

From Pasture to Plate: The impact of Veterinary drug Residues in Food Animals

^{1*}Diviyaanandhan V S and ²Chidambaranathan Arumugasami

¹M.V.Sc Scholar, Department of Veterinary Pharmacology and Toxicology, Kerala Veterinary and Animal Sciences University, Lakkidi, Pookode, Kunnathidavaka, Wayanad - 673576

²M.V.Sc Scholar, Division of Extension Education, ICAR - Indian Veterinary and Research Institute, Izatnagar, Bareilly, Uttarpradesh - 243122

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Abstract

Veterinary drugs are essential in food animals for maintaining animal health, preventing diseases, and improving productivity. However, improper drug use and failure to observe withdrawal periods may lead to residues in meat, milk, and eggs, which leads significant risks to food safety and public health. These residues can enter the food chain through direct drug administration, the use of banned substances, feed contamination, and environmental exposure. Their presence in animal products has been linked to antimicrobial resistance, allergic reactions, toxic effects, and disruptions to gut health. To these risks, regulatory agencies have established very strict guidelines, including maximum residue limits (MRLs), withdrawal period compliance, routine monitoring, and promoting good veterinary practices. Ensuring food safety requires a collaborative effort between farmers, veterinarians, policymakers, and consumers. By adhering to regulatory frameworks and implementing best practices, the risks associated with drug residues in food animals can be effectively controlled, protecting both human health and global food trade.

Keywords: Animal health, food safety, drug residue, withdrawal.

Introduction

Veterinary drugs play a crucial role in maintaining animal health, preventing diseases, and improving productivity in food animals. However, when these drugs are not used correctly or withdrawal periods are ignored, residues may remain in animal products such as meat, milk, and eggs. The presence of these drug residues raises concerns about food safety, human health, and international trade. This article discusses the sources, risks, and control measures associated with drug residues in food animals.

How Drug Residues Enter the Food Chain

Drug residues can end up in food animals through several pathways:

- **Veterinary Drug Administration** – Livestock receive antibiotics, antiparasitics, growth hormones, and anti-inflammatory medications for disease control. If proper withdrawal periods are not followed before slaughter or milk collection, residues may persist in animal-derived products.
- **Use of Banned Substances** – Some producers illegally use restricted or prohibited drugs, such as chloramphenicol or clenbuterol, which are known to pose serious health risks.
- **Feed Contamination** – Residues can enter food animals if medicated feed is accidentally mixed with non-medicated feed. Inadequate cleaning of feeding

equipment can also result in contamination.

- **Environmental Exposure** – Drug residues can be introduced into the food chain through environmental contamination, such as exposure to medicated animal waste that enters water sources or soil.

Health Risks Associated with Drug Residues

Consuming animal products containing drug residues can have harmful effects on human health, including:

- **Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR)** – One of the most significant risks is the development of antimicrobial-resistant bacteria. Prolonged exposure to antibiotic residues can make bacterial infections harder to treat, leading to increased health complications.
- **Allergic Reactions** – Certain drugs, such as penicillins and sulfonamides, can trigger severe allergic responses in sensitive individuals, even at very low concentrations.
- **Toxic Effects and Cancer Risks** – Some drug residues, including nitrofurans and hormonal agents, have been linked to toxic effects, organ damage, and cancer in humans.
- **Disruptions to Gut Health** – Antibiotics present in food can affect the balance of beneficial gut bacteria, potentially leading to digestive problems and weakened immunity.

Regulations and Safety Measures to Control Drug Residues

To ensure food safety, international organizations and regulatory agencies have established strict guidelines to minimize drug residues in animal products. Key measures include:

- **Setting Maximum Residue Limits (MRLs)** – Organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and Codex Alimentarius have defined acceptable residue levels to protect consumers.

- **Observing Withdrawal Periods** – Farmers must comply with recommended waiting times after drug administration to allow residues to clear from the animal's system before harvesting meat, milk, or eggs.
- **Regular Monitoring and Testing** – Government food safety authorities conduct routine checks on livestock products to detect excessive drug residues. Countries with stringent monitoring programs, such as the United States and European Union, enforce penalties for violations.
- **Promoting Good Veterinary Practices (GVP)** – Veterinarians and farmers must use appropriate dosages, follow correct administration procedures, and maintain accurate records to prevent misuse of veterinary drugs.
- **Raising Awareness and Educating Stakeholders** – Training programs for farmers, veterinarians, and consumers can help improve compliance with drug residue regulations and promote safer livestock management.

Strategies to Reduce Drug Residues in Animal Products

Ensuring food safety requires minimizing drug residues in meat, milk, eggs, and other animal-derived products. Several effective strategies can help achieve this goal:

Proper Use of Veterinary Drugs

- **Observing Withdrawal Periods** - Farmers should adhere to recommended waiting times before harvesting animal products to allow drug residues to diminish.
- **Using Approved Medications:** Only legally authorized drugs should be administered, avoiding prohibited substances that pose health risks.
- **Correct Dosage and Administration:** Following veterinary guidance ensures proper dosing, reducing the chances of excessive residues.
- **Maintaining Treatment Records:** Detailed records of drug usage, including dosage, administration method, and

withdrawal periods, help track residue risks.

- **Separating Treated Animals:** Animals under medication should be kept apart from untreated ones to prevent contamination of food products.
- **Enhancing Disease Prevention:** Strengthening biosecurity measures, vaccination programs, and nutrition can minimize the need for medical treatments.

Safe Feeding Practices

- **Ensuring Feed is Residue-Free:** Proper cleaning of feed storage and equipment prevents contamination with medicated feed.
- **Exploring Natural Alternatives:** Using probiotics, prebiotics, and herbal supplements can help reduce reliance on antibiotics and other drugs.

Monitoring and Testing Programs

- **On-Farm Screening:** Farmers and veterinarians can utilize rapid tests to detect residues in milk and meat before distribution.
- **Regulatory Oversight:** Government agencies should conduct routine food testing to ensure compliance with residue limits.

Education and Awareness Initiatives

- **Training for Farmers and Veterinarians:** Knowledge about responsible drug use, withdrawal times, and residue prevention can enhance compliance.
- **Consumer Awareness:** Educating the public about food safety regulations promotes demand for residue-free animal products.
- Implementing these measures helps ensure that animal products remain safe for consumption while maintaining public health and food quality standards.

Conclusion

Drug residues in food animals pose a serious threat to public health and food safety. Implementing strict drug regulations, ensuring responsible use of veterinary medicines, and educating stakeholders can help minimize the risks. A collective effort from farmers, veterinarians, policymakers, and consumers is

essential to safeguard food quality and protect human health.

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