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trading standards law explained

Foot-and-mouth disease

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In this guide, the words 'must' or 'must not' are used where there is a legal requirement to do (or not do) something. The word 'should' is used where there is established legal guidance or best practice that is likely to help you avoid breaking the law.

This guidance is for England

Foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) is an infectious viral disease that affects all cloven-hoofed animals, particularly cattle, pigs, sheep, goats and deer.

It is an acute infectious disease, which causes fever followed by development of vesicles (blisters), chiefly in the mouth and on the feet. The disease is caused by a virus, of which there are seven types.

What is the possible impact of the disease?

The disease can have a serious economic impact due to its ability to spread very rapidly and its profound effect on productivity. A very small quantity of the virus is capable of infecting an animal and the disease could spread rapidly throughout the country if it is not controlled quickly.

Clinical signs

Affected animals display vesicles on the feet or in the mouth. Other symptoms depend on the species of animal that is affected.

More information on how to spot foot-and-mouth disease, including symptoms, pictures of infected animals, etc is available on the GOV.UK website.

What happens when a suspect animal is found?

The owner of a suspected animal or carcase (or their vet) must by law report the fact to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) by contacting the Rural Services Helpline and speaking to the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) on 0300 020 0301. The stock owner is not expected to diagnose the disease, but all owners and keepers should make themselves familiar with the symptoms and call in a veterinary surgeon as early as possible. Never ask another owner / keeper to look at the suspected animal.

What happens if disease is confirmed?

The premises where disease is confirmed will be put under restriction so no animals can move on or off. It will be referred to as the infected premises. An approved disinfectant must be used to disinfect footwear, clothing and vehicles before entering or leaving the premises.

A protection zone of at least 3 km and a surveillance zone of at least 10 km around the infected premises where the disease has been confirmed will be put in place. There are certain restrictions for keepers of livestock who are in the protection and surveillance zones.

Also, it is likely that a national movement ban will be imposed on any animals that are susceptible to the disease. Details of this will be announced by Defra straight away.

Can people catch the disease?

Foot-and-mouth disease is not believed to affect human health.

Could it affect the food I eat?

The Food Standards Agency has advised that the disease in animals has no implications for the human food chain.

What can be done to reduce the risks?

Good biosecurity. Biosecurity measures should be practised routinely. Trucks, lorries, market places and loading ramps - in or over which infected animals have travelled - are a disease risk until properly cleansed and disinfected. Roads may also become contaminated, and viruses may be picked up and carried on the wheels of passing vehicles.

The boots, clothing and hands of any person who has been in contact with infected animals can spread the disease.

A range of regulatory measures exist, which help to reduce the risk of any notifiable disease spreading before it is detected (silent spread) and to help with tracing of animals if any incursion were to occur. These include requirements for cleansing and disinfecting livestock vehicles. The Animal Gatherings Order 2010 and its associated licence and biosecurity advice specify requirements to reduce the risk of spread of disease at livestock markets and shows throughout Great Britain.

Further guidance on disease prevention and biosecurity measures is available on the GOV.UK website.

Legislation applicable to foot-and-mouth disease

The Animal Health Act 1981 covers the control of outbreaks of animal diseases, including FMD. This includes the slaughter of any animals for the purposes of preventing the spread of the disease.

A later amendment to the Animal Health Act 1981 includes a duty to slaughter all susceptible animals, but only on infected premises. The Act also allows certain exceptions to this duty to slaughter in laboratories, zoos, wildlife parks, rare breeds and separate production units.

The Foot-and-Mouth Disease (England) Order 2006 sets out the procedures and controls required on suspicion and confirmation of FMD, and allows the creation of a number of zones providing different levels of control. The Order also introduces a number of treatments, such as heat treatment (cooking), deboning and maturation that have to be applied to meat and other animal products from an infected area.

The Foot-and-Mouth Disease (Control of Vaccination) (England) Regulations 2006 permit vaccination as an acceptable disease-control strategy in addition to the slaughter policy. The Regulations prohibit vaccination except under licence by Defra and also ban the export of vaccinated animals to a Member State of the European Union (EU), Norway, Iceland or Liechtenstein. The Regulations cover control zones, both where vaccination takes place and where it is expressly prohibited. The Regulations also introduce treatments for meat and other animal products from vaccinated animals.

Notifiable diseases

For information on diseases that are notifiable (which means there is a legal requirement to report cases and suspected cases to APHA), please see 'Notifiable diseases'.

Disease alerts

Livestock keepers can stay up to date with the latest FMD developments via the APHA alert subscription service.

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: May 2026

Key legislation

- Animal Health Act 1981
- Foot-and-Mouth Disease (Control of Vaccination) (England) Regulations 2006
- Foot-and-Mouth Disease (England) Order 2006
- Animal Gatherings Order 2010

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 go to the legislation.gov.uk website. The site usually updates the legislation to include any amendments made to it. However, this is not always the case. Information on all changes made to legislation can be found by following the above links and clicking on the 'More Resources' tab.

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