

Dog Food Recall Slows Down, FDA Continues Investigations

Much of the hype surrounding the dog food recall has quieted, but the FDA continues to investigate.

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The Menu Foods Inc. cat and dog food recall, which began mid-March and involved more than 100 brands of pet food, caught the attention of veterinarians, pet owners, pet food manufacturers, pet store retailers, and the general public. At press time, media coverage about the pet food recall had slowed down, with the latest recall being issued late May.

This is a good indication that the problem is under control, says Kimberly May, DVM, Dipl. ACVS, American Veterinary Medical Association's Communications Division.

"There haven't been any other complaints that have been brought to our attention," says May. "I think people are becoming a little more comfortable that things have at least slowed down."

However, there are still concerns as to the long-term effects in animals that ate the tainted food, she says.

"We're not sure what's going to happen as far as chronic problems," May says. "Until we can get an idea of what that may be, I think there is going to be some concern on everyone's part."

The recall has been quite an eye opener for many people who didn't necessarily understand the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's role in this, May says. Many pet owners have questioned why the number of documented deaths have remained so low (16 at press time) when various media reports have claimed there could be thousands more.

"[The FDA's] primary mission in this entire recall situation has been to investigate the situation and ensure that the recalls are enforced," May says. "Once you cross that line into collecting data on the deaths and linking those deaths back to the food, that goes beyond their scope. In a human situation, that would be the role of the Centers for Disease Control, but we don't have that."

The FDA says it recognizes that there may be many more pet illnesses and deaths than the 16 confirmed so far. Universities and groups such as Banfield, the Veterinary Information Network and the American Assn. of Veterinary Laboratory Diagnosticians are providing information to help the FDA in assessing the extent of the outbreak.

Because there is no surveillance network for the FDA to rely on to confirm cases, it must investigate each complaint and confirm whether or not the pet food was involved, a FDA spokeswoman says.

"To date, the agency has received over 18,000 complaints," she says. "Confirmation that these may be related to the pet food recall takes time and requires follow up by our field staff. Veterinary reports and other evidence need to be collected for each case before any of these reports can be confirmed. In many instances there is insufficient information available to draw a conclusion about a possible association with pet food consumed and pet illness and death. The FDA's primary concern is in identifying the source of the contaminant, assuring that the recall is effective and providing information to the public."

The need for a surveillance system in a CDC capacity is being discussed, and the FDA says it recognizes the benefits of such a system in addressing future outbreaks.

In the meantime, the FDA says it will continue to monitor imported wheat and corn gluten as well as rice protein concentrate and isolates arriving from all countries destined for human and animal consumption.

"The FDA import alert for these products sourced from China remains in effect and U.S. Customs and Border Protection will continue laboratory testing of the products as they enter the United States," the spokeswoman says. "The inspections are a precautionary measure to ensure the safety of products entering at U.S. ports of entry."

May says that the AVMA continues to disseminate the latest pet food recall information (www.avma.org), but doesn't predict it will ever have the answer to the total number of pet deaths associated with the recall.



“We suspect there will never be an accurate total number,” May says. “People want that, but it’s probably not practical at this point.”

For more information about the dog food recall, visit www.dogchannel.com/dog-news/dog-food-recall-updates.aspx.