



Animal &
Plant Health
Agency

APHA Briefing Note 31/23

Bluetongue Virus and TB Skin Testing

Date issued: 21 December 2023

Purpose

1. To inform Official Veterinarians (OV) and Approved Tuberculin Testers (ATT) in Great Britain (GB) of APHA, Defra, Scottish Government and Welsh Government's position regarding the risk of mechanical transmission of bluetongue virus (BTV) via tuberculin skin testing.
2. To remind OVs and ATTs in GB of the importance of adhering to the established skin testing instructions, specifically in relation to the hygienic management of the multi-dose tuberculin syringes and needles.

Background

3. Under natural conditions BTV is almost exclusively transmitted between its ruminant and camelid hosts by the bites of certain species of *Culicoides* midges infected with the virus.
4. The likelihood of mechanical transmission of this virus between herds/flocks and within a herd/flock by unhygienic veterinary practices (e.g. shared use of surgical equipment or hypodermic needles contaminated with blood) cannot be totally excluded.
5. However, mechanical transmission of BTV via tuberculin intradermal ('skin') testing of cattle and other species is considered to be very rare under natural field conditions and of very little or no practical significance for the potential secondary spread of the disease within and between herds or flocks.

APHA is an Executive Agency of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and also works on behalf of the Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Food Standards Agency to safeguard animal and plant health for the benefit of people, the environment and the economy.

Official Position

6. Tuberculins are injected intradermally, not subcutaneously or intravenously, and if the tuberculin skin test is performed correctly, bleeding should not occur. Furthermore, TB testers are required to adopt a series of hygienic practices, including the use of new or sterilised short intradermal needles for each new herd they test, and changing needles in the unlikely event that they become visibly contaminated with blood or any other material during testing. Tuberculin needles must also be wiped between animals with cotton wool moistened with surgical spirit.
7. By adhering to this protocol, the very small risk of mechanical transmission of BTV within and between herds, subjected to tuberculin skin testing, is further mitigated or eliminated respectively.
8. Therefore, the statutory tuberculin skin testing programme of cattle (and, when required, other eligible livestock) within an established bluetongue control zone must continue as normal. Suspending or delaying scheduled TB tests (beyond their allocated testing window) is considered disproportionate and unlikely to prevent further cases of BTV, and so it is not recommended.
9. Failure to complete a TB test by the end of its prescribed window will result in the suspension of a herd's Officially TB-Free (OTF) status and the application of TB movement restrictions as usual, that is until the overdue test has been completed with negative results. There will be no change to overdue procedures applied by APHA.

Further Information

10. OV and ATT instructions on Tuberculosis Testing:
http://apha.defra.gov.uk/External_OV_Instructions/index.htm
11. OVs and ATTs delivering TB testing under one of the Veterinary Delivery Partners (VDPs) should address any queries to the relevant VDP in the first instance who will collate and escalate to APHA as necessary.
12. OVs in Scotland and non-VDP OVs in England should refer any queries to ScotlandEndemics@apha.gov.uk and TBAdvice@apha.gov.uk respectively.