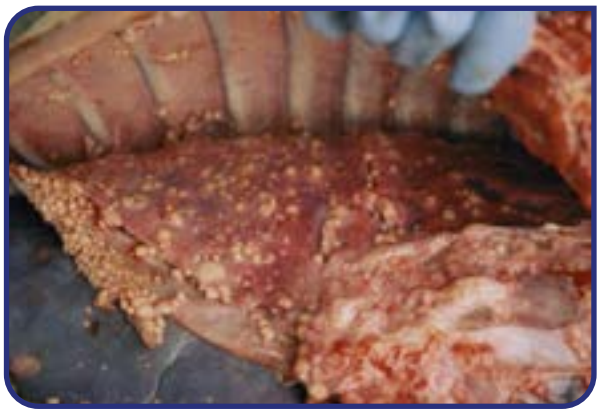
BOVINE TUBERCULOSIS (BTB)

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

1. What is bovine tuberculosis?



Bovine tuberculosis is a chronic disease of cattle caused by the bacterium Mycobacterium bovis. It develops very slowly over several months or years and causes loss of weight, swollen lymph nodes, coughing, diarrhoea, pneumonia and ultimately death.

2. Which animals can get BTB?

Cattle are the main host of BTB, but the bacterium can infect almost any mammal, including sheep, goats, horses, pigs, dogs, cats, camels and various wildlife species. In some parts of the world the disease has become established in wildlife populations and from there can re-infect domestic animals, making control of the disease very difficult. For instance, African buffalo in several national parks of South Africa have become infected with BTB and the disease is maintained in their herds.

3. How do animals get BTB?

BTB is transmitted in body fluids and respiratory droplets, so is spread between animals when they are in direct contact with each other or through contaminated materials e.g. feed. Young animals can also be infected by drinking milk from an infected mother. Predators can be infected by eating an infected animal. Because infected animals take a long time to reach the final stages of disease, they can spread the infection to other animals for a long period of time before the problem is detected.

4. Can humans get BTB?

Yes. BTB can be caught by humans if they drink raw milk or eat undercooked meat from infected animals, or if they have close contact with the body fluids of infected animals, for instance during slaughter. The symptoms can be very similar to human tuberculosis caused by Mycobacterium

Last updated: April 2022

tuberculosis and it can be difficult to distinguish between the diseases without advanced testing. BTB can be treated the same way as human tuberculosis, with a long course of a combination of antibiotics.

5. How do I know my food is safe?

Animals that are slaughtered at registered abattoirs are inspected for BTB and their meat is safe to eat. Pasteurised milk is safe to drink, as the pasteurization process destroys mycobacteria. Meat that is not slaughtered at a registered abattoir may not be safe to eat and should be cooked thoroughly until well done to reduce the risk. Raw milk should be boiled before drinking.

6. How can BTB be prevented in animals?

Like many diseases, BTB can be prevented from entering a herd by practicing good principles of biosecurity. New cattle should be bought from reliable sources that test their herds regularly for BTB. Cattle should be kept in a way that minimizes their ability to have contact with wild animals.

7. How do I test my cattle for BTB?

All the animals in a herd of cattle should be tested for BTB at least every second year. The test is performed by a veterinarian and involves injecting tuberculin into the skin of the neck and checking the injection site 72 hours later to see if there is a reaction. If animals test positive the state veterinarian must be informed, as BTB is a controlled disease.