

The Pet Food Recall: What You Should Know (And Do)

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You've probably heard about the pet food recall. But unless you've been actively seeking out more information, you may not realize just how extensive the problem is, and that it's far from over. The situation's bigger than most news stories have recognized:

Deaths

While the media has been reporting "16 confirmed deaths," estimates based on veterinary reports range from 2,000 to 7,000 animals in the United States may now be deceased due to contaminated pet food, and thousands more may be affected. And the FDA has received more than 17,000 reports of affected pets, roughly half of those being reports of deaths.

Contaminated Ingredients

The recall now involves at least three contaminated ingredients: wheat gluten, rice protein concentrate, and corn gluten (at least in South Africa) from two exporters in China. The contamination appears to have been deliberate, using melamine and other compounds that artificially raise the apparent protein content of the gluten or protein concentrate to increase its market value.

Contaminants

In addition to melamine, cyanuric acid and other contaminants have been found in the pet food and in the urine and tissues of affected pets. Recently, researchers at Guelph University reported a chemical reaction that can occur between melamine and cyanuric acid. While neither melamine nor cyanuric acid are very toxic to pets, in combination they can produce deadly crystals.

Long-Term Effects

There's no telling what the long-term effects of eating the contaminated food may be to pets who may have been affected without showing clinical signs (kidneys can lose up to 70% of their function before blood or urine tests reflect the damage).

The Human Food Supply

Contaminated ingredients apparently made their way into the human food supply (although the FDA intercepted most of it before it actually got to consumers). Some hogs farms and poultry farms received animal feed that has tested positive for melamine. After tests were run, the USDA concluded that "there is a very low risk of illness from the consumption of meat from animals exposed to the feed in question."

The Time Line

Importers may have been receiving contaminated ingredients from China since last summer. The scope and severity of the situation has been exacerbated by slow reporting and delays before pet foods with suspected contaminants have actually been recalled. The Itchmo.com website provides a Pet Food Recall Time Line at www.itchmo.com/menu-foods-recall-fact-sheet, with extensive information on what happened when.

The Pet Food Recall: What to Do

Educate Yourself

Make sure you keep up to date on the news on this matter. Nearly every week sees additional recalls. For the latest news, visit the websites at petconnection.com and itchmo.com. Sign up for Itchmo's Pet Safety Alert email subscription to get information on new recalls and other urgent pet safety news by email.

Check every pet food you use against the recall list. The FDA has a searchable database of recalled foods: see www.accessdata.fda.gov/scripts/petfoodrecall/. For an extensive list of pet foods that includes what's been recalled and what hasn't, with additional information on every brand (including what contractors manufacture the food) see thepetfoodlist.com. Check your pet food against the recall lists often as additional foods are being added as investigations continue – the latest recalls were issued on May 17th and 18th, nine weeks after the recalls began.

Learn to read pet food labels. For more information, see "Interpreting Pet Food Labels" on the FDA website (www.fda.gov/cvm/petlabel.htm) and "Dog Food Label Information 101" from the Dog Food Project website (www.dogfoodproject.com/index.php?page=labelinfo10).

Research alternative pet foods. Many brands of pet food do not use any of the contaminated ingredients (wheat gluten, rice protein concentrate, and corn gluten), and some pet food companies have their own plants where they manufacture and pack their own pet food. However, even if a pet food label does not list wheat gluten or rice protein concentrate (or "rice powder" or "rice gluten") as ingredients, you should check the food against the recall list. One expansion of the recall involved several companies that learned their pet food co-packer had added rice protein concentrate to their foods without their knowledge.

If you're considering a home-prepared diet, do your research! While it may be tempting to prepare your own pet food at home, there are many ways to get it wrong (at the expense of your pet's health). Be sure to learn at least the basics about canine or feline nutrition and healthy, balanced, home-prepared diets for your pets before embarking on this path. There are several views of how our dogs and cats should be fed, and there are many disagreements among proponents of the various types of diets. Raw diets are increasingly popular, but there are risks to these (including food-borne illness such as salmonella), so read up on the issues and weigh the risks before adopting a raw food diet. With any home prepared diet, it's vital that you feed a variety of wholesome foods and supplement those foods with proper levels of vitamins and minerals. Familiarize yourself with foods that are toxic to dogs (including onions, grapes and grape products, macadamia nuts, human vitamin supplements containing iron, and much more). There are several good books on home-prepared diets: see the entries in the "Dog Diets" category under "Recommended Reading" on my yourdreamdog.com website for some recommendations.

Speak to your veterinarian before making any significant changes in your pets' diets. This is especially true if you choose a home-prepared diet, but is also true if you wish to shift the types of commercial foods you're feeding (to foods available only in specialty pet stores or direct from the manufacturer, for example, including any commercially prepared raw diets). Note that, as with general practitioners in human medicine, not all veterinarians have a strong background in nutrition. Ask for a referral to a veterinary nutritionist if you feel your primary vet doesn't have the specialized knowledge of nutrition you are looking for.

Schedule annual exams for your pets. These exams should include complete blood tests (sometimes called "geriatric profile" tests) and urinalysis to be sure that your pets' nutritional needs are being met. If you are switching to a home-prepared diet, have these tests performed before you begin feeding the new food so you have a "baseline" you can compare later tests against.

Know Your Pets

Noticing when something is "just not right" with your pets is your best line of defense against illness. Take note of your pet's normal eating and drinking and eliminating patterns, and learn to recognize signs of good health as well as signs of illness (see www.pvy.com/pcl/articles/c100013/q10000193.htm). Pets often hide their pain (an instinctive desire to avoid showing signs of weakness), so there may not be any obvious signs of pain such as limping or crying. Changes in behavior or posture, increased respiration and heart rates, a reluctance to move, panting, or a tight "worried" look around the eyes may indicate your dog is in distress. The key is to look for changes in your dog's appearance or behavior, as these may indicate something is wrong. A summary of signs of good health is here: www.growingupwithpets.com/pet_health/en/health_tips/signs.shtml. To help you recognize signs of pain in your dog, see this web page: www.cvmb.colostate.edu/ivapm/animals/dogs.htm.

Take your pet to the vet if you have any concerns.

Observe your pets for any signs of illness. The specific signs of renal disease to look for include a change in water consumption and urination (especially if these increase), vomiting, lethargy, depression, loss of appetite, or diarrhea. If your pet is showing any of these signs, please see a veterinarian as soon as possible, even if your pet hasn't eaten any of the recalled foods. Familiarize yourself with the signs of illness in pets. You'll find links to web pages with this information on the Your Dream Dog website, in a more extensive version of this document at yourdreamdog.com/wp/news/pet-food-recall/.

If your pet has eaten any of the recalled food, visit your vet even if your pet doesn't seem to be sick. Ask for a complete blood test (including a Complete Blood Count that can check for anemia and infections and a Serum Chemistry Profile that measures the function of the major organs) and urinalysis with special attention paid to the urine's "specific gravity" and any crystals found in the urine. Explain that you think your pet may have eaten some of the contaminated food (bring the bag or can that includes the product code so your vet can compare it to the pet food recall list).

Immediately Stop Feeding Any Recalled Food!

Properly dispose of any recalled pet food

Provide your vet with samples of the suspect food. Bring full or empty cans or pouches or bags with you so your veterinarian can check the specific product codes against the full recall list. Your veterinarian may also be able to send samples of the food out to be tested for the specific contaminants found (including melamine and cyanuric acid). Instructions for veterinarians on submitting samples and reports are available on the American Veterinary Medicine Association's website at avma.org/onlnews/javma/may07/x070501b.asp.

Make sure any opened foods are sealed and stored in a safe place where children and pets can't get to them. Keeping the bags or pouches of recalled food you have fed to your pets will help your vet determine if any harm has come to your pets, and may help you recover some costs of veterinary care from the manufacturers. If you cannot ensure that the opened food will not be eaten, return it to the store for proper disposal.

Return unopened cans and bags of recalled product to the store you purchased them from. The store should give you a refund.

Do not donate any recalled food to an animal shelter or put it on the curb or throw it in the trash where an animal might be able to get to it. Sad but true, the "can I donate the recalled pet food to my local animal shelter" has shown up as a "frequently asked question" on some of the websites concerning the pet food recall.

Tell Your Veterinarian About Pet Connection and the Itchmo Safety Alerts.

Make sure your vet knows about the petconnection.com website and the safety alerts available from itchmo.com. These are the best sources of up-to-date information. Once alerted to new information, your veterinarian can seek out additional information on veterinary-specific websites such as AVMA.org and the Veterinary Information Network.

Report Pet Illnesses and Deaths.

If you believe one of your pets is ill (or has died) due to contaminated pet food, report it. The petconnection.com website has a database for pet owners to report pets who have been affected by the contaminated pet food. You can enter information at www.petconnection.com/recall/. Report this to the FDA by contacting your local Consumer Complaint Coordinator (contact information can be found at www.fda.gov/opacom/backgrounders/complain.html). You should also ask your veterinarian to submit samples and a report to the AVMA.

Tell your friends and co-workers what they should know about the pet food recall!

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