

Badgers and TB

Every year thousands of badgers are shot in an attempt to stop the spread of bovine tuberculosis (bTB) disease in cattle. The culls are government-approved, but a lot of people say that culling is the wrong thing to do.

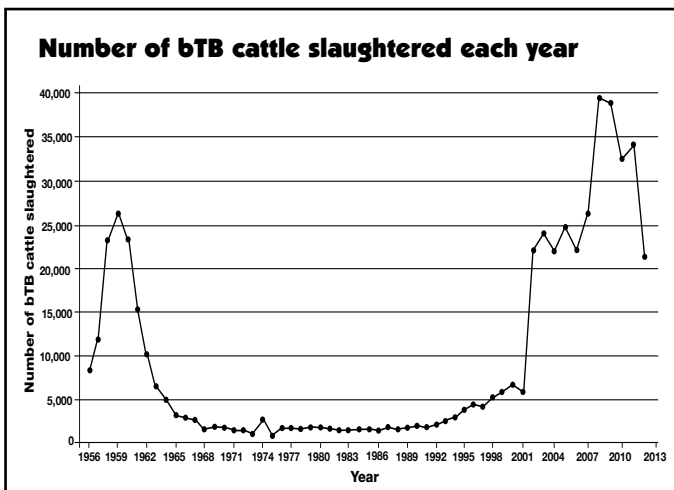
What is bTB?

Bovine tuberculosis (bTB) is a highly infectious fatal disease that affects cows. Animals who catch the disease don't show obvious symptoms at first, but in time they become very ill and die. Dairy herds have to be tested regularly and any infected animals are killed.

The milk from cows with bTB can't be sold because people can catch the disease if they drink milk or eat dairy products from infected animals. Before the introduction of milk pasteurisation in 1935, bTB in people was common and often fatal. Fortunately, today, it's very rare.

The History of bTB

In the 1960s, the incidence of bTB was reduced dramatically, largely by farmers stopping the spread of the disease amongst cows. However, in the 1990s, the situation began to change for the worse, and over the last 20 years the number of cattle with bTB has increased significantly.



Some people say the recent increase has been caused by:

- The intensification of dairy farming.
- The relaxation of cattle testing and movement controls in the 1980s.
- Farmers importing cattle that were not tested for bTB during the Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak in 2001.



The science of bTB

Bovine tuberculosis (bTB) is caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium Bovis* (M. Bovis). It's called 'bovine' (which means cattle) because it mainly affects cows, although all sorts of mammals can get it, including badgers, rats, foxes, deer and humans. It is called a zoonotic disease - which means it can be passed to people from animals. Bovine tuberculosis is similar to the human form of TB, which is caused by a different bacterium called *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (M. tuberculosis).



The parts of the country that are particularly affected by bTB are the South West and Midlands of England and certain parts of Wales.

How do cows catch bTB?

Cows mainly catch bTB by breathing in bacteria expelled by infected cattle as tiny aerosol droplets. It may also be caught through contamination of feeding and watering sites and from infected wildlife, including badgers. Cows are likely to catch bTB if they are kept in poor conditions or are suffering ill health. The disease is spread more easily when animals are kept inside poorly ventilated wintering sheds or when they are confined together at market, or in livestock lorries.

How do badgers catch bTB?

Badgers catch bTB from cows (probably through infected urine and faeces) and also from each other. Most badgers don't have the disease.

Why do farmers want to cull badgers?

Some dairy farmers believe that badgers are mainly to blame for cattle being infected with bTB and for spreading the disease. They argue that the only way to prevent cows getting the disease is to kill badgers because they act as a reservoir (or source) of the disease.

What is happening?

Each year since 2013 pilot badger culls have taken place in the SW of England. Over six weeks during September and October, thousands of badgers are killed - shot at night as they flee farmers armed with rifles. According to the government, 70 per cent of badgers in these areas will have to be killed over four years in order to achieve a 16 per cent reduction in bTB.

If these pilot culls are deemed 'successful', they will be rolled out across the country, resulting in the deaths of 130,000 badgers, one third of England's badger population.



Dairy cattle housed in intensive conditions inside a shed - an unhealthy, stressful environment that encourages the spread of disease.

Why not vaccinate cows against bTB?

The vaccination of cows is currently banned by European legislation, because the vaccine interferes with the test to find out whether the cows have bTB. In short, it has been impossible to tell a vaccinated cow from an infected one. However, a test has recently been developed that can tell the difference, but it still needs to be accepted for use by the regulatory authorities.

Why not vaccinate badgers?

The government says that it costs a lot less for farmers to shoot free-running badgers than it does to trap and vaccinate them.

In March 2012, the Welsh Assembly Government abandoned plans to cull badgers and adopted instead a plan to vaccinate using an injectable BCG vaccine. More than 1,400 badgers have now been vaccinated in Wales. And in England, almost a thousand badgers have been vaccinated in Gloucestershire.

The Krebs Study

To try to answer the question of whether badgers are to blame for TB in cattle, the government organised a study called the Randomized Badger Cull Trial (RBCT), which was run by the Independent Scientific Group on Cattle TB (ISG). In their 2007 report, the ISG said that 'badger culling can make no meaningful contribution to cattle TB control in Britain', and they 'recommend that TB control efforts focus on measures other than badger culling'.

Who is against the cull?

- Numerous leading scientists (including Professor Lord John Krebs, who organised the RBCT), wildlife societies and animal protection groups.
- The public - seventy per cent of people replying to the government's consultation opposed the cull.
- MPs - in October 2012, they voted to abandon the cull by 147 to 28 votes.

Why are they against the cull?

People say that shooting badgers is cruel. They also argue that it won't work - a cull would be of little help in reducing the disease, and could actually make things worse. The Krebs Study (see above) found that shooting badgers upsets their family groups, causing surviving animals to move out of the area, spreading TB further afield.

What do those against the cull suggest is done to combat bTB?

They say that to combat bovine TB, in cows we should:

- Improve the living conditions, health and welfare of cows so that they are less likely to catch the disease.
- Improve biosecurity so that bTB is not spread to new areas.
- Vaccinate badgers against bTB using an injectable vaccination now, and use an oral vaccine when it is developed.
- Accelerate the introduction of BCG vaccine for cows.

Action:

- Order campaign post cards and leaflets from Animal Aid.*
- Find out if your MP has signed EDM 299. If not, please ask him or her to do so.*
- Ask your teacher to invite a speaker from Animal Aid to give a talk to your class on the badger cull.
- Boycott dairy products. Dairy farmers blame badgers instead of improving conditions for dairy cows.

* Visit the Animal Aid website for more details.