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Bovine viral diarrhoea

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In this guide, the words 'must' or 'must not' are used where there is a legal requirement to do (or not do) something. The word 'should' is used where there is established legal guidance or best practice that is likely to help you avoid breaking the law.

This guidance is for Scotland

Bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) can have very varied symptoms, from inapparent infection to severe enteritis, abortion and death. It can have substantial impact on the profitability of farms. This highly contagious disease has been estimated to cost between £13 and £31 per cow in Great Britain. It impacts animal welfare within affected herds, and reduces farm productivity and profitability.

Control and prevention can be achieved through improved biosecurity and vaccination.

Following pressure from the agricultural industry, the Scottish Government agreed to introduce a staged programme of increasing control measures to attempt to eradicate the disease in Scotland.

Clinical signs

Clinical signs can vary greatly, such as a bout of diarrhoea or pneumonia (often in a group of animals), or an increase in abortions / stillbirths and a decrease in fertility.

Calves contracting the disease while still in the womb can be born as 'persistently infected' animals (PIs). Such animals continue to excrete the virus throughout their lives and are therefore the greatest risk of spread of infection. These animals, as well as failing to thrive, tend to have impaired immunity, making them more susceptible to other diseases. They are likely to die before reaching maturity. Cattle infected after birth can recover from BVD, but do suffer from a reduced ability to fight other infectious diseases.

BVD is spread via contact with infected cattle, particularly PIs. A thorough BVD testing regime, movement restrictions and good biosecurity controls are required to eradicate this disease.

Phase 6 of the BVD Eradication Scheme

On 1 July 2025, Scotland began phase 6 of the BVD Eradication Scheme, which has the aim of protecting BVD-negative herds at all costs.

Phase 6 makes the following changes to requirements:

- It removes previous requirements on restrictions on taking samples from the official ear tag or management tag of a calf under 20 days of age
- When sampling obligations have been missed, keepers are permitted to move animals off a holding. A movement restriction only applies in relation to keepers of a breeding bovine animal with a 'not negative' BVD status, and only when the first compliance deadline for sampling has been missed
- Keepers may move bovine animals on to a holding where a bovine animal with an individual BVD-positive status is present and has been kept on that holding for more than 40 days
- Keepers of any herd that contains animals with an individual BVD-positive status are required to separate those animals from the rest of the herd
- The definition of a 'qualifying calf' has been updated and extended for calves born on or after 1 February 2026, requiring a sample to be submitted for test before the calf is 40 days old. It also restricts the movement of any animals on the holding until the animal has a BVD-negative status. A 'qualifying calf' is any calf born to:
    - A dam that became part of a breeding herd
    - A breeding bovine animal that was moved on to the holding of the calf's birth while the dam was pregnant with the calf
- Keepers of a breeding herd with a 'not negative' BVD status who have failed to comply with additional sampling obligations are restricted from moving bovine animals on to a holding until the breeding herd has a collective 'not negative' BVD status

More information about phase 6 is available on the Scottish Government website.

BVD testing requirements

Every year, keepers of a breeding herd of cattle or a breeding bovine animal must take, or arrange to be taken, a sample from a set number of animals (this varies according to farm set-up) for BVD. Dairy herds must be 'check tested' twice a year if they calve all year round. The samples should not be from animals that have previously been tested and found to be negative, or dams of such animals (such dams are assumed to be negative).

A breeding herd is defined in the Bovine Viral Diarrhoea (Scotland) Order 2019 as "a group of two or more bovine animals in which breeding, whether by natural, assisted or artificial means, is intended by its keeper to take place and no steps are taken to prevent or minimise the chances of such breeding".

The sample (which can be either blood or a part of the ear taken using a special ear tag) must be submitted to an approved laboratory for testing. Only a vet can take and submit a blood sample, but farmers can take and submit a sample using an appropriate ear tag. An official tag (primary or secondary) must be used when tissue-tagging calves under 20 days old.

Within five days, the laboratory must notify the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) and the keeper - via ScotEID - clearly stating whether the result is 'negative' or 'not negative' for exposure to BVD virus, or confirms the presence of the BVD virus.

A result of 'not negative' does not necessarily mean that there is BVD in the herd; it simply means that an animal / animals have at some point been exposed to the disease. Further advice should be sought from your vet.

Where a calf is born to an animal that was not intended to be bred from (that is, not a breeding bovine or in a breeding herd) a sample must be taken within 40 days of birth and submitted for testing. The calf must have an individual BVD-negative status before leaving the herd.

Herd status and movement restrictions

The herd status has to be updated each year and is dependent on the most recent test results. The herd status can be 'negative' or 'not negative'. The PI locator on ScotEID displays the CPH numbers of all herds with BVD-positive animals that have been in a herd for more than 40 days.

Animals from herds that are classified as 'not negative' are not permitted to move from the holding they are on, except in one or more of the following circumstances:

- They are individually tested and found to be negative
- The movement is under a licence issued by a veterinary inspector or APHA
- They move direct to a slaughterhouse (not via a market)

A breeding herd that has not been tested is classified as 'not negative' and the movement restrictions above apply. Similarly, if a breeding herd / animal is kept on the same holding as a breeding herd / bovine that has not been tested, it is also classified as 'not negative'.

Where a keeper is notified that their herd is 'not negative' and another herd is kept on the same holding, they must notify the other keeper(s) of the test result, and of any subsequent change in status, within seven days. Where a breeding animal is to be moved off a holding, other than for slaughter, the keeper must notify the new keeper (even if only a temporary keeper) or market operator of the BVD status of the animal / herd.

Bovines confirmed BVD-positive must not be moved off the holding other than direct to a slaughterhouse or under licence; nor may cattle move on to the holding, except under licence from APHA. Movement restrictions may only be lifted once the positive animal is removed to slaughter or the animal has been retested and confirmed to be no longer BVD-positive. The retest of any positive animal can only be undertaken by a veterinary surgeon.

Risky animals

Cattle without an individual BVD status are termed 'risky' animals. These animals fall into one of the following categories:

- Born into non-breeding herds in Scotland
- Brought in from outside Scotland
- Come from BVD 'not negative' herds in Scotland

On arrival into the breeding herd, these animals must be tested for BVD within 40 days (unless moved directly to slaughter within 40 days). 'Risky' animals cannot leave the herd without an individual BVD-negative or assumed-negative status.

Compulsory BVD investigation

Herds that have tested BVD 'not negative' for more than 15 months must undergo a compulsory BVD investigation (CBI). A CBI will require the keeper to test all animals within the herd to obtain a BVD-negative or assumed-negative status.

If a BVD-positive bovine is found, movement restrictions as outlined above will apply. If the BVD-positive animal remains on the holding for more than 40 days, the keeper's CPH number will be added to the PI locator list on ScotEID until the animal is removed to slaughter or tests BVD-negative.

Once all the animals test BVD-negative, the CBI is complete. Keepers must continue to test all calves born into the herd for a further 12 months.

Minimising risk

All BVD-positive animals must be housed indoors and separately to other cattle on the holding, in order to minimise the risk of transmitting the virus as far as possible.

Where there is only one BVD-positive animal, the keeper must ensure that it is housed with no more than one other animal, in order to safeguard its welfare. The companion animal must be selected on the basis of it having a very low risk of spreading BVD. This is regardless of individual animals' BVD status.

Other means of reducing risk include:

- Check the BVD status of any animals you bring on to your holding, which can be done on the ScotEID website (email help@scoteid.com, tel: 0300 244 9823)
- Avoid buying in pregnant animals, as calves that contract BVD in the womb can become PIs for BVD. Also avoid taking pregnant animals to shows
- Avoid nose-to-nose contact with cattle from neighbouring holdings
- Vaccination may be an option, but this should be discussed with your vet

Can people catch the disease?

BVD is not known to affect humans, but good hygiene procedures should always be followed after contact with livestock.

Could it affect the food I eat?

No, it does not affect the food we eat and it cannot be contracted by consuming beef products.

Notifiable diseases

For information on diseases that are notifiable (which means there is a legal requirement to report cases and suspected cases to APHA), please see 'Notifiable diseases'.

Further information

More detailed guidance on BVD is available on the Scottish Government website.

Trading Standards

For more information on the work of Trading Standards Services and the possible consequences of not abiding by the law, please see 'Trading Standards: powers, enforcement and penalties'.

In this update

Information added about phase 6 of the Scottish Government's BVD Eradication Scheme.

Last reviewed / updated: September 2025

Key legislation

- Animal Health Act 1981
- Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006
- Cattle Identification (Scotland) Regulations 2007
- Bovine Viral Diarrhoea (Scotland) Order 2019

Please note

This information is intended for guidance; only the courts can give an authoritative interpretation of the law.

The guide's 'Key legislation' links go to the legislation.gov.uk website. The site usually updates the legislation to include any amendments made to it. However, this is not always the case. Information on all changes made to legislation can be found by following the above links and clicking on the 'More Resources' tab.

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