

Farm news

November 2025



Bluetongue – looking out for affected calves or lambs

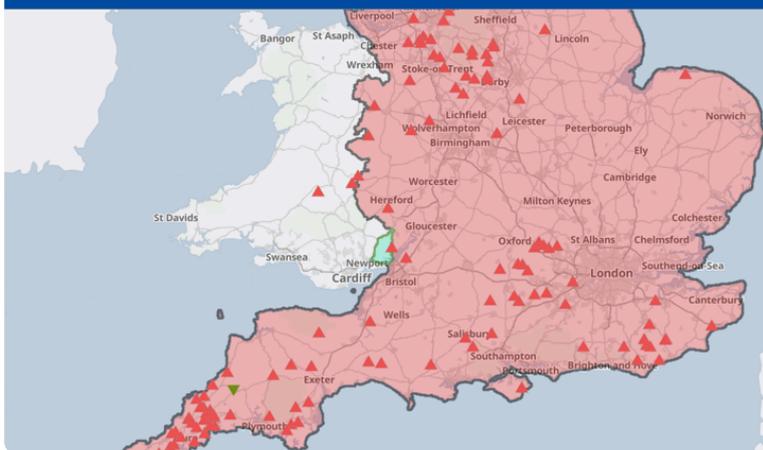
Carolyn Baguley

As the colder weather sets in and the midge season slows down, we hope that the circulation of Bluetongue virus will draw to a close for this year.

However, there will be unborn calves and lambs that have been infected while in the uterus and, over the next few months, you may see a few of these being born into your herds or flocks. Since Derbyshire has, at the time of writing, had the second-most infections in England after Cornwall (see map below), we are expecting to see some affected calves (probably from November onwards) and lambs (maybe more in the early lambing flocks from late December onwards?), particularly in unvaccinated animals (or those vaccinated during mid-pregnancy when the virus had already caused damage).

I thought this month's newsletter would be a good time to go over what we might expect to see. For some herds and flocks where the initial clinical signs in the adults and youngstock were so mild that they went unnoticed, **it might be that affected calves or lambs will be the first sign of BTV that you notice.** This was certainly the case for some East Anglian farms that were affected last year.

Overview of Bluetongue Cases & Zones since August 2024



APHA's Bluetongue case map, accessed 21/10/2025. Each red triangle represents one case of BTV. <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/4867f4e1f680415898482df7aabb703d/page/Page>

During the mating period and very early pregnancy, bluetongue can cause reduced conception rates, early foetal losses, and sub-fertile or infertile bulls.

Later on in pregnancy it may cause deformed calves and lambs. The outcome for the foetus depends to a large extent on the stage of pregnancy at which the dam was infected with the bluetongue virus. The table below gives a nice overview of the effects of BTV-8 on the bovine foetus at different stages of pregnancy. Although most of the current concerns are around BTV-3, rather than BTV-8, we expect that BTV-3 might behave in a similar way.

It's worth noting that the table doesn't mention abortions if the dam becomes infected in late pregnancy – these can and do occur, but they may be more to do with the dam having a high temperature (a fever in itself can cause abortion) than a specific effect of the virus itself.

Month	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Day of gestation	30	60	90	120	150	180	210	240	270
	1 st Trimester			2 nd Trimester			3 rd Trimester		
Early embryonic death/abortion	70-130 days: Brain abnormalities			Normal brain development					
Virus-positive calves at birth									
145 days: foetal immunity develops									
Infection during mid-gestation produces virus-positive and antibody-negative deformed calves at birth.				Infection during late gestation produces virus-positive calves which can be antibody-negative or positive, depending on whether the calf has produced antibodies in response to the infection.					

Effects of BTV-8 on the unborn bovine foetus. Similar effects are seen in sheep, with brain abnormalities in lambs when the ewe is infected in mid-gestation but, since sheep pregnancies are shorter, the months and days will need to be adjusted.

Brain damage and other effects

Many of the effects of BTV-3 infection on calves are neurological, and this is because the virus causes destruction of brain tissue before the calf is born. Calves can have 'hydranencephaly', where the brain tissue of the cerebral hemispheres is almost completely destroyed and replaced with a membranous sac filled with cerebrospinal fluid, or 'porencephaly' which is a similar but less severe presentation with less destruction of brain tissue.

The severity of brain damage caused by bluetongue tends to lessen as gestation progresses – so a calf infected at 80 days gestation may have extensive destruction of both cerebral hemispheres, whereas a calf infected after mid-gestation may have focal meningoencephalitis in one small area of the brain.

Affected calves may be 'dummy calves'. They appear 'vacant', with a passive demeanour and little or no suck reflex, and often have to be euthanased. Varying degrees of brain damage result in varying mental capacity.

Other neurological signs include central blindness (where the eyes look fine but the brain can't process vision), seizures, circling, difficulty standing, weakness, wide-based gait, head pressing and stargazing.

Calves may be premature, stillborn or weak. In surviving calves, secondary infections (like scour or pneumonia) are common due to reduced colostrum intake.

Other reported deformities include alterations in the shape of the jaw, cataracts, and a bright red nose at birth.

The list above can apply to lambs too, but more affected calves were reported last year, possibly because of the areas of the country affected and the times of year that infection occurred.

Affected calves and lambs may be born viraemic, i.e. with the virus still circulating in their bloodstream, and they therefore may have the potential to transmit infection if bitten by a midge. This is one of the ways we think the virus overwintered in England last year.

What else could it be?

Don't assume affected calves definitely have bluetongue. There are other conditions that can cause calves and lambs to be affected in similar ways. These include viral infections (Schmallenberg, BVD in calves, Border Disease in lambs, other BTV serotypes...), parasitic infections (e.g. neospora), toxins (e.g. plants such as lupins), mineral deficiencies (e.g. swayback in lambs), or genetic conditions.

How can I investigate suspect calves?

Firstly, we must remember that bluetongue is notifiable and all suspect cases must be reported to APHA (by you or by us).

When APHA is contacted with a report of suspected bluetongue, including in a newborn calf or lamb, a duty vet will discuss the situation with whoever places the call to determine if bluetongue can be ruled out. If it can't, they will decide whether an APHA investigation is needed. In England, this comes down to whether any other notifiable diseases are suspected.

If no other notifiable diseases are suspected, APHA will not arrange an on-site investigation and will not restrict the premises or the affected animals. Instead, they will provide the caller with an authorisation code, allowing the private veterinary surgeon (PVS) to submit samples directly to the Pirbright Institute for bluetongue testing. This will cover free testing for up to 3 affected animals, although you will have to cover the costs of the sampling and postage. The testing is PCR, which looks for fragments of the virus itself rather than the antibody response to it. PCR can remain positive for 5-6 months after infection.

If the test results are negative for bluetongue, the Pirbright Institute will communicate them directly to you.

If the test results are positive for bluetongue a duty vet from APHA will communicate the results to you. **If the infection is bluetongue serotype 3 (BTV-3), premises and animals in England will not be restricted.** If other serotypes are identified, restrictions and other disease control measures may be applied (there have been a couple of BTV-8 cases in England this year, and APHA are keen to keep an eye on this situation).



Farm and Equine Centre

Markeaton Lane, Markeaton, Derby DE22 4NH
01332 294929

Alfreton
01773 304900

Pride Veterinary Centre
01332 678333

Allestree
01332 554422

Shelton Lock
01332 700321

Hilton
01283 732999

Stapenhill
01283 568162

Langley Mill
01773 304914

Mickleover
01332 518585

Oakwood
01332 666500

Lumpy Skin Disease Pablo Sancho Ros



Lumpy skin disease is a highly contagious viral disease that is transmitted via insects such as biting flies and mosquitoes. It affects cattle, water buffalo and wild ruminants.

The main signs include sudden fever (over 39 Celsius) and nodular skin lesions (particularly on the head, neck, back and udder) but we can also see swollen lymph nodes, eye discharge, declining milk production and loss of appetite.

Lumpy skin disease has never been reported in the UK, but recently – for the first time ever - it has been confirmed in cattle in France and Italy, which means they don't hold their lumpy skin disease-free status anymore.

Lumpy skin disease is notifiable in the UK, meaning that if you suspect it, you have a legal duty to notify Defra.

Hopefully we won't have too much to worry about, especially since DEFRA suspended imports of various bovine commodities from these two countries since the 25th of June (Italy) and the 1st of July (France), but in this tiny article we just wanted to give you a heads up so you can be more vigilant with your cattle skin conditions – surveillance is important!

For any questions, or if you are worried about this, give us a call.



Cow with Lumpy skin disease

Image reproduced with permission, courtesy of Dr Deepak Subedi (Animal Health Australia)

Practice Hog Roast

12th November 2025 7pm at our Markeaton Practice
DE22 4NH

Hog Roast & Drinks (Vegetarian option available on request)

FREE to attend however booking essential for catering requirements.

Please call us on 01332 294929 to reserve your space.