

ANTIBIOTIC USE AND FARMING: WHY DO FARMERS NEED TO USE ANTIBIOTICS?



No matter the type of **farming practices** used, just like when people get sick, animals occasionally get sick. And so, managing **animal health** on farms may require using **veterinary medicines**, including **antibiotics**, from time to time. **Farmers have a moral and legal obligation to keep their animals healthy** and ensure they receive appropriate treatment. This is why farmers sometimes need to administer antibiotics when their animals fall ill with a bacterial infection. **Antibiotics are**

prescription-only medicines in Europe and are therefore only available for use by farmers following diagnosis by a veterinarian and after the provision of a veterinary prescription. There are **strict rules** as to when and how they can be used to treat sick animals, as advised by a veterinarian.

According to EU law, the veterinarian can prescribe antibiotics to control disease in a group of animals where one or more animals are already sick to **prevent the spread of an infection** where no appropriate alternatives are available. The veterinarian can also prescribe antibiotics for an individual animal or a restricted number of animals to prevent infections when the risk is high, for instance, following certain surgical procedures. **Antibiotics cannot be used routinely** nor to compensate for poor hygiene, inadequate husbandry or poor farm management.

Responsible Use is Key

In Europe, farmers abide by the **Responsible Use principles** set out by the [European Platform for the Responsible Use of Medicines in Animals](#), **EPRUMA**, under the best-practice framework for using antibiotics in **food-producing animals**. EPRUMA provides guidance on stimulating **optimal animal health** as part of a farm management plan to **reduce the need for antibiotics**.

This is based on a **holistic approach** of minimising disease through infection prevention approaches, including **good housing and ventilation**, good hygiene, **appropriate nutrition**, regular monitoring of **health and welfare**, animal health planning, use of diagnostics, **vaccination**, reporting any adverse events to the pharmacovigilance system and **biosecurity**. Thus, preventative measures aim to keep animal groups healthy or limit the spread of diseases within an animal population. **When a bacterial disease hits an animal, there is no alternative to antibiotic treatment for that animal.**

Infection prevention actions and products **help reduce the need for antibiotics**. These can be broken into two main categories: preventive and supportive. **Preventive** action can be taken through biosecurity, good housing and ventilation, and the use of vaccines that protect animals from specific diseases.

Supportive action can be taken by using products that help maintain the animal in good health, for example, optimal nutrition and probiotics, or by selecting animals for greater disease resistance.

No Therapeutic Alternatives to Antibiotics

Whilst there are currently no therapeutic alternatives to antibiotics authorised for use in livestock in Europe, there are several susceptibilities enhancing products, such as **virulence modifiers**. **Nutrition can also play a very important and critical function** in maintaining optimal animal health and welfare. **Feed additives** used for farm animals are pivotal contributors to ensuring adequate nutrition and optimal **animal welfare**. Such **feed ingredients** ensure feed safety such as reducing the presence of undesirable microorganisms. They can also improve digestibility and maintain the animal's gut flora balance, supporting their welfare, resistance and **resilience to eventual infections or stressors**.

Using antibiotics for growth promotion purposes was banned in 2006 under the [EU Feed Additives Regulation](#) – Regulation (EC) No 1831/2003 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 September 2003 – on additives for use in animal nutrition to tackle **antibiotic resistance**. Yes, the fact that the use of antibiotics as growth promoters has been banned in Europe remains **widely unknown amongst the general public**. This was recently demonstrated in the [latest European barometer](#), which showed that only around two-fifths of EU citizens (42%) are aware of that; however, it is slightly more than in the previous wave (+4 percentage points). A large number of respondents (57%) do not know such a ban exists. Since the 2006 EU ban on antibiotics as growth promoters, other continents have decided to follow this example, underpinning the position of the EU as a best practice region as outlined in the [EU One Health Action Plan](#) on **Antimicrobial Resistance**. Much progress has been made in reducing the need to use antibiotics on farms in Europe, with 25 European countries providing sales data continuously between 2011 and 2022, reporting an average **53% drop in sales** over this period.

