

Executive Summary

# Resistance AND Responsibility

2024

Antibiotic use in supermarket supply chains

ALLIANCE TO  
SAVE OUR  
ANTIBIOTICS



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# Executive Summary

This is the Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics' fourth assessment of the antibiotics policies of major UK supermarkets. This report finds that no supermarkets have policies that are strong enough to ensure that their suppliers are fully compliant with new UK legislation prohibiting the use of antibiotics to compensate for poor animal welfare.

Most supermarket antibiotics policies still only cover own-brand foods and little or no progress has been made towards covering branded products. The scope of the policies needs to be extended to branded foods and to imported food in order to protect consumers and ensure that British farming standards are not undermined by imports.

The assessment criteria used in this report take into account new veterinary medicines legislation which came into force on 17<sup>th</sup> May 2024<sup>1</sup>. The new legislation bans farmers from using antibiotics routinely. It also prohibits the use of antibiotics to “compensate for poor hygiene, inadequate animal husbandry, or poor farm management practices”.

In line with the legislation, many supermarkets say that their suppliers must use good animal husbandry and farm management practices to achieve good animal health and welfare and to minimise the need for antibiotics.

Unfortunately, in practice low minimum husbandry standards in supermarket supply chains are resulting in excessive antibiotic use. The very intensive conditions in which most pigs and poultry in supermarket supply chains are kept result in poor hygiene, high levels of stress and avoidable disease. The use of very fast-growing breeds of broiler chickens, the early weaning of piglets and routine tail docking of piglets are all factors which are known to contribute to higher levels of antibiotic use.

The new legislation does not apply to imported food, which means that meat, fish, eggs and dairy imported into the UK can be legally produced with routine antibiotic use, including the use of antibiotics for growth promotion. Despite the potential for imported foods to be produced with irresponsible antibiotic use, few supermarkets include all imported foods in the scope of their antibiotics policies.

## Criteria used for assessing supermarket policies

1. Is the supermarket's publicly available antibiotics policy clear about its coverage?
  - 1a. Does the policy cover all own-brand products, including ingredients?
  - 1b. Does the policy cover all branded products, including ingredients?
  - 1c. NEW: Does the policy cover all UK sourced products and ingredients?
  - 1d. Does the policy cover all imported products and ingredients?
2. Does the policy restrict the use of the “highest-priority critically important antibiotics” (fluoroquinolones and 3rd and 4th generation cephalosporins) across the supply chain so that they are never used for prevention or for group treatments?
3. Does the policy completely ban the use of the last-resort antibiotic colistin in the supply chain?
4. Does the supermarket collect data on/ monitor antibiotic use in the supply chain?
5. Does the supermarket publish antibiotic-usage data in the supply chain at regular intervals e.g. annually?
6. Does the supermarket publish antibiotic-usage data by farm system?
7. Does the supermarket have antibiotic-use reduction targets?
8. NEW: Does the policy ensure that antibiotics are not used to compensate for poor hygiene, inadequate animal husbandry, or poor farm management practices, in line with the latest UK and EU legislation?

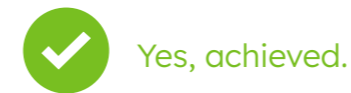
Does the supermarket monitor antibiotic use in their supply chain?



Does the supermarket have antibiotic-use reduction targets?



# Assessment table



	<b>1.</b> Publicly available policy is clear about coverage	<b>1a.</b> Policy covers all own brand products	<b>1b.</b> Policy covers all branded products	<b>1c.</b> Policy covers all UK sourced products and ingredients	<b>1d.</b> Policy covers all imported products and ingredients	<b>2.</b> Policy restricts the use of HPCIA's	<b>3.</b> Policy bans Colistin	<b>4.</b> Supermarket monitors antibiotic use in the supply chain	<b>5.</b> Supermarket publishes antibiotic-usage data in the supply chain at regular intervals e.g. annually	<b>6.</b> Supermarket publishes antibiotic-usage data by farm system	<b>7.</b> Supermarket has Antibiotic use reduction targets	<b>8.</b> Policy in line with the latest UK and EU legislation
	✓	—	✗	—	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	—
	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	—	—	—	✗	✗	✗	—
	✓	✓	✗	—	—	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	—
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	✓	✓	—	—	—	✓	—	✓	✓	✗	✓	—

# Key findings:

- Supermarkets are failing to ensure that their suppliers are fully compliant with new legislation prohibiting the use of antibiotics to compensate for poor hygiene and inadequate animal husbandry<sup>2</sup>. Most supermarkets continue to sell fast-growing breeds of broiler chickens, which require six to nine times more antibiotics per bird than slower-growing breeds<sup>3</sup>. Only M&S sells only slower-growing broilers, and Waitrose has committed to doing so from 2026.
- Supermarket antibiotics policies frequently only cover their own-brand ranges, and so branded products and imported foods can still contain animal products that have been produced on farms with irresponsible antibiotic use.
- M&S is the best-performing supermarket in terms of responsible antibiotic use policy. M&S's policy covers its full supply chain, as they do not stock branded animal products and apply their policy to imported goods. Tesco and Waitrose are the next-best performing supermarkets.
- M&S and Morrisons are the only supermarkets to have a full ban on the use of the antibiotic colistin, which is used as a last resort in human medicine.
- Only Aldi, M&S, Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose publish good or acceptable data on their antibiotic use. ASDA, Coop, Iceland and Lidl publish no information on their antibiotic use.
- Iceland has a particularly weak antibiotics policy. It does not monitor antibiotic use in its supply chain and has no specific restrictions on the use of the highest-priority critically important antibiotics.
- Iceland and Lidl claim their prohibition on routine antibiotic use extends to imported food. However, Iceland, Lidl and ASDA have all been sourcing frozen chicken and turkey products from a Polish meat supplier that was the source of a major outbreak of antibiotic-resistant Salmonella in the UK<sup>4</sup>.
- The online supermarket Ocado is the only supermarket with no antibiotics policy. Ocado has told the Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics that it is developing a policy and will publish it later this year. Ocado was not included in earlier Alliance assessments, and has not had as long to develop antibiotics policies and to benefit from advice and guidance from the Alliance. As a result, we have not included Ocado in the overall assessment table this time but will include it in our future assessments.

# Glossary

## **ANTIBIOTIC**

Any substance with a direct action on bacteria that is used for treatment or prevention of infections or infectious diseases.

## **ANTIMICROBIAL**

Any substance with a direct action on micro-organisms used for treatment or prevention of infections or infectious diseases, including antibiotics, antivirals, antifungals and antiprotozoals.

## **ANTIBIOTIC RESISTANCE**

The acquired ability of bacteria to survive or to grow in the presence of a concentration of an antibiotic agent that was previously sufficient to inhibit or kill bacteria of the same species. This makes treating previously simple infections increasingly difficult.

## **GROUP TREATMENTS**

Antibiotic treatments given to groups of animals, most often in their feed or drinking water.

## **HIGHEST-PRIORITY CRITICALLY IMPORTANT ANTIBIOTICS**

These antibiotics are considered the most important for human medicine of all the antibiotics that are used in farming. Includes the fluoroquinolones, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> generation cephalosporins (modern cephalosporins) and colistin.

## **LAST-RESORT ANTIBIOTIC**

In human medicine, these antibiotics are reserved for serious and often life-threatening infections that are resistant to many other types of antibiotics. Colistin is a last-resort antibiotic that is licensed to be used in farm animals in the UK. The Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics believes that the use of colistin in farming should be banned.

## **METAPHYLACTIC ANTIBIOTIC TREATMENT**

Metaphylaxis is a group treatment, when antibiotics are added to the animals' feed or drinking water, after clinical disease has been diagnosed in some of the animals in the group. All animals get treated, including those not yet showing signs of infection, as the aim is to control the spread of the disease.

## **PREVENTATIVE/PROPHYLACTIC ANTIBIOTIC TREATMENT**

Antibiotic treatment given to an animal or group of animals before clinical disease has been diagnosed, to prevent the occurrence of disease.

## **STOCKING DENSITY**

Number of animals per unit of area in a pen, shed or field.

# References

- 1 The Veterinary Medicines (Amendment etc.) Regulations 2024, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2024/567/contents/made>
- 2 The Veterinary Medicines (Amendment etc.) Regulations 2024, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2024/567/contents/made>
- 3 Netherlands Veterinary Medicines Institute (SDa), 2023. Usage of Antibiotics in Agricultural Livestock in the Netherlands in 2022 Trends, <https://cdn.i-pulse.nl/autoriteitdiergeneesmiddelen/userfiles/EN/SDa-rapporten/engels-def-sda-rapport-met-brief---het-gebruik-van-antibiotica-bij-landbouwhuisdieren-in-2022-revision.pdf>
- 4 Hewitt, 2023. Three UK supermarkets sell antibiotic dosed chickens linked to deadly superbug outbreak, ITV News, <https://www.itv.com/news/2023-06-20/uk-supermarkets-sell-antibiotic-dosed-chickens-linked-to-deadly-superbug>



The Alliance to Save Our Antibiotics is an alliance of health, medical, environmental and animal welfare groups working to stop the over-use of antibiotics in animal farming. It was founded by the Soil Association, Compassion in World Farming International and Sustain in 2009. The Alliance vision is for a world in which human and animal health and well-being are protected by food and farming systems that do not rely on routine antibiotic use.



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