



UK Antibiotic Regulations

Antibiotics are powerful medicines developed to treat bacterial infections, either by killing the bacteria directly or preventing their reproduction. Bacteria can become resistant to antibiotics over time through overuse, inappropriate use (e.g. growth promotion or as a precaution against disease), courses of treatment not being completed and/or poor infection control.

Overuse or misuse of antibiotics in animals is a significant factor in the development of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, which can spread to humans. The World Health Organisation recognises antimicrobial resistance (AMR) as one of the top global public health and development threats. The UK has strict regulations surrounding antibiotics to preserve their effectiveness and protect both human and animal health.

Obtaining antibiotics without a prescription (e.g. purchasing online) is a criminal offence in the UK.

OATA therefore recommends that our industry plays its part in combating anti-microbial resistance by **using antibiotics only as prescribed by their vet**, whether for fish, corals or other animals.

- **Antibiotics can only be prescribed by a veterinary surgeon.**
- Before prescribing antibiotics, the veterinary surgeon **must** perform a clinical assessment of the animal(s) under their care to provide enough information to diagnose and prescribe safely and effectively. This **must** include a physical assessment when antibiotics are to be prescribed.
- In most instances the veterinary surgeon will supply the antibiotics; however, the written prescription can be taken to a pharmacy to supply the medicines if necessary.
- Antibiotics **cannot** be prescribed to be used routinely, to compensate for poor hygiene/inadequate husbandry practices or to promote growth/increase yield.
- A veterinary surgeon may **not** prescribe antibiotics before clinical signs of disease or to prevent the occurrence of disease or infection (prophylactic use*).

*Antibiotics may be prescribed for prophylactic use under exceptional circumstances (i.e. very high risk of infectious disease outbreak); however, this would require the veterinary surgeon to write a rationale and conduct a thorough management review.

If you have concerns regarding the illegal possession, use and/or supply of antibiotics in Great Britain you can [report a breach of regulations to the VMD here](#).
For Northern Ireland contact webmaster@health-ni.gov.uk.

Questions and answers

My local fish store advises I use antibiotics to prevent a disease outbreak when introducing new fish. What should I do?

You must have a prescription from a vet before obtaining or using antibiotics in the UK. Specific antibiotics will target specific bacterial infections, they will not treat viral, fungal, protozoan or parasitic infections. Buying healthy fish and introducing them to a well-maintained aquarium of an appropriate size, with suitable tankmates, good water quality, good husbandry and hygiene is the best way to prevent disease outbreaks.

Are corals and other invertebrates covered by this legislation when it comes to antibiotics?

Yes, the laws which cover veterinary medicines apply to “all animals other than man”, meaning it also applies to invertebrate animals, e.g. corals. So antibiotic use in corals is the same as for fish – they can only be used if prescribed by a vet.

If it will help my corals/animals, why shouldn't I buy antibiotics online?

Obtaining antibiotics without a prescription is a criminal offence in the UK.

Veterinary medicines must go through a strict authorisation procedure to ensure they are safe, effective and made to a high quality. Online sellers (which are not authorised by the Veterinary Medicines Directorate) may be selling counterfeit or sub-standard products, without the proper veterinary guidance to ensure the medicine and dosage is appropriate. Administering the wrong medicine has the potential to worsen health issues of your livestock and contribute to antibiotic resistance.

How can the use of antibiotics in my aquarium contribute to resistance?

Any illegal use of antibiotics will likely result in use of an inappropriate medicine, incorrect dosage and/or incorrect treatment length. This will put a selection pressure on bacteria present in the aquarium, meaning they can adapt and develop resistance to the treatment. Water from routine maintenance can also enter into water courses through outside drains. If this water is contaminated with resistant strains of bacteria these could transfer to the environment and ultimately damage human health. That's why we all need to play our part in using antibiotics responsibly.

**ALWAYS REMEMBER:
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WITHOUT A PRESCRIPTION IS
A CRIMINAL OFFENCE IN THE UK**