

Frequently asked questions about African swine fever (ASF)

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There has recently been an increase in cases of African swine fever among wild boar populations in Europe. African swine fever (ASF) is a disease of domestic pigs and wild boar caused by a virus. As the pathogen is not dangerous to humans, the consumption of foods originating from infected animals does not pose a health risk to consumers. To prevent the spread of the ASF pathogen, however, it is important not to bring in food from risk areas. The German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) has compiled some selected questions and answers on the subject.

What is African swine fever?

African swine fever (ASF) is a disease of domestic pigs and wild boar caused by a virus. Infection with the ASF virus usually leads to an acute and severe, often lethal, disease in these animals. ASF is a notifiable epizootic disease, the control of which is regulated in animal health law and the swine fever regulation.

How does the virus spread?

The ASF virus is endemic above all in infected wild boar in Africa and can be transferred locally to domestic pigs. In the past, there have also been outbreaks of ASF in several southern European countries. Since 2007, the ASF virus has spread from Georgia to Armenia, Azerbaijan, the Russian Federation, the enclave of Kaliningrad and Moldova. Since 2014, numerous ASF cases have been reported in wild boar in the Baltic States and Poland and since 2017 in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania, along with outbreaks among domestic pigs. In September 2018, the ASF virus was detected for the first time in wild boar in Belgium.

How is the pathogen transferred?

The ASF virus can be transmitted between animals through various channels. In addition to direct infection, transmission is also possible via certain tick species. Due to the limited distribution area of the relevant ticks, however, this transmission path is of no consequence in northern Europe. The virus is transmitted mainly through direct contact between infected animals or contact with the excretions of infected animals. As soon as it has found its way into the environment, the pathogen can remain infectious for a longer time.

Foods produced from infected animals which are consumed by non-infected animals play a special role. The virus can remain infectious for several months in foods produced from infected animals, such as ham. Via foods of this kind, the pathogen can find its way into previously ASF-free regions and cause disease in pigs and wild boar. Food scraps should therefore be disposed of in such a way that they cannot be reached by wild boar.

Can humans take ill if they consume foods produced from infected animals?

As the ASF virus cannot be transferred to humans, it is not dangerous. The consumption of foods originating from infected animals is not dangerous to health either.

What general recommendations apply to the consumption of meat from domestic pigs and wild boar?

Wild boar and domestic pigs can be infected with other pathogens apart from the ASF virus, some of which can be transferred to humans and cause disease. As with all raw meats, consumers should therefore always observe the basic rules of kitchen hygiene when preparing the meat of wild boar or domestic pigs. These include compliance with the cold chain and the avoidance of cross-contamination, which is understood to be the transfer of germs from one food to another. The meat should also be properly heated in such a way that a core temperature of 70° C is reached for at least two minutes.

Can people become ill if they have had contact with infected animals?

As no transmissions of the ASF virus to humans have been reported to date, the virus is regarded as not dangerous to humans. Direct contact of humans with infected animals does not pose a risk either.

What can consumers do to ensure that the virus does not spread further?

It happened repeatedly that the ASF virus was introduced into previously ASF-free pig and wild boar herds through foods that were produced in regions in which the ASF virus is widespread. To prevent the spread of the pathogen to other herds, strict compliance with regulations on the importing of foods from risk areas in which the virus has spread and from third countries is therefore important. Uneaten foods containing animal ingredients should be disposed of in such a way that they cannot be reached by other animals.

More information on the subject:

https://www.bmel.de/EN/Animals/AnimalHealth/-Texte/ASP_EN.html

Which authorities deal with animal diseases in Germany?

The Friedrich Loeffler Institute (FLI), Federal Research Institute for Animal Health, is the research institute in Germany which conducts research in the field of epizootic diseases. In the event of an outbreak of ASF in wild boar in Germany, the FLI has prepared measures to prevent the subsequent spread of the disease to the greatest possible extent. These measures apply mainly to hunters and farmers and are published on the FLI website.

More detailed information on disease control: <https://www.fli.de/en/news/animal-disease-situation/african-swine-fever/>

How is ASF controlled in Europe and Germany?

ASF is a notifiable animal disease the control of which is regulated in Europe and Germany by laws and regulations. An overview of the legal provisions on ASF can be found at the website of the State Office for Consumer Protection and Food Safety of Lower Saxony. (https://www.tierseucheninfo.niedersachsen.de/startseite/service/rechtsvorschriften/afrikanische_schweinepest/rechtliche-bestimmungen-zur-afrikanischen-schweinepest-121748.html)

More information on the subject of food infections at the BfR website

http://www.bfr.bund.de/cm/350/verbrauchertipps_schutz_vor_lebensmittelinfektionen_im_privathaushalt.pdf

<http://www.bfr.bund.de/cm/350/verbrauchertipps-schutz-vor-viralen-lebensmittelinfektionen.pdf>



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