

Animal Health Management

S.S. Mehesare^{*1} and S. M. Khupse²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Veterinary Clinical Complex (Veterinary Medicine), Mahatma Gandhi Mission, MGM's Dr. Rajendra Suryawanshi College of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Gandheli, Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar, Maharashtra

²Subject Matter Specialist, Department of Livestock Production, MGM Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Gandheli, Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar, Maharashtra

*Corresponding Author Email: sopuvet@gmail.com

Abstract

Animal health management is a planned approach to maintaining productivity, welfare and disease resistance through prevention, early detection and timely intervention. Effective programmes combine vaccination, parasite control, balanced nutrition, clean housing, reproductive care, biosecurity, record keeping and regular veterinary examination. In livestock systems, small changes in feed intake, body condition, rumination, milk yield, growth, behaviour or reproductive performance may provide early warning of a health problem before obvious clinical signs appear. A herd or flock health plan therefore depends on routine observation and measurable indicators rather than treatment alone. Young stock, pregnant animals, high-producing animals and recently transported or introduced animals require special attention because their risk of disease is often higher. Good management also reduces avoidable antimicrobial use by preventing infection and supporting diagnosis before treatment. Digital records, sensors and laboratory tests can strengthen decision making, but they are most useful when linked to clear action thresholds and professional interpretation. A practical animal health programme should be adapted to species, production system, local disease pattern and available resources, with animal welfare and farm economics considered together.

Keywords: *Animal health management, preventive care, biosecurity, vaccination, livestock welfare, disease surveillance*

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Introduction

Animal health management combines daily husbandry with veterinary decision making so that disease is prevented where possible and recognised early when it occurs. It includes housing, nutrition, hygiene, vaccination, parasite control, reproductive management, welfare, record keeping and emergency planning. On farms, management must protect groups as well as individual animals because infection, nutritional error or heat stress may affect many animals before severe clinical signs are noticed.

A successful programme begins with normal baselines. Farmers and veterinarians should know expected feed intake, water use, growth, milk production, body condition,

reproductive performance and behaviour for each class of animal. When routine records show an unexpected change, investigation can begin earlier, reducing losses and supporting more responsible medicine use.

A farm health programme becomes more reliable when observations are made at the same time each day and recorded in a simple, consistent way. Changes in posture, social behaviour, appetite, rumination, breathing pattern, gait or vocalisation may be the first indication that an animal is unwell. Production data should also be interpreted in context because a decline in milk yield or growth may reflect heat stress, feed quality, water restriction, pregnancy stage or disease. Looking at several indicators together is usually more

useful than relying on a single sign. This approach encourages earlier examination and makes it easier to distinguish an isolated problem from a group-level event that may require immediate investigation.

Health management should also be organised around risk groups. Newborns, recently weaned animals, animals in late pregnancy, fresh calvers, high-producing dairy animals, breeding males and animals introduced from outside the farm often need closer observation. Seasonal conditions can change risk as well: heat and humidity may increase heat stress and spoilage of feed, while cold or wet conditions can worsen respiratory and foot problems. By identifying these predictable periods in advance, farmers can prepare housing, feed, vaccination, staffing and emergency supplies before problems occur. Preventive planning is therefore not a fixed calendar alone; it is a process of matching farm routines to the changing biological and environmental needs of the animals.

Preventive Health Planning

Prevention is the foundation of animal health management. Vaccination schedules should reflect local disease risk, species, age and production stage. Parasite control should be based on epidemiology, clinical signs and, where practical, diagnostic testing rather than repeated treatment without assessment. Regular examination of feet, skin, teeth, udder, eyes and body condition helps identify problems that are easily missed during routine feeding.

Health plans should be reviewed during key transitions such as weaning, breeding, late pregnancy, calving, peak lactation, transport and introduction of purchased animals. These periods involve changes in immunity, nutrition and social stress. Written protocols improve consistency among workers and make it easier to assess whether a preventive measure is effective.

Vaccination is most effective when it is treated as one part of a wider prevention programme. The choice of vaccine, age at first dose, booster interval and timing in relation to breeding or expected disease exposure should be discussed with a veterinarian familiar with the local disease situation. Vaccines must be stored, transported and administered correctly

because breaks in the cold chain, expired products or incorrect injection technique can reduce their value. Records should identify the product, batch number, date, dose and animals treated. When disease occurs despite vaccination, these records help determine whether the problem relates to timing, coverage, handling, pathogen variation or another underlying factor.

Parasite management also benefits from a targeted approach. Internal and external parasites can reduce feed efficiency, growth, milk production, fertility and general comfort without always causing dramatic clinical signs. Farmers should combine observation with tools such as faecal examination, body condition scoring, coat quality, anaemia assessment where appropriate and pasture-risk evaluation. Repeated blanket treatment may increase cost and encourage drug resistance, whereas treatment based on evidence can improve long-term control. Pasture rotation, manure management, avoiding overcrowding and protecting young animals from heavily contaminated areas are useful non-drug measures that support an integrated parasite-control plan.

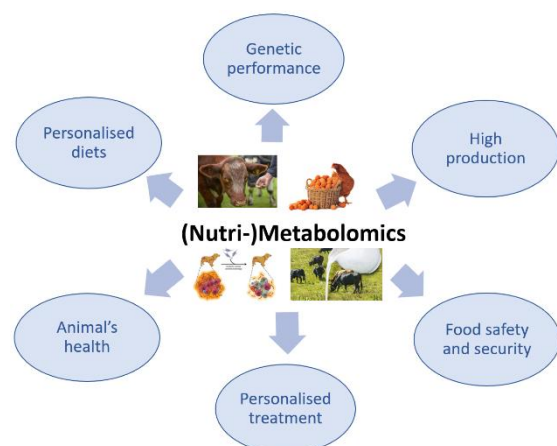
Routine preventive care should include feet, skin, udder, mouth, eyes and horns where relevant. Lameness often begins with small hoof lesions or poor flooring conditions, and early trimming or treatment can prevent prolonged pain and production loss. Udder cleanliness and correct milking technique reduce the opportunity for mastitis, while dental problems can reduce feed intake in older animals. Regular inspection does not need to be complicated; the important point is that workers know what normal looks like and have a clear procedure for reporting abnormalities. A short weekly or monthly checklist can make these examinations more consistent and ensure that minor problems are not overlooked until they become expensive or difficult to treat.

Preventive planning should include disease-specific action thresholds. For example, an unusual rise in fever, abortions, diarrhoea, coughing, lameness or mortality should trigger a defined response rather than waiting until the problem becomes severe. The response may include isolation, examination, sampling, review of recent animal movements

and temporary restriction of visitors or sales. Thresholds should be simple enough for workers to recognise and should be written into the farm health plan. This is particularly valuable on larger farms where several people observe different groups of animals and where early signs may otherwise remain disconnected.

Nutrition and Metabolic Health

Adequate energy, protein, minerals, vitamins and clean water are essential for immunity, growth and reproduction. Underfeeding can reduce resistance to infection, while excessive or poorly balanced feeding can contribute to metabolic disease. Rations should match body weight, production level and physiological stage, and major feed changes should be introduced gradually.



Monitoring body condition, manure consistency, rumen fill, milk components, growth rate and feed refusal can reveal nutritional problems before severe disease develops. In dairy animals, transition feeding around calving deserves particular attention because negative energy balance and mineral imbalance increase the risk of ketosis, milk fever and reproductive delay.

Feed quality is as important as ration formulation. Mould, rancidity, contamination, poor storage or sudden changes in ingredients can cause digestive disturbance and reduce intake even when the calculated nutrient content appears adequate. Feed bins, troughs and storage areas should therefore be kept dry and clean, and spoiled feed removed promptly. Water deserves similar attention because intake can fall when water is dirty, warm, salty, poorly accessible or supplied through low-flow equipment. Water points should be checked

routinely for cleanliness and delivery rate. In hot weather, extra drinking space and shade can become critical because water intake rises as animals attempt to control body temperature.

The transition period around parturition illustrates how nutrition and health are connected. During late pregnancy and early lactation, the animal must adjust rapidly to changes in energy and mineral demand. Poor dry-matter intake, excessive body condition or abrupt ration changes can increase the risk of metabolic disorders and delay return to normal reproductive function. Close monitoring of appetite, rumen fill, manure, body temperature, milk production and behaviour during this period allows early intervention. Separate grouping of transition animals, comfortable resting space and easy access to fresh feed can be as important as the ration itself because competition and stress directly influence intake.

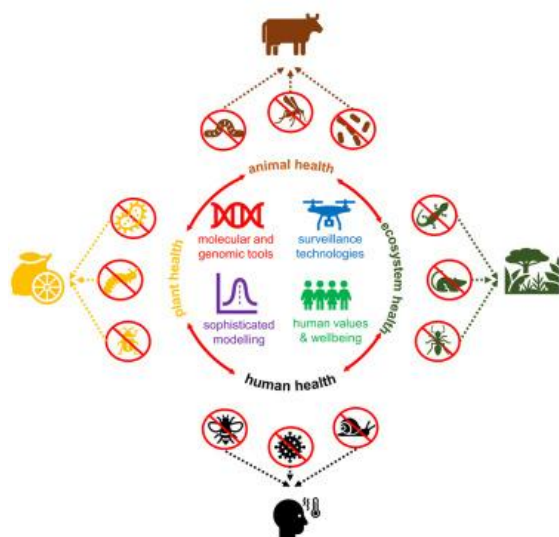
Body condition scoring provides a practical way to track whether energy reserves are appropriate for the production stage. Sudden loss of condition may suggest inadequate intake, chronic disease, lameness or heavy parasite burden, while excessive condition can increase calving and metabolic risk in some systems. The most useful approach is to score animals at regular production stages and compare groups over time rather than relying on a single observation. Growth records in young stock serve a similar purpose. Weighing or using validated weight tapes helps identify animals that are failing to meet expected growth, allowing the farm to review milk feeding, starter intake, disease history, parasite control and competition at the feed bunk.

Table 1. Core components of an animal health management programme.

Component	Key management action
Preventive medicine	Maintain risk-based vaccination, parasite control and routine health examination schedules.
Nutrition	Provide balanced rations, minerals and continuous access to clean water; monitor body condition.
Biosecurity	Quarantine new animals, isolate sick animals and maintain cleaning and disinfection protocols.
Reproduction	Track breeding, pregnancy, calving and postpartum events and investigate repeated failure.
Young stock	Ensure colostrum intake, hygiene, vaccination and growth monitoring.
Records	Record disease, treatment, production, mortality and reproduction to identify trends.

Biosecurity and Infection Control

Biosecurity reduces movement of infectious agents into, within and out of an animal unit. New or returning animals should be isolated and observed before mixing with the resident group. Visitors, vehicles, equipment, footwear and shared tools can carry pathogens, so cleaning and disinfection procedures should be proportional to farm risk.



Internal biosecurity is equally important. Sick animals should be separated when possible, treatment equipment kept clean, calving areas maintained hygienically, and carcasses and biological waste disposed of safely. Good ventilation, suitable stocking density and dry bedding reduce environmental contamination and respiratory stress.

A practical biosecurity plan starts by mapping how animals, people and materials move through the farm. The cleanest areas should be protected from unnecessary traffic, while high-risk areas such as sick pens, calving areas and manure-handling zones should have separate equipment where possible. Workers should move from younger or healthier groups toward sick animals rather than in the opposite direction, and hands, boots and tools should be cleaned between risk areas. Even simple measures such as dedicated footwear, clearly marked buckets and a visitor log can reduce accidental spread when they are applied consistently.

Quarantine is especially important when animals are purchased, returned from shows or markets, or moved between distant farm units.

The quarantine period should allow observation for fever, diarrhoea, respiratory disease, skin lesions, lameness and other signs relevant to the species and local disease pattern. Veterinary testing may be appropriate for selected diseases before animals enter the resident group. Quarantine facilities should have separate feeding and cleaning equipment, and workers should avoid sharing needles or treatment devices between quarantined and resident animals. Introducing animals slowly after the observation period also reduces social stress and makes follow-up easier.

Cleaning and disinfection work best when organic material is removed first. Manure, bedding, mud and feed residues can protect pathogens from disinfectants, so surfaces should be physically cleaned before an appropriate product is applied at the correct concentration and contact time. Housing design should support this process through good drainage, durable surfaces and sufficient drying time between groups. Rodents, wild birds, insects and stray animals may also carry infectious agents or contaminate feed and water; therefore feed storage, waste disposal and pest control are part of biosecurity rather than separate housekeeping tasks.

Disease control also depends on the management of needles, syringes and other reusable equipment. Needles should be changed at appropriate intervals and immediately when bent, contaminated or damaged. Multi-dose containers should be handled in a way that avoids introducing dirt or biological material. Equipment used for oral dosing, obstetrical assistance or wound care should be cleaned and stored dry after use. These practices reduce the risk of transferring infection between animals and also improve the accuracy and safety of treatment procedures.

Reproductive and Young-Stock Health

Reproductive efficiency is closely linked with general health. Breeding animals need appropriate body condition, mineral status, heat detection and timely pregnancy diagnosis. Abortion, repeat breeding, retained placenta and prolonged calving intervals should be investigated rather than accepted as routine production losses.

Young animals require rapid intake of high-quality colostrum, a clean environment and monitoring for diarrhoea, respiratory disease and navel infection. Weaning should minimise nutritional and social stress. Poor weight gain may indicate chronic disease, inadequate milk or feed intake, parasites or overcrowding.

Reproductive records help distinguish occasional failure from a persistent herd problem. Dates of heat, insemination, pregnancy diagnosis, calving, abortion and postpartum disease should be linked with body condition, milk production and treatment history. When repeat breeding increases, the farm can review heat detection, insemination timing, semen handling, uterine health, nutrition and heat stress rather than treating every case as an individual fertility problem. Difficult calving should also be recorded because it can affect both dam and offspring, increasing the risk of retained placenta, uterine infection, weak newborns and delayed return to breeding.

The first hours of life are critical for young-stock health. Newborns should receive adequate high-quality colostrum promptly, have the navel managed hygienically and be moved to a clean, dry environment. Pens or hutches should provide protection from weather without trapping moisture or ammonia. Milk or milk replacer should be prepared consistently, feeding equipment cleaned, and starter feed introduced in a way that supports rumen development. Diarrhoea and respiratory disease in young stock should be recorded by age and location because repeated cases often point to shared weaknesses in hygiene, ventilation, colostrum management, stocking density or feeding procedure.

Surveillance, Records and Early Warning

Simple records turn observation into usable information. Dates of birth, vaccination, treatment, reproductive events, mortality, disease diagnosis, milk yield and body weight can reveal patterns not obvious from memory. Repeated cases in the same pen, season or age group should trigger a search for shared risk factors.

Sensors and farm software can add continuous data on activity, rumination, temperature, feed intake or milk conductivity. These tools do not replace clinical examination, but they can identify animals that need attention. Alert thresholds should be reviewed so workers do not become overwhelmed by false alarms.

Records become more valuable when the farm uses them to calculate simple rates rather than merely storing dates. Examples include monthly disease incidence, calf mortality, pregnancy rate, repeat-breeding rate, lameness prevalence and the proportion of animals treated for mastitis. Comparing these figures across months or production groups can reveal gradual deterioration that might be missed in day-to-day work. Targets should be realistic for the farm and reviewed with the veterinarian. A sudden change is often more informative than whether a farm matches an external benchmark exactly, because each production system has different breeds, climate, housing and management conditions.

Digital monitoring can support this process by collecting information more frequently than manual observation. Activity collars, rumination sensors, automated milk meters, temperature devices, weighing systems and camera-based tools may flag animals whose behaviour has changed. These alerts should lead to inspection rather than automatic treatment. A useful system has a clear response pathway: who receives the alert, how quickly the animal is checked, what observations are recorded and when veterinary examination is required. Without such a pathway, technology may create many notifications without improving health outcomes.

Laboratory testing and post-mortem examination are important when the cause of disease is uncertain or when cases occur repeatedly. Samples should be collected before treatment when possible and handled according to veterinary guidance so that results remain meaningful. Necropsy of selected mortalities can identify nutritional, infectious or management problems that are not visible from external examination. The value of diagnostics increases when results are linked with farm records, feed changes, weather, movement history and treatment response. This

combination of clinical information and testing supports more precise decisions and reduces unnecessary use of medicines.

A useful surveillance system also pays attention to patterns across space. If several cases occur in one shed, pen, water line or feeding group, the common environment should be inspected. Mapping cases by location can reveal problems such as a blocked drinker, poor ventilation, wet bedding, contaminated feed or high stocking density. Seasonal mapping may show that a disease consistently appears after a weather change, feed transition or movement event. These patterns help the farm shift from treating individual cases to removing the underlying risk factor.

Table 2. Examples of routine health indicators and possible responses.

Indicator	Management response
Reduced feed intake	Check ration, water supply, heat stress and signs of systemic or digestive disease.
Decline in milk yield	Review udder health, feed intake, lameness, fever and stage of lactation.
Increased respiratory signs	Assess ventilation, stocking density, new animal introductions and infectious causes.
Poor growth	Review nutrition, parasites, chronic infection and competition for feed.
Repeat breeding	Assess heat detection, body condition, uterine health and timing.
Rising mortality	Initiate veterinary investigation, necropsy and urgent biosecurity review.

Animal Welfare and Responsible Treatment

Health management and animal welfare are inseparable. Pain, lameness, chronic hunger, heat stress and poor handling reduce productivity and compromise ethical care. Facilities should allow animals to rest, move, access feed and water and avoid injury. Low-stress handling improves safety for animals and workers.

Medicines should be used only when indicated, at the correct dose, route and duration. In food-producing animals, withdrawal periods must be followed. Antimicrobial stewardship requires attention to hygiene, vaccination and diagnostics so that antibiotics are not used as a substitute for poor management.

Comfort is a measurable part of health management. Animals need sufficient lying space, non-slip flooring, protection from extreme weather and unrestricted access to feed

and water. Crowding increases competition and can raise the risk of injury, respiratory disease and poor intake, while hard or wet resting surfaces contribute to hock lesions and lameness. Heat stress deserves particular attention in warm climates because panting, reduced feed intake, lower milk yield and fertility problems may appear before severe illness. Shade, air movement, cooling systems and access to water should be planned before the hottest period rather than added only after animals begin to suffer.

Responsible treatment also requires accurate dosing and follow-up. Body weight should be estimated as accurately as practical because underdosing can reduce effectiveness and contribute to resistance, while overdosing may increase toxicity and cost. Treatment records should include the animal identification, diagnosis or reason for treatment, medicine, dose, route, duration, person administering it and withdrawal date where applicable. Animals that fail to improve should be re-examined instead of receiving repeated empirical treatment. This discipline improves animal welfare, food safety and antimicrobial stewardship while giving the veterinarian better information when a case becomes complicated.

Conclusion

Animal health management is most effective when prevention, monitoring and prompt clinical care operate as one system. Balanced nutrition, biosecurity, vaccination, reproductive management, welfare and reliable records reduce disease risk and improve productivity. Technology can strengthen this approach, but careful observation and sound veterinary judgement remain essential.

The best programmes are specific to the farm and reviewed regularly. By acting on early warning signs and addressing management causes rather than relying only on treatment, livestock owners can improve animal well-being, reduce avoidable medicine use and protect long-term farm performance.

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