

TB – REDUCING RISKS OF TRANSMISSION

How are cattle affected by bTB?

Bovine TB (bTB) is primarily a respiratory infection. It can progress to clinical disease which is characterised by respiratory signs such as coughing and weight loss. However clinical signs of bTB in cattle are very rare in NI as infected animals are usually detected in the early stages of infection and long before clinical signs are seen. Infection can become established in the intestine after ingestion, but this also is rare as it depends on the consumption of large quantities of the organism. The great majority of bTB infections in cattle are sub-clinical and can only be detected using diagnostic tests or at post-mortem.

How are badgers affected by bTB?

It is established in scientific literature that badgers have a role in the epidemiology or spread of TB. They can be infected with the TB bacterium and are regarded as a wildlife reservoir. TB can affect almost all organ systems in badgers; the most frequent site on post-mortem examination is the lungs. Infected bite wounds are found frequently, more so in male badgers, possibly due to territorial behaviour. Some badgers will go on to develop advanced disease, emaciation and death.

Can TB spread to humans?

Bovine TB can infect humans and cause tuberculosis symptoms. Fortunately due to the ongoing bTB programme in NI together with milk pasteurisation and meat hygiene inspections, infection with bTB in humans is rare in NI. Bovine TB is not seen as a human health issue. However there is a risk for those working closely with cattle or drinking unpasteurised milk.

How do cats get TB?

Cats can become infected with TB by ingestion (eg drinking unpasteurised infected milk or milk products, or from the carcasses of infected animals), by inhalation (eg close contact with farm animals) or through bite wounds (eg by being bitten by an infected animal or if a wound becomes infected by bacteria in the environment).

Which other species are susceptible to TB?

Other species are susceptible to bTB, including camelids, goats, deer, sheep and pigs, and are subject to statutory controls, so testing of them may have to be carried out. It is important to keep and manage these species separately from cattle to reduce the risk of spread of disease.

What needs to happen to allow bovine TB to be controlled in NI?

TB test effectiveness needs to be improved; farmers need to be encouraged and supported in adopting and maintaining effective biosecurity; and the wildlife factor must be addressed.