



BCVA Policy Statement

BCVA Position on the Use of Analgesia in Cattle

Version 2026

Aligned with UK Law, Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966, RCVS Professional Standards and Red Tractor Assurance Requirements (2025–2026)



1. PURPOSE AND SCOPE

This document sets out the British Cattle Veterinary Association (BCVA) position on the use of analgesia in cattle, clearly defining where analgesia use is legally required, defined by professional or assurance standards, and strongly recommended as best practice.

Effective pain management is essential to safeguard animal welfare, optimise productivity, and meet legal and ethical obligations. Pain has direct impacts on production outcomes including milk yield, growth, fertility and recovery time from painful conditions and procedures, as well as indirect impacts through increased disease severity and risk of chronic conditions.

2. REGULATORY AND PROFESSIONAL FRAMEWORK

Pain management in cattle sits within a clear legal, professional and assurance framework:

- Animal Welfare Act 2006: establishes a duty of care to prevent unnecessary suffering and ensure prompt treatment.
- Protection of Animals (Anaesthetics) Act 1954: mandates the use of local anaesthetic for specific procedures.
- Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966: restricts the diagnosis, treatment and performance of veterinary surgery (including administration of prescription analgesics) to registered veterinary surgeons, with limited exemptions; it underpins professional accountability, regulation and responsibility for safeguarding animal welfare.
- RCVS Code of Professional Conduct: requires veterinary surgeons to make animal health and welfare their first consideration when attending animals.
- Red Tractor Assurance Standards (updated February 2025; current 2026 application):
 - ◊ A vet-signed, farm-specific Health Plan is mandatory and must include pain relief procedures and husbandry protocols.
 - ◊ Husbandry procedures must include appropriate use of anaesthesia and analgesia and be undertaken by trained, competent personnel.

Farm animals are recognised as sentient beings, and responsibility for pain management is shared between veterinary surgeons (diagnosis, prescribing, protocol design) and stockpersons (daily monitoring and implementation).

3. BCVA PRINCIPLES ON PAIN AND ANALGESIA

BCVA recognises that cattle experience pain associated with husbandry procedures, disease and injury. Pain is defined as an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, which may include components that can be both physically and mentally distressing.

Pain in cattle:

- Is multifactorial and influenced by prior experience.
- Can be acute, chronic, inflammatory or procedural.
- May be under-recognised due to stoic behaviour.

Local anaesthesia addresses acute nociceptive input, while non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are required to control inflammatory and ongoing pain.

BCVA therefore advocates a preventative, multimodal approach to pain management incorporating:

- NSAIDs (systemic analgesia)
- Local anaesthesia
- Sedation where appropriate
- Treatment of underlying disease
- Appropriate nursing care

4. RECOGNITION AND IMPACT OF PAIN

Pain should be actively assessed using a combination of indicators:

4.1 Behavioural indicators

- Reduced feed intake and rumination
- Isolation from herd
- Altered posture (e.g. arched back)
- Lameness or reluctance to move
- Dullness or depression
- Increased vocalization

4.2 Physiological indicators

- Increased heart rate and respiratory rate
- Hyperalgesia (exaggerated response to pain)
- Allodynia (pain response to normally non-painful stimuli)

4.3 Production indicators

- Reduced milk yield
- Reduced growth rates
- Sub-optimal fertility

Pain has significant consequences including compromised welfare, reduced productivity, prolonged recovery and increased risk of chronic disease and culling, all of which can negatively impact farm carbon footprint and sustainability.

5. ANALGESIA CATEGORIES AND BCVA STANCE

5.1 Analgesia is Legally Required

- Local anaesthetic is legally required for disbudding of calves
- Local anaesthetic is legally required for surgical castration of calves over two months of age

Failure to comply constitutes an offence (Protection of Animals (Anaesthetics) Act 1954, Mutilations (permitted Procedures) (England) Regulations 2007 and parallel devolved legislation) and represents unacceptable welfare standards.

5.2 Analgesia is Required / Expected as Standard of Care

- Disbudding and castration (all methods and ages): Local anaesthetic + NSAID
- Surgical procedures (e.g. caesarean, displaced abomasum surgery): Local anaesthetic + Peri-operative NSAIDs
- Lameness: Routine NSAID use alongside corrective interventions

These expectations align with Red Tractor requirements that analgesics are used appropriately during husbandry procedures and defined within the health plan.

Evidence demonstrates that NSAID use improves recovery, reduces inflammation and decreases risk of chronic pain and repeat disease events.

5.3 Analgesia is Strongly Recommended (Best Practice)

- Calving (especially dystocia)
- Infectious and inflammatory disease: mastitis, metritis, bovine respiratory disease
- Post-operative recovery

NSAID use in these contexts improves appetite, recovery rates, and productivity outcomes.

6. MULTIMODAL ANALGESIA

BCVA advocates multimodal analgesia as best practice for painful procedures and conditions. This approach provides superior pain control compared with single-modality treatment.

- Local anaesthesia (e.g. nerve blocks)
- NSAIDs (e.g. meloxicam, flunixin, ketoprofen, carprofen)
- Sedation where appropriate (e.g. alpha-2 agonists such as xylazine)
- Treatment of underlying pathology
- Appropriate nursing care (bedding, access to feed and water, monitoring)

7. NSAIDS IN CATTLE PRACTICE

NSAIDs act through inhibition of cyclo-oxygenase (COX) enzymes, reducing inflammation, pain and pyrexia.

Clinical benefits include:

- Reduced inflammation and pain
- Improved feed intake and recovery
- Enhanced production performance
- Reduced risk of chronic pain and hyperalgesia

Indications where NSAIDs should be considered standard of care include:

- ***Surgical procedures***
 - Caesarean section
 - Displaced abomasum/abdominal surgery
 - Dehorning/disbudding/castration (legal requirement)
- ***Lameness***
 - All clinically lame animals
 - NSAID use in combination with corrective trimming and suitable intervention
- ***Calving and postpartum period***
 - Routine administration is strongly encouraged
 - NSAID use in cases of dystocia is of high importance

- ***Infectious diseases***
 - Mastitis
 - Metritis
 - Bovine Respiratory Disease (BRD)
 - Calf scour
 - NSAIDs used in conjunction with antimicrobials where appropriate
- ***Routine husbandry procedures***
 - Notably castration and disbudding/dehorning which are legislated for

8. ANAESTHESIA AND ANALGESIC TECHNIQUES

8.1 Local Anaesthesia

- Essential for many procedures
- Includes nerve blocks, line blocks, IV regional anaesthesia

8.2 Sedation and Adjuncts

- Alpha-2 agonists (e.g. xylazine) may be used
- Enhance analgesia and facilitate handling

8.3 Multimodal Protocols

Best outcomes achieved through:

- Local anaesthesia
- NSAIDs
- Sedation (where appropriate)

9. PREVENTION OF PAIN

Pain prevention should be a core component of herd health planning, in line with Red Tractor requirements for proactive herd health management:

- Vaccination programmes
- Lameness prevention strategies
- Optimised housing and handling systems
- Good stockmanship
- Early intervention protocols

Prevention is as important as treatment and reduces both welfare compromise and economic loss.

10. CASCADE USE AND PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Veterinary medicinal products in the UK are authorised for specific:

- Species
- Indications
- Dosages and routes of administration

These authorised uses are defined in the Summary of Product Characteristics (SPC). Use outside of these conditions is considered off-label and must follow the prescribing cascade

10.1 Cascade use in analgesia

In cattle practice, while several NSAIDs are licensed, gaps remain in authorised indications, durations of use, and species-specific licensing (particularly for small ruminants). These limitations can restrict optimal pain management.

10.2 Cascade Responsibilities

Where licensed products do not meet welfare needs, the veterinary prescribing cascade must be used responsibly to prevent unacceptable suffering. Veterinary surgeons prescribing analgesia to cattle under the cascade must:

- Take full responsibility for prescribing decisions
- Use an evidence-based approach
- Assign appropriate withdrawal periods
- Ensure compliance with established Maximum Residue Limits (MRLs)
- Maintain accurate records
- Obtain informed consent from the animal owner
- Protect food safety and public health
- Specify an appropriate withdrawal period – failure to do so represents a legal breach and a food safety risk.

10.3 Supply Issues

Medicine availability can also necessitate cascade use. In cases of:

- Product shortages
- Supply chain disruption

10.4 Cascade associated risks

Veterinary surgeons may prescribe alternatives under the cascade where no authorised product is available

While essential for animal welfare, cascade use carries increased risks:

- Reduced evidence base for efficacy and safety
- Uncertainty in dosing and pharmacokinetics
- Increased responsibility on the prescribing veterinary surgeon
- Greater complexity in withdrawal period determination
- Potential risks to:
 - ◊ Animal welfare
 - ◊ Food safety
 - ◊ Public health

10.5 BCVA Position on Licensing and Cascade Use

The BCVA supports:

- Appropriate and responsible use of the cascade to prevent animal suffering
- Evidence-based use of NSAIDs, including off-label where justified
- Increased licensing of NSAIDs for:
 - ◊ Additional indications (e.g. calving, lameness prevention)
 - ◊ Wider species coverage
- Research and industry collaboration to:
 - ◊ Expand licensed indications
 - ◊ Improve product availability
- Education of farmers and veterinary surgeons to:
 - ◊ Improve understanding of withdrawal periods
 - ◊ Promote confidence in analgesic use

11. DOCUMENTATION AND ASSURANCE

- A written, vet-signed and annually reviewed Health Plan
- Inclusion of pain relief protocols and husbandry procedures
- Evidence that procedures are carried out using appropriate analgesia and trained personnel

Accurate medicine records must be maintained. Documentation supports welfare assurance, legal compliance and food safety.

12. CHRONIC PAIN AND WELFARE DECISION-MAKING

- Ongoing analgesia
- Regular reassessment

Where prognosis is poor, timely euthanasia must be considered a welfare-positive decision.

13. SUMMARY STATEMENT

- The Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 underpins veterinary responsibility
- Red Tractor 2025–2026 standards require inclusion of pain relief protocols
- NSAIDs are central to modern cattle analgesia
- Multimodal analgesia represents best practice
- Pain prevention is as important as treatment
- Failure to provide analgesia is a significant welfare concern

Effective pain management is essential to safeguard cattle welfare, optimise productivity and sustainability and meet legal and ethical obligations. Responsible prescription and use of NSAIDs, and multi-modal analgesia where appropriate, should be considered standard of care for all painful procedures and conditions in cattle.

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