



## OWNERS, VETS QUESTION REGULATIONS AS PET FOOD SCARE CONTINUES

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*As the list of tainted pet food recalled continues to grow, pet owners and veterinarians across the country are questioning whether new methods are needed for determining the safety of dog and cat food.*

Since the middle of March nearly 100 brands of dog and cat food products have been pulled off shelves or recalled because they are believed to be tainted with poisonous chemicals. According to some veterinarians, thousands of pets may have been affected before the problem was discovered.

Last week the company that is the source of the original pet food recall, Menu Foods, expanded its recall to include all "cuts and gravy"-style products made from Nov. 8 to March 6. At first they had said the tainted food was only in batches created starting Dec. 3.

And another company, Sunshine Mills Inc. of Alabama has recalled dog biscuits that are made with wheat gluten imported from China. Tests have shown that the gluten, which is added to some pet food as a protein-rich filler and binder, is tainted with melamine, a chemical used in some pesticides and to make plastics.

Government and university scientists have also found melamine in samples of the tainted wet pet food as well as in the urine and kidneys of deceased cats.

In response to these discoveries the Food and Drug Administration, the government agency that oversees food and drug safety, blocked imports from the Chinese company that made the wheat gluten and exported it to the United States.

### **Contract manufacturers**

The recall has exposed the fact that, although sold under many different brand names, most pet foods are created only a few manufacturers, such as Menu Foods, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association.

The companies that own the brand hire these "contract manufacturers" to make their particular pet food. The contract company owns the processing plant where the food is made and rent out time on their production equipment to make each particular kind of food. Officials explain it is a

much cheaper way of making the food because each individual brand doesn't have to buy the expensive manufacturing equipment themselves.

The manufacturing company purchases the ingredients while the brand often provides the recipe or formula for their particular brand of pet food.

According to investigators, it appears all the brands got the same tainted ingredients from the same place in the latest outbreak.

### **The role of the Food and Drug Administration**

According to federal law the FDA is required to regulate both human and animal food and drugs. Foods that are seen to have higher risks get more inspections, Dr. Stephen Sundlof, director of the FDA Center for Veterinary Medicine, told the AVMA. Pet food manufacturers are usually only inspected if there is a complaint such as this one.

Critics believe that as more ingredients are imported from developing countries like China, where safety regulations might not be as strict as here in the United States, the agency is not increasing its monitoring and inspection.

"This is what globalization is about," Marion Nestle, a nutrition professor at New York University who is writing a book about pet food, told the Associated Press.

"The FDA is an agency under siege," she said and it lacks the money and manpower to screen imported food properly.

But others believe that although the United States cannot inspect every good imported here it does insist that developing countries have higher standards for foods they export.

And that eventually the economic market will determine safety – Americans will not purchase from companies that won't guarantee safe products.

Pet food companies who get bad ingredients "are going to ask for things much more rigorously than a nation can ask for. And they will get them," Neal Hooker, a professor of agricultural economics at Ohio State University told the AP.

### **Pet owners respond**

In the meantime, some pet owners have decided to opt out of the pet food market completely. They are making their pet food from scratch.

"I'm very suspicious of any large-brand manufactured dog food," Amy Parish, who stopped using canned dog food and now mixes dry food with chicken, rice, oatmeal and cottage cheese, told CNN.

But veterinarians are warning that making nutritionally balanced pet food is complicated and shouldn't be seen as a long-term solution. Some common foods like salt, garlic, onions, grapes and chocolate are not safe for pets.

But not everyone agrees with this assessment.

"The pet food industry doesn't want people competing with them," Dr. Donald Strombeck, a retired veterinary medicine professor who wrote a book about home-prepared pet food, told CNN.

"An animal can basically eat the same things we eat. They're not going to develop a deficiency."

-- *Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra*

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