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9. Diseases & Medication

Medication and Gamebirds

Modern game rearing, like other sectors of animal production, often requires use of medicines to ensure the health and welfare of gamebirds. All medicines used in game rearing must be prescribed and administered under the direction of a qualified vet.

Medicines that may be prescribed include antibiotics, wormers and anticoccidial products. The key to reducing the reliance on and the need for medications is to ensure there is very good husbandry and bio-security on the rearing field and in the release pens.

Antibiotic use in game birds

Antibiotics are an integral part of modern medicine and veterinary practice. However, bacteria which are resistant to antibiotics have been emerging, and this is a very real problem for the future. Reducing the use of those antibiotics we do have that are still working to as low a level as possible is seen as a global priority¹⁶⁷.

Are antibiotics used for game birds?

Yes. Antibiotics are used to treat sick gamebirds, as well as preventing the spread of disease outbreaks both where game are reared, and on shoots where they are released. The game industry is committed to playing its part in national and global antibiotic reduction, and it is imperative that everyone reviews their practice and reduce their usage as far as possible.

Are game farms and shoots responding?

Yes. The Game Farmers' Association (GFA) worked with the Veterinary Medicines Directorate so that measurements of the amount of antibiotics used in the game industry were recorded for the first time in 2016. This showed that three quarters of the active ingredient was given in feed, and a quarter in water¹⁶⁸. Through improvements in practice, the amount of antibiotics used in the gamebird industry was reduced by more than a third in 2017. This progress is welcomed by the Veterinary Medicines Directorate, but it is important to continue reducing usage and hit the target of a further 25% reduction by 2020¹⁶⁹.

How are they reducing antibiotic use in gamebirds?

It is possible to reduce the need for antibiotics by improving biosecurity and game management. This makes it harder for disease to establish in the first place, and ensures conditions where, if disease occurs, it is less likely to thrive. Getting these things right can go a long way towards reducing the need for antibiotics.

At the game farm this means:

- a healthy parent flock
- clean disease-free eggs
- suitable stocking densities
- good quality food
- optimal conditions on the rearing field.

At the shoot, it is important to have:

- quality release pens with the right mix of habitats
- no standing water in and around release pens
- clean and plentiful drinking water
- good quality food.



When should antibiotics be used for gamebirds?

“Antibiotics for incorporation into gamebird feed should not be prescribed at all unless the birds in question have been visited by the vet responsible for them or a clinical assessment of the birds has been undertaken by the vet (e.g. post mortem examination) and a need to prescribe has been established. Any departure from this general principle of responsible prescribing requires specific justification.”

This means that antibiotics should only be given by the vet responsible for your birds, in the correct amounts, and in response to a need for them – not to prevent a need arising. There is also a compulsory 28-day withdrawal period between birds being treated with medication, before they can be shot, to ensure the meat is free of residue before it is eaten.

Justification to whom?

The enforcement body for this area is the Veterinary Medicines Directorate, who endorse the new best practice guidelines for prescribing antibiotics in gamebirds published in 2017. The following ten-point plan has already succeeded in reducing antibiotic use, but there is still a long way to go:

1. For the purposes of prescribing, all kept gamebirds must be “under the care” of a qualified veterinary surgeon. This means the vet has been given responsibility for the health of the flock by the owner. That vet must see the flock immediately before prescribing or have visited recently enough to make a diagnosis and prescribe.
2. Correct husbandry and management should always be in place and will reduce the need for medication and treatment.
3. Bird keepers must talk to their vet to establish whether there is a need to prescribe antibiotics before asking a feed company to compound rations containing medication.
4. Medicines prescribed under the ‘cascade’ system (which covers most of those used in gamebirds) can only be administered by a vet or someone directed by him or her and acting under his or her responsibility.
5. ‘Cascade’ medication is “in particular for the avoidance of unnecessary suffering”.
6. Antibiotics must always be prescribed in response to a



specific need arising in the birds in question. They should never be used as a matter of habit or a substitute for good bird management.

7. Where prescription of antibiotics is indicated, it must be for specific circumstances and for the exact amount necessary to resolve the problem.
8. Owners should be advised on correct administration and storage of products, and appropriate withdrawal periods.
9. Antibiotics must never be wasted or allowed to pollute the environment. Unused antibiotics must not be flushed to the sewer and should be disposed of as pharmaceutical waste.
10. Any antibiotic use **MUST** be recorded.

These are available in full on the Game Farmers Association website at: www.gfa.org.uk

Ask the shoot

1. What measures do you take to reduce the need for medication in your birds?
2. Do you use foot baths outside your release pens?
3. How often do you clean your drinkers?
4. Do you move them?
5. How often do you move your feed hoppers?
6. Can you assure me that you stick to the 28-day withdrawal period for medicines?