

What You Can Do About the Dog Food Recall

Veterinarian offers guidelines for owners concerned about the dog food recall.

Maureen Kochan

Posted: April 9, 2007, 5 a.m. EST

The Food and Drug Administration announced Thursday that it had tracked all the contaminated wheat gluten from the suspect Chinese supplier and said no other companies were likely to launch additional recalls. As a result, the FDA issued a ban on all imports of the item from the suspect supplier.

Initially, 95 brands of cat and dog food produced by Canada-based Menu Foods Inc. were recalled March 16, but since the FDA's discovery of melamine, several additional pet food items were recalled, because they used the same wheat gluten supplier as Menu Foods.

The news came as little comfort to anxious dog owners, even as the FDA sought to reassure the public that the contaminated pet food made up only one percent of all commercial pet food on the market.

The official death toll from the contaminated pet food pending further investigations stands at 16, mostly cats, though the FDA says it has received 12,000 complaints from consumers so far, more than twice the number of complaints the agency receives all year from all products.

Still, says veterinarian Karla S. Rugh, DVM, Ph.D., it's unlikely that your dog will develop kidney failure even if he ate some of the contaminated pet food.

Pets at high risk for problems include dogs with pre-existing kidney problems, and young puppies, says Rugh, whose "Ask the Vet" column appears in DOG FANCY. Other potential risk factors include the amount eaten relative to body size, how many times the food was eaten (one meal vs. multiple meals), and the dog's overall general health, she says.

More cats than dogs have died due to several possible factors, Rugh says. The amount of contaminant required for a toxic dose may be lower in cats than dogs, she says, and cats may differ from dogs in the way they metabolize — or don't metabolize — the toxic substance.

"Cats also tend to drink less water than dogs, which may affect how the toxic substance is eliminated from the body," she says. Also, cats tend to be more secretive about their physical ailments than dogs. "[Cat] owners may have difficulty detecting a problem until it has progressed to a critical stage," she says.

The American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine recommends owners take pets who have consumed contaminated pet food to their veterinarian for evaluation, including blood chemistries and urinalysis, regardless of whether the pet is showing symptoms. "By doing this, the veterinarian can evaluate kidney function and establish baseline values that can be used for comparison if future problems occur," Rugh says.

Watch your dog and report to your veterinarian any symptoms of kidney failure, including lethargy, decreased appetite, vomiting, diarrhea, changes in water intake, and changes in urination.

Your veterinarian can also recommend a safe dog food, says Rugh, who cautions owners against feeding dogs a raw diet. "Raw meat, especially chicken, can be contaminated with *E. coli* or *Salmonella* bacteria, which are hazardous to both dogs and their human families," she says. Raw diets also contain bones which unless finely ground can damage the digestive tract.

And you can't just throw together some ingredients and call it dog food, Rugh says. Dogs have very specific nutritional requirements and any dog food — commercial or homemade, raw or cooked — must be balanced to meet those requirements, she says.

"A healthy dog food is one that's been developed by an expert — or experts, in the case of commercial products — in canine nutrition and shown to be nutritionally balanced," Rugh says. "Some homemade dog foods meet these criteria, but many do not."



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