

Bovine viral diarrhoea

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This guidance is for England

Bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) can have very varied symptoms and may result in death. It can have substantial impact on the profitability of farms. This highly contagious disease costs UK farmers an estimated £61 million per year. It impacts animal welfare within affected herds and reduces farm productivity and profitability.

Following pressure from the agricultural industry, the Government introduced a funded voluntary programme between 2018-2021 to attempt to tackle the disease in England.

Clinical signs

Clinical signs can vary greatly, such as a bout of diarrhoea or pneumonia (often in a group of animals), or an increase in abortions / stillbirths and a decrease in fertility and lower conception rates. BVD can also cause return to heat, embryo deaths, deformities and weak or premature calves.

Calves contracting the disease while still in the womb can be born as 'persistently infected' animals (PIs*). Such animals continue to excrete the virus throughout their lives and are therefore the greatest risk of spread of infection. These animals, as well as failing to thrive, tend to have impaired immunity, making them more susceptible to other diseases. They are likely to die before reaching maturity. Cattle infected after birth can recover from BVD.

[*For ease of reference, all animals that are BVD positive are referred to in this guide as PIs.]

BVD is spread via contact with infected cattle, particularly PIs. A thorough BVD testing regime, movement restrictions and good biosecurity controls are required to eradicate this disease.

BVD testing

On 21 June 2018 the Government announced '[Stamp out BVD](#)' funding in England (the funding has now ended). In England and [Wales](#) the BVD eradication programmes remain voluntary and are not supported by legislation. BVD schemes in Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have statutory requirements and are backed by legislation, as BVD is one of the biggest disease issues affecting the cattle industry.

In England, BVDFree England is the national, voluntary, industry-led scheme; it has the aim of eliminating BVD. The scheme was set up with the backing of the National Farmers Union, National Beef Association, Holstein Group, British Cattle Veterinary Association, Livestock Auctioneers Association and the levy funded Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB). BVDFree England is hoping to develop, in conjunction with the Government, an eradication scheme that is legislated. Some industry commentators believe this could become a reality from 2025.

Whilst there is currently no legislation specifically for the control of BVD in England, there are supporting assurance schemes such as [Red Tractor Dairy](#), which requires farmers to have a BVD elimination plan in place, such as those supported by BVDFree England or a [CHECS accredited scheme](#). The [Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Livestock: Cattle](#) (see paragraph 24) indicate that the written health and welfare plan should as a minimum cover specified diseases, of which BVD is one.

All herds enrolled under a CHECS scheme must declare the results of any screening carried out during the previous 12 months to either their own veterinary surgeon or a health scheme provider. The full requirements are detailed in the [CHECS technical document](#).

The BVDFree England voluntary scheme is built around the [national database](#), which can be searched for the BVD status of individual animals and herds tested under the scheme. Farmers must [sign up to the scheme](#) and develop a herd health plan, in conjunction with their own veterinary surgeon, based around the ADAM principles. The [ADAM principles](#) are:

Step 1 - Assess the herd in terms of disease risk, history and biosecurity.

Step 2 - Define the BVD herd status.

Step 3 - Action plan for control of BVD on the farm.

Step 4 - Monitor progress by repeating step 2 to maintain BVD-free herd status.

All PIs must be identified and culled.

The AHDB website contains information on how to [tag and test](#) for BVDFree England. By law, cattle must be identified with a pair of approved ear tags that correlate with the cattle passport. Tissue sampling tags can be ordered from your usual tag supplier and are used in place of one of the approved tags, usually the secondary tag.

Any blood samples must be taken and submitted by a veterinary surgeon.

All samples taken under the action plan must be sent to a [designated lab](#). The laboratory will send the test results to the farmer. The laboratory will also upload the results to the national database. The test results and the herd status / individual animal statuses are publicly accessible through the BVDFree England database. Specific details such as farm name or keeper are not shown in the public search facility.

The route to establishing herd BVD-free status in a [dairy herd](#) is slightly different to that of a [beef herd](#).

Once satisfactory results are received, BVDFree England can issue a certificate based on the [individual animal BVD status](#). For herd BVD status, BVDFree England can issue a certificate based on the tag and test status (for [virus](#)) when all calves born test negative for two years minimum or where youngstock (minimum of five unvaccinated animals per management group at 9-18 months age) are blood sampled (for [antibody](#)).

More information on [the scheme](#) is available on the BVDFree England website.

Herd status and movement restrictions

Ultimately, BVD elimination will only happen with support and a coordinated approach from farmers, veterinary surgeons and the agriculture industry.

Under CHECS, there are three standard programmes for BVD:

- Accredited Free (AF) Programme - demonstrating that the herd is free from BVD
- Vaccinated Monitored Free (VMF) Programme - demonstrating that BVD is controlled through vaccination of the breeding herd and by regular monitoring of young stock
- Eradication Programme - implements a control programme to reduce the detrimental effects on herd productivity caused by the disease and to achieve freedom from the disease

To maintain the status, under CHECS, check tests are carried out on successive calf crops. Where animals have been confirmed as PI they must not be sold on, except to slaughter. CHECS also requires movements off the farm to meet specified conditions, such as being kept separate from non-accredited cattle. The full requirements are detailed in the [CHECS technical document](#).

For BVDFree England, the herd status has to be renewed each year and is dependent on the most recent test results.

BVDFree England has set a variety of statuses, which have different meanings:

- BVD Virus Test Negative – cattle are not pregnant and are either:
 - from a BVD accredited-free herd through a CHECS cattle health scheme
 - or
 - individually tested BVD virus-free
- BVD Low Risk – from a herd with a 'negative' BVD herd status through animal screening OR pregnant cattle that would otherwise be in the above category
- BVD Status Unknown – all cattle not in the above two categories (including from 'not negative' herds)
- BVD Virus Test Positive – all cattle for which the most recent BVD antigen test is positive. Animals subsequently retested as BVD antigen negative can be reclassified as BVD Virus Test Negative

By joining BVDFree England, farmers agree to:

- actively engage in BVD control in order to eliminate the disease from the herd
- report all BVD testing results relating to the herd to the BVDFree England database
- allow herd and individual animal statuses to be openly accessible through the BVDFree England database
- not move PI animals other than directly to slaughter or through a dedicated (red) slaughter market

Minimising risk

PI animals are highly infectious and should be culled as soon as they are identified. PI animals should not be traded. Other cattle in the herd may be transiently infected, although they can be traded if not identified as a PI.

Spreading the BVD virus through movement of the animal puts other herds at risk and undermines the national effort to eliminate the BVD virus from England.

Means of reducing risk include:

- check the BVD status of any animals you bring on to your holding. This can be done through the BVDFree England database
- practice [good biosecurity](#)
- avoid buying in pregnant animals, as calves that contract BVD in the womb can become PIs for BVD. Also avoid taking pregnant animals to shows
- avoid nose-to-nose contact with cattle from neighbouring holdings
- vaccination may be an option but this should be discussed with your vet

Can people catch the disease?

BVD is not known to affect humans but good hygiene procedures should always be followed after contact with livestock.

Could it affect the food I eat?

No, it does not affect food we eat and it cannot be contracted by consuming beef or dairy products.

Further information

More detailed guidance is available from [BVDFree England](#), [AHDB](#) and [CHECS](#).

Trading Standards

For more information on the work of Trading Standards services - and the possible consequences of not abiding by the law - please see '[Trading Standards: powers, enforcement and penalties](#)'.

In this update

No major changes.

Last reviewed / updated: April 2024

Key legislation

- [Agriculture \(Miscellaneous Provisions\) Act 1968](#)
- [Animal Health Act 1981](#)

- [Animal Welfare Act 2006](#)
- [Cattle Identification Regulations 2007](#)

Please note

This information is intended for guidance; only the courts can give an authoritative interpretation of the law.

The guide's 'Key legislation' links often only shows the original version of the legislation, although some amending legislation is linked to separately where it is directly related to the content of a guide. Information on changes to legislation can be found by following the above links and clicking on the 'More Resources' tab.

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