, group treatments, when antibiotics are added to animal feed or drinking water to treat or control infections at a herd or flock level, account for about 75% farm antibiotics used in the UK. This shows that the majority of farm antibiotic use is not sufficiently targeted.

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<sup>2</sup> Antimicrobials – which include antibiotics, antivirals, antifungals and antiparasitics – are medicines used to prevent and treat infections in humans, animals and plants. Antibiotics are medicines used to prevent and treat bacterial infections. Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is a natural process of microbes evolving to be able to resist the action of drugs, making them ineffective. Antibiotic resistance occurs when bacteria evolve to resist the action of antibiotics.



Excessive use of group treatments is unfortunately common around the world, but in some European countries, like Sweden, Norway or Iceland, 80–90% of farm antibiotic use is for individual treatments. Most UK farm antibiotic use should also be targeted in this way and be for the treatment of individual sick animals. Stronger legislation and the setting of targets can help achieve this.

### **New legislation on farm antibiotic use introduced on 17 May 2024**

On 17 May 2024, new Veterinary Medicines Regulations on farm antibiotic use were introduced in England, Scotland, and Wales. The new regulations are largely based on legislation which the European Union introduced on 28 January 2022.

The legislation contains some welcome measures which should support more responsible farm antibiotic use. Unfortunately, despite the Government having previously said that it intended to implement the EU legislation in full, some key aspects have been left out. As a result, weaknesses in the legislation and how it is interpreted may allow the overuse of antibiotics on farms to continue.

The new regulations for Great Britain include:

- A ban on routine farm antibiotic use.
- A restriction on preventative antibiotic use to exceptional circumstances, where the risk of infection is very high, and where the consequences of not using antibiotics is likely to be severe.
- A ban on using antibiotics to compensate for poor hygiene, inadequate animal husbandry or poor farm management practices.

Key measures the EU has taken, but which have been left out of the regulations for Great Britain include:

- A ban on prophylactic (preventative) treatments of groups of animals. The EU introduced such a ban on 28 January 2022
- A ban on the importation of animal foods produced with antibiotic growth promoters. The EU will introduce such a ban on 3 September 2026.
- Mandatory antibiotic-use data collection by animal species. Since 2023, all EU Member States are required to collect such data.

A final key weakness in the UK Government's approach has been the lack of action on raising minimum animal husbandry standards. While the new regulations clearly state that antibiotics may not be used to compensate for poor hygiene or inadequate animal husbandry, no action is being taken to improve hygiene or to end husbandry practices known to contribute to high levels of antibiotic use.

Factors known to contribute to disease, and higher use of antibiotics, include: keeping animals permanently indoors in barren conditions and at very high stocking densities, the early weaning of piglets, routine tail docking of piglets, the use of inappropriate breeds such as very fast-growing chickens, and inappropriate diets.

Higher minimum husbandry standards, addressing these poor conditions, should be introduced. In the absence of improvements in minimum husbandry standards, it is likely that antibiotics will



continue to be used to compensate for poor hygiene, inadequate animal husbandry or poor farm management practices, in breach of the legislation.

| [www.saveourantibiotics.org](http://www.saveourantibiotics.org) | [@ASOAntibiotics](https://twitter.com/ASOAntibiotics) |

The Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics brings together over 70 health, medical, civil-society, farming, and animal-welfare groups and campaigns to stop the overuse of antibiotics in animal farming. It was founded in 2009 by Compassion in World Farming, the Soil Association and Sustain.