

NOAH

Animal medicines - what you should know

We know medicines help protect us from disease and can help get us better when we are ill, but there are a number of myths about the medicines given to keep the UK's farm animals healthy. Check out the following beliefs and challenge your assumptions.

1 Animals are given more vaccinations and medicines than are necessary or good for them.

Just as parents ensure their children are properly protected against disease, it is the responsibility of farmers to ensure the good health and well-being of the animals under their care. Vaccines are important in protecting animals from diseases that they are likely to encounter and may be difficult to treat. Other medicines are used to treat sick animals, or, for example, to protect them from parasite infestation.

The government, through the Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD), controls the quality, safety and effectiveness of the vaccines and medicines used in all animals.

The Veterinary Medicines Directorate, in conjunction with the Food Standards Agency and the Animal Health Agency, randomly collect samples from farm animals and from food of animal origin to ensure that it is safe to eat and that authorised medicines are being used both correctly and safely.

Animal medicines and vaccines help the farmer and vet ensure the good health and well-being of the animals under their care. They will be used as little as possible but as much as necessary.

2 Animal medicines are given to make money for farmers and vets.

No. Animal medicines are used in farm animals, like pets and people, to prevent and control disease and illness. Animal medicines are just as sophisticated and effective as human medicines. They are expensive to produce and licence for use in farm animals.

The farmer and vet are responsible for the health and welfare of animals under their care. Medicines cost the farmer money – veterinary surgeons and other prescribers do not indiscriminately prescribe or supply medicines that are unnecessary for the health and welfare of animals. As well as prescribing medicines in response to a disease problem, veterinary surgeons and other advisers will often give farmers advice on the animal husbandry measures they can take to prevent a recurrence of disease.

3 You can't be sure that meat is safe to eat with all the vaccinations and medicines animals that are given now.

There is published information, from independent sources such as the Food Standards Agency and the Veterinary Residues Committee, readily available to show that meat and other food produced from animals is safe to eat.

The Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD) co-ordinates the collection of samples from foodstuffs such as meat, milk and eggs from both UK produce and imported produce. These food samples are analysed for residues derived from the use of veterinary medicines.

The VMD is responsible for the reporting of results. This work is overseen by the Veterinary Residues Committee, an independent advisory committee that oversees the UK's surveillance for residues of veterinary medicines. These results are published and readily available.

4 There are residues of animal medicines in our food.

Most animal food products do not contain any veterinary medicine residues.

In the event that food from animals does contain veterinary medicine residues, they will be at minute concentrations, below the 'no-effect level.'

The 'no-effect level' is the maximum dose of a substance that can be consumed over a stated period without producing detectable ill effects. The 'no effect level' is used to help calculate an appropriate 'withdrawal period' for the medicine.⁽¹⁾

Until the withdrawal period has elapsed, the animal or its products must not be used for human consumption.

The results of the veterinary medicines residues surveillance schemes which check that all is well are published by the Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD). They demonstrate that British farmers use medicines responsibly.

On the very rare occasions, that unacceptable residues (residues above the maximum residue level) are found, the VMD works with the Food Standards Agency in a follow up investigation, and to instigate action to ensure public safety.

5 Food from animals that have been vaccinated is not safe to eat.

Vaccines work by stimulating the body to produce its own defence against infection. Mimicking what happens when an animal has been exposed to disease, the body and its defensive system will "remember" the identity of the invading organisms. Subsequent to this, if the animal comes into contact with the infectious disease agent (e.g. bacteria or virus) that the animal has been vaccinated against, its body is ready to fight it and the animal will not fall ill and suffer. This protects the individual animal and because of this the animal will not develop the disease and will not become infected.

A further benefit of vaccination is that where a significant proportion of the herd/flock is vaccinated,

it helps protect the unvaccinated animals in that population from the disease, a concept known as "herd immunity".

6 Legislation around meat production and food safety is not tough enough.

Meat production and food safety are strictly regulated and controlled. British farmers and the animal health industry as well as those involved in processing food have to abide by strict controls. Their work is closely monitored and they are inspected regularly by government bodies including the Veterinary Medicines Directorate, the Animal Health Agency, Local Authority Environmental Health Officers and the Food Standards Agency. The work of the VMD is also overseen and monitored by the Veterinary Residues Committee, an independent advisory committee that manages the UK's surveillance programme for residues of veterinary medicines.

Recent consumer surveys show that there is public confidence in the established systems to ensure using medicines to protect farm animals' health and welfare will not adversely affect the safety of food from animals.

7 Animals are given antibiotics to boost growth.

Not true. At one time very small doses of some antibiotics were allowed to be added to feed because they improved the growth rates of some farm animals. But the EU phased out this practice, stopping the sale of antibiotic growth promoters on the 1st January 2006.

8 Animals are 'pumped up' with hormones to boost growth.

No – hormonal growth promoters have been banned since 1988 in the UK and the rest of the European Union.

Some hormones are used as medicines to treat sick cattle or to aid fertility control in cattle, pigs and sheep. They must only be prescribed under the strict control of a veterinarian. These products have been

licensed as safe to use in food producing animals by the Veterinary Medicines Directorate, with withdrawal periods imposed to ensure no harmful residues can enter the food chain.

9 Animals are only given vaccinations and medicines because hygiene and living conditions standards are below par.

Animals, like people, need medicines too. Farmers use advice from professional veterinary surgeons, animal nutrition advisers and others to ensure that their livestock are kept healthy and their welfare is maintained in line with or better than the current animal welfare legislation.

Recent years have seen outbreaks of more “exotic” diseases such as Bluetongue, Avian Influenza and others and increasing levels of ‘endemic’ diseases such as Bovine Viral Diarrhoea and liver fluke. Such diseases are difficult to control and eradicate by good husbandry alone. Veterinary medicines, including vaccines, are tools that aid the good health and well-being of farm animals.

10 Animal medicines are only necessary in intensive farming.

Animals, like people, get ill and need medicines either to prevent or treat disease. Disease and illness occurs in all forms of farming. It is the duty of the farmer to ensure that the animals are healthy and husbandry practices comply with or exceed current animal health and welfare legislation.

11 Organically farmed animals are not given antibiotics.

Just as with people animals can be prescribed antibiotics to treat bacterial infections. If they were not then their welfare would suffer. This is the case in both organic and conventional systems of production.

12 Organic meat is healthier.

There is no evidence to suggest that organic meat is any healthier than conventionally produced meat. The balance of current scientific evidence does not support this view. Available evidence shows that the nutrient levels are similar in food produced by both organic and conventional agriculture.

13 Organic farming is better for the environment.

All types of farming require varying degrees of inputs to ensure the production of safe and nutritious food. Animals farmed under a variety of production systems are subject to disease and illness. Some researchers say that extensively produced organic food places a greater burden on the environment than efficiently grown conventional food as many more animals are needed to produce the same volume of food. Our land and resources are precious. With an expanding world population, more and more sophisticated methods of production will be required to feed the world. Organically produced food alone cannot meet the food (especially protein) demands that humanity requires.

14 Organic farming is more humane.

No, both organic and conventional food production in the UK must comply with current animal health, welfare and food hygiene legislation.

15 Animal medicines are a serious risk to human health.

Correctly used, animal medicines do not pose any risk to human health.

The animal medicines industry is committed to promoting responsible use of all types of medicines under the slogan 'as little as possible, as much as necessary'. By continuing to follow this principle when using medicines, farmers and veterinary surgeons can ensure that they remain available as a key tool to help maintain the health and welfare of the UK's farm animals.

Glossary and further information

(1) The withdrawal period is the time which passes between the last dose given to the animal and the time when the level of residues in the tissues (muscle, liver, kidney, skin/fat) or products (milk, eggs, honey) is lower than or equal to the MRL. The Maximum Residue Level (MRL) is the maximum concentration of residue following administration of a veterinary medicine acceptable under the laws of the EU.

Antibiotics

Concerns that antibiotics may be losing their effectiveness are not new, but the issue of antimicrobial resistance has received increasing attention recently from the scientific and political communities. Resistance to antimicrobial products is known to occur in both human and veterinary medicine but is seen most commonly in hospitals where antibiotic usage is high and where the 'selection pressure' creating and maintaining a pool of resistant bacteria is also high. Many antibiotics have been in animal use for 50 years and resistance here is not seen as a significant problem.

There is currently concern in some quarters that use of antibiotics in animals may compromise the effectiveness of related medicines in man. The animal health industry recognises these concerns and takes seriously its own responsibility in this area. As a result, extensive studies, set up in conjunction with the relevant regulatory authorities, are underway to help shed more light on this subject. Industry is also heavily involved, from a worldwide to a UK level, in the development of responsible use of medicines

guidelines. In the UK these are produced by RUMA (the Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture Alliance).

All the available evidence suggests that the use of antibiotics in animals has had little or no impact on the incidence of antibiotic resistance in human infections with bacteria such as enterococci, known to be carried by animals.

It has long been known that some types of bacteria, e.g. Salmonella and Campylobacter, can pass from animals to man. However, the majority of food poisoning outbreaks caused by these bacteria are not even treated with antibiotics. Indeed, following the guidance on the safe preparation and cooking of food issued by the Food Standards Agency is one of the best ways to avoid food borne illness.

Animal medicines are not a risk to human health, and are vital to the health and welfare of our farm animals.

Veterinary Medicines Directorate
www.vmd.gov.uk

Veterinary Residues Committee
www.vet-residues-committee.gov.uk

Animal Health Agency
www.defra.gov.uk/animalhealth

Food Standards Agency
www.food.gov.uk

RUMA (Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture Alliance)
www.ruma.org.uk



Crossfield Chambers, Gladbeck Way,
Enfield, Middlesex EN2 7HF
Tel: 020 8367 3131 Fax: 020 8363 1155
General email: noah@noah.co.uk

www.noah.co.uk