



Veterinary medicines

What are veterinary medicines?

These are medicines that are used to treat sick animals or prevent disease in herds or flocks of animals.

They include sheep dips, flea treatments, wormers, creams and sprays for infected skin or hooves, vaccinations, and drugs to control bacterial infections (antibiotics), parasites and fungal diseases.

Why are veterinary medicines used?

Veterinary medicines are used to make sure that animals are healthy.

They may be used to treat sick animals, in which case a medicine is prescribed by a vet in the same way as a doctor would issue a prescription.

They may also be used to prevent disease, in which case all the animals in a flock or a herd may be treated against a disease or infection, in the same way that people have jabs to stop them catching flu.

How are veterinary medicines authorised for use?

Government Ministers or the European Union must authorise all veterinary medicines before they can be marketed or used on animals in the UK. Once authorised, veterinary medicine residues in the food chain are monitored through a surveillance programme to make sure that they do not pose a risk to people's health.

The Food Standards Agency makes sure that food safety is given top priority during the authorisation and monitoring processes and that any veterinary medicine residues in food are as low as practically possible and within safe limits.

Why and how are veterinary medicines regulated?

Veterinary medicines are regulated to ensure that they do not present health risks to the treated animals, to people who eat meat and animal products, to people administering the veterinary medicines or to the environment.

Any company that wants to get a veterinary medicine authorised must submit an application containing information on whether there could be any effects on people's health.

Rigorous safety assessments are undertaken by committees of experts to ensure that any residues of veterinary medicines (explained below) remaining in the animal products will not be harmful to people eating the products.

The company must also supply information on the quality of the veterinary medicine and how effective it is, whether it is safe for the people who will be administering it, and whether it could impact on animals or the environment in any way.

What are veterinary medicine residues?

Veterinary medicine residues are the very small amounts of veterinary medicines that can remain in animal products such as meat, fish, eggs, honey and milk after slaughter or collection, and so make their way into the food chain.

Not all animal products contain veterinary medicine residues and where they do occur they are typically at very low levels (measured in parts per million).

Veterinary medicine residues also include any 'breakdown' products from the veterinary medicine (the results of the medicine breaking down into its component parts).

Residues of veterinary medicines can remain even when veterinary medicines are administered in the right amount; therefore, withdrawal periods are imposed to ensure that residues have fallen to safe levels. The withdrawal period is the waiting time that must elapse before treated animals can be slaughtered or their products, such as milk and eggs, collected.

Are veterinary medicine residues in food safe?

People consuming small amounts of veterinary medicine residues in their diet are not at risk, provided that the amount they are consuming is below the safety limit set by the expert committees when the veterinary medicine was authorised.

Many scientific studies are carried out to determine the safety limit and it is standard practice to include a large safety margin.

Once the safety limit is set, a safety-based legal limit (called a Maximum Residue Limit – MRL) is calculated for each of the animal products. These legal limits represent the maximum amount of the veterinary medicine that is safely and legally permitted in each of the tissues or products.

The use of withdrawal periods (explained above) ensures that residues do not exceed legal limits and provides an assurance of public safety.

How are babies and children protected?

The authorisation process takes account of any risk to babies and children.

How is food checked for veterinary medicine residues?

A veterinary residues surveillance programme monitors veterinary residues in animals and animal products in the UK to ensure that no unexpected residues are occurring and to provide an extra check that veterinary medicine residues do not harm people's health. Samples of meat, fish, eggs, honey and milk are collected and tested in laboratories that operate to internationally accepted standards.

This is overseen by the independent Veterinary Residues Committee (VRC), which advises the Government.

What foods are checked and where do the samples come from?

The veterinary residues surveillance programme is twofold. First, it covers the surveillance of UK-produced red meat, poultry, salmon and trout, eggs, wild and farmed game and milk. Samples are taken randomly from farms and slaughterhouses.

Secondly, it covers imported foods and processed products not covered above, such as baby foods and bacon. These samples come from retail outlets and border inspection posts, where animal products are checked before they are allowed to enter the UK.

What does the surveillance programme show?

The surveillance programme shows that residues of veterinary medicines are rarely found and, where residues do occur, they are almost always at low levels that are not a threat to people's health.

What are the health risks of exceeding the veterinary medicine residue safety limit?

In general, occasionally exceeding the safety limits by a small amount does not pose a health risk to adults, or to babies and children. Very rarely are the residues found in the surveillance programme associated with safety concerns and, where this is the case, action is taken by the Government to protect the public.

Should I worry more about imported animal products than those produced in the UK?

Wherever there is a legal limit, food imported into the EU must comply with it. The surveillance programme looks at both UK and imported produce. Despite the occasional problem, the UK does not generally import foods that contain residues that are not permitted or are above legal limits.

Sometimes, if a recurring problem is identified, it is followed up by EU-wide action.

Is the use of hormones allowed?

Hormones occur naturally in humans and animals. They are produced by glands in the body and carried to particular organs and tissues to produce specific responses – to stimulate development, for example. Hormones can also be made synthetically.

Hormones can be used as veterinary medicines to treat sick animals. They are given in low doses and are carefully controlled to ensure that any remaining residues will not affect the health of consumers.

Some hormones can also increase the growth of food-producing animals. The use of hormones for growth promotion is banned in the EU. This includes a ban on steroids for bulking up animals.

Other countries, notably the US, continue to use hormones for growth promotion. Meat from animals that have been treated with hormones for growth promotion cannot be imported into the EU.

What about feed additives – do they count as veterinary medicines?

Feed additives are added to animal feed during the manufacturing process. They are added for specific reasons. Some, for example, stop the feed from spoiling. Others, such as vitamins, add to the nutritional value of the feed or help to promote growth. Certain additives prevent disease from occurring.

Although feed additives are not legally classified as veterinary medicines, they are also strictly controlled and are assessed for safety by the EU.

The use of antibiotic growth-promoting feed additives will be phased out by 2006. This is because of concerns about the potential spread of antibiotic resistance.

How can I find out more?

The Veterinary Medicines Directorate oversees the authorisation and surveillance of veterinary medicines in the UK. You can visit their website, www.vmd.gov.uk, which contains more information and links to other useful sites including:

The Veterinary Residues Committee
www.vet-residues-committee.gov.uk, and
The Veterinary Products Committee
www.vpc.gov.uk/

The European Agency for the Evaluation of Medicinal Products oversees the authorisation for veterinary medicines on an EU-wide basis. More information can also be found on their website at www.emea.eu.int/

www.food.gov.uk