

FACTSHEET

Antibiotic use in livestock

What is antibiotic resistance?

Antibiotics, which are commonly used to treat a wide variety of infectious diseases, have been playing a major role in both human and animal health. Yet, misuse and overuse of these drugs have significantly contributed to 'antibiotic resistance', which the WHO cites as an "increasingly serious threat to global public health"¹.

Such resistance develops when bacteria build mechanisms to withstand antibiotics. Consequently, antibiotics become less or no longer effective and bacterial infections become more difficult or impossible to eradicate. Without effective antibiotics common infections could become lethal and standard medical treatments such as surgery could become more hazardous.

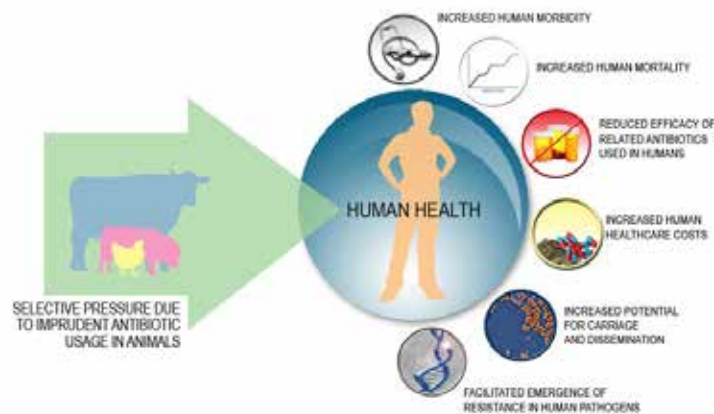


Figure 1: Consequences of AMR on human health. Source: University of Michigan

What does our food have to do with it?

Although excessive consumption of antibiotics by consumers remains a critical issue, overuse and misuse on farms contributes to the spread of antibiotic resistance.

Tests² on meat products by several consumer organisations across the EU showed that most samples contained antibiotic resistant bacteria. The presence of such bacteria can be a direct threat to consumers' health, via uncooked meat or cross-contamination, i.e. spreading bacteria to other surfaces. But the most alarming hazard is actually indirect.

Indeed, the high number of contaminated samples clearly shows there is an issue at farm level. Antibiotic resistant bacteria can spread through soil and water and be carried by farm workers to other environments. The presence of antibiotic resistant bacteria at farm level poses a risk to society as a whole



¹ WHO factsheet n°194 on Antimicrobial resistance <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs194/en/>

² See BEUC position paper 'Antibiotics use in livestock: Time to act', p.7 http://www.beuc.eu/publications/beuc-x-2014-043_pca_beuc_position_paper_on_antibiotic_resistance.pdf



🗨️ What do the EU institutions do about it?

EU countries have set up different national policies to tackle this burning problem. They also collect data on antibiotics sales which are then used to compare situations across the EU.

The European Commission issued an Action Plan³ in 2011 in response to calls by the Council and Parliament for immediate measures. It set out provisions on the appropriate use of antimicrobials - a category of drugs encompassing antibiotics - and the need to tackle this issue via the review of the veterinary medicines and medicated feed legislations. We are currently awaiting both proposals.

🗨️ What does BEUC recommend to EU decision makers?

- **Phase out** prophylaxis, i.e. treatment as a herd when no animal experiences symptoms, and better regulate metaphylaxis, i.e. treatment as a herd when only a few animals are sick. Antibiotics should be used primarily for cure, not prevention.
- **Make** individual treatment the norm and herd treatment the exception whenever possible.
- **Improve** animal health by fostering the implementation of good management and hygiene practices.
- **Allow** veterinarians to only prescribe antibiotics, not sell them to remove potential economic incentive.
- **Place restrictions** on the use of antibiotics critically important for human health in livestock when other equally effective treatment options are available.
- **Restrict and better monitor** 'off-label' uses whereby vets can prescribe a medicine for unapproved indications or species.
- **Set** clear reduction targets. Denmark and Norway have done so. And they work.
- **Test** more meat products for the presence of antibiotic resistant bacteria.
- **Require** reliable consumption data from Member States to get a clearer picture of what happens on the ground.

For further details, see [BEUC's position paper](#)

³ 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council - Action plan against the rising threats from Antimicrobial Resistance'
http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/health_consumer/docs/communication_amr_2011_748_en.pdf