

Researchers Develop Dog Food Contamination Test

Test can show if a recently recalled dog food contains melamine in a matter of minutes.

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Researchers at University of the Pacific in Stockton, Calif., say they've developed a new way to rapidly identify melamine and other foreign substances in cat and dog foods.

The breakthrough enables scientists to, in a matter of minutes, find whether dog food has been contaminated, a process which currently takes a minimum of several hours.

Professor O. David Sparkman and graduate student Teresa Vail say they used a mass spectrometer machine and a Direct Analysis in Real Time (D.A.R.T.) device to determine whether or not a can of dog food that was recently recalled contained the industrial plastic melamine, a chemical used in plastic furniture, cookware and fertilizers.

The chemical is at the heart of the ongoing dog food recall that began in mid-March.

Sparkman said that by using mass spectrometry, which is used to weigh and identify molecules in substances, they were able to determine that a sample of dog food contained melamine because "it gave off a computer signal that is specific to the chemical."

The D.A.R.T. device, when connected to the spectrometer machine, allows the food's components to be read as signals on a computer screen, Sparkman said.

"It took less time [to obtain] the results than to open up the can," Sparkman said.

The new method, which could save federal regulators time and money when testing food imports, was developed after Vail learned that some of the cans of pet food she'd recently bought for her dogs were recalled due to the possibility they contained melamine.

Vail and Sparkman say they plan to present their method in June during an American Society of Mass Spectrometry conference in Indianapolis. Sparkman said he hopes the method will be applied widely as a "standardized tool" to help keep cats and dogs safe.