7/14/2019

Dear GMVH Clients:

Pet nutrition will always be a vital component of your pet’s health. And we all want what’s best for the beloved animals in our home. Naturally, we’d like to feed in accord with our standards and beliefs surrounding what is ‘right’ for our pet. Secondly, the diet has to be realistic: affordable, easily obtainable, and well-tolerated by our pets.

Lately our hospital has had a rise in calls and inquiries from clients regarding what is safe for their pets to eat, some families worried about what their pet is already eating and others seeking advice on what to feed. Our veterinarians are here to help you and want to take this opportunity to provide some of the latest information we have regarding the health scare that has hit the media linking cardiac disease to certain pet food types and brands.

The recent June 2019 FDA statement is summarized here:

Dog food brands most linked to heart-disease reports named

U.S. FDA tallies 560 dogs affected since 2014

*June 27, 2019 (published)*

By Edie Lau; Lisa Wogan

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration today for the first time publicly identified the pet food brands most frequently associated with cases of dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM), a serious and potentially fatal heart disease. The vast majority of cases involve dogs, but a few cases involving cats have been reported, as well.

In an [update](https://www.fda.gov/animal-veterinary/news-events/fda-investigation-potential-link-between-certain-diets-and-canine-dilated-cardiomyopathy) on its investigation into the potential link between certain diets and canine DCM, the FDA listed 16 pet food brands that have been named in 10 or more reports of the disease.

The top three brands are Acana, named in 67 reports; Zignature, named in 64 reports; and Taste of the Wild, named in 53 reports.

Starting in 2014 and through April 30, 2019, the FDA has received reports of 560 dogs and 14 cats diagnosed by veterinarians to have DCM. Of those, 119 dogs and five cats have died.

Not included in the figures are counts from "the many general cardiac reports" the agency received that did not involve a diagnosis of DCM. "However," the FDA said, "this case information is still valuable, as it may show heart changes that occur before a dog develops symptomatic DCM."

DCM is a condition resulting in an enlarged, weak heart that cannot pump blood efficiently. Dogs with DCM may tire easily, cough and have trouble breathing. More dramatically, they might exhibit sudden weakness, collapse, faint or die with no warning.

The large majority of reports received by the FDA were made in 2018 and 2019. The agency has been investigating the problem since [last year](https://www.vin.com/doc/?id=8700146). It announced in July that it had learned of cases of DCM in dogs eating certain pet foods, many labeled as "grain-free" and containing as main ingredients peas, lentils, other legume seeds (known as pulses) and/or potatoes.

While particular dog breeds are known to be genetically predisposed to DCM — breeds such as Doberman pinscher, Great Dane, Newfoundland, boxer, Irish wolfhound and cocker spaniel — many of the affected dogs were not of those breeds. That is what caught veterinary cardiologists' attention early on.

The cause of the problem is unknown, and most researchers investigating the problem suspect the answer won't be easy to identify. The FDA cannot say with certainty that diet is the culprit, although in an investigation update posted in [February](https://www.vin.com/doc/?id=8961994), the agency reported that some dogs diagnosed with DCM improved simply by changing their diet. Other investigators have reported similar observations.

At that time and again today, the FDA said: "Based on the data collected and analyzed thus far, the agency believes that the potential association between diet and DCM in dogs is a complex scientific issue that may involve multiple factors."

Because of the uncertainty, the agency has not asked the companies behind the implicated brands to recall them. "We have shared case report information with these firms so they can make informed decisions about the marketing and formulation of their products," the FDA wrote in a [Q&A](https://www.fda.gov/animal-veterinary/animal-health-literacy/questions-answers-fda-center-veterinary-medicines-investigation-possible-connection-between-diet-and) on its canine DCM investigation.

The agency added, "We are also sharing this information with the public, but encourage pet owners to work with their veterinarians, who may consult with a board-certified veterinary nutritionist, prior to making diet changes."

In analyzing ingredients and ingredient proportions of the identified diets eaten by affected animals, FDA researchers have found that more than 90% of implicated products were "grain-free," meaning they did not contain corn, soy, wheat, rice, barley or other grains. Ninety-three percent contained peas and/or lentils.

Early on, some veterinarians investigating the problem posited that novel animal protein sources in diets, such as kangaroo, bison or duck, might be a factor. But in its latest update, the FDA reported: "The most common proteins in the reported diets were chicken, lamb and fish; however, some diets contain atypical protein sources such as kangaroo, duck and bison. No one animal protein source was predominant."

The FDA said most of the identified foods in the canine cases are dry formulations, but not all. There also are raw food, semi-moist food and wet foods reported.

A representative from one company owning a frequently implicated brand expressed concern about the issue while questioning the premise that its formulations could be culpable.

Dr. Alexia Heldman, director of veterinary affairs for Diamond Pet Foods, which owns Taste of the Wild, said in a telephone interview, "Over the last year, there have been a lot of theories .... Where we are now, there are more questions unanswered than there were a year ago."

Heldman said Taste of the Wild is the largest brand of grain-free food, noting that 29 million bags have been sold in the U.S. since September 2017.

She said that 53 reports of disease cases should be considered in the context of sales. "If the numbers were presented as a percentage of bags sold, we would be at the other end of the list," Heldman said.

At the same time, the numbers aren't inconsequential, she said. "I certainly want to make sure we don't in any way minimize what those pets and pet owners have been through."

Heldman has taken some of the calls made to the company by affected pet owners. "It is devastating. My heart really does break when I talk to pet owners. I and everyone else at the company really hate that this is happening."

Heldman noted that Taste of the Wild formulations have been largely unchanged during the past four to five years. "[H]ow did this come out of nowhere?" she wondered.

The FDA wonders the same. "Another puzzling aspect of the recent spike in DCM cases is that they have occurred just in the last few years," the agency wrote in today's update.

It noted that formulation is not the only possible variation: "The FDA is working with the pet food industry to better understand whether changes in ingredients, ingredient sourcing, processing or formulation may have contributed to the development of DCM."

Diamond Pet Foods encourages veterinarians and pet owners who have questions or concerns to contact them, Heldman said. The company number is 800-342-4808. "We take meticulous notes, because we want to share with everyone, especially the FDA, anything that we can do to help potentially figure out what is truly going on," Heldman said. "It's a top priority."

Similarly, Pets Global, owner of the Zignature line, said in a prepared statement, "Ensuring the health of all our pet customers continues to be our top priority."

The statement also says in part: "While the vast majority of our customers thrive with our high quality, grain-free pet formula, we are taking the FDA's recent announcement very seriously. As such, we have created a dedicated customer care line (888-897-7207) so we can understand more to further ensure the safety of all pets. As the FDA said in its release, it still does not have enough information to fully understand these cardiac issues. Any pet owners or veterinarians who have information on this matter are strongly encouraged to contact our dedicated customer care line backed by our team of veterinary experts and nutritionists."

Mike Fuccillo, a spokesperson for Champion PetFoods, which owns Acana, the most frequently named brand on the list, and Orijen, another brand on the list, said the company had no comment.

*Jennifer Fiala contributed to this report*



Naturally, this FDA update has sparked valid questions and concerns regarding grain-free diets and many commonly fed brands on the market. People are anxious to know what facts the veterinary community has to date on the matter.

First I’d like to share statements from Tuft’s Veterinary Nutrition, because they summarize the key aspects of the current topic of diet-related cardiac disease in dogs:

**https://vetnutrition.tufts.edu/2018/06/a-broken-heart-risk-of-heart-disease-in-boutique-or-grain-free-diets-and-exotic-ingredients/**

<https://vetnutrition.tufts.edu/2018/11/dcm-update/>

In these articles you can appreciate the complexity of the issue surrounding certain dog foods and the potential cardiac health hazards they have on pets. Some of the best things each owner can do is the following:

1. Ask yourself, is my dog or cat on a grain-free diet for an important medical reason? If so, work with our veterinarians to find a diet meeting high standards during this precarious time when grain-free foods are under major scrutiny.
2. Do you have concerns regarding cardiac disease in your pet that is eating a diet you feel is amongst the ones listed as problematic? If yes, we recommend making an appointment with our office to get a good listen to your pet’s heart and lungs, discuss heart disease, and discuss diagnostic options for applicable cases: echocardiogram, taurine levels. (Remember taurine deficiency is not the crux of the matter, rather it is one beneficial detail to investigate in any patient whose cardiac stability is in question due to diet-concerns).
3. Are you left wondering if the brand you are feeding is appropriate and safe for your dog? As stated in the above Tuft’s Veterinary updates, there is more to the nutritional problem at hand than just grain-free ingredients or low taurine levels. I think we all need to be carefully selective right now when choosing pet diets because all the facts are not in. Teams of veterinary cardiologists and nutritionists are diligently working to bring us answers but we all need to be patient and do the best we can in the interim.

The bottom line is you have to feel confident in your choice for your pet’s nutrition. I would say a few quick guidelines to adhere to is this: 1) Get a diet that is AAFCO-tested through feeding tests/trials, not just AAFCO-approved to be balanced. It simply means that particular diet has undergone more evaluation prior to being sold to consumers. The AAFCO statement is right on each bag of cat and dog food. 2) Utilize a company that has licensed full-time nutritionists on staff, high quality control of the factory producing their food, and a good reputation, 3) Work with a veterinary nutritionist if you plan on feeding people foods to your pet. Simply avoiding a commercial diet is not necessarily the best route if the foods you are feeding do not summate to a balanced and safe combination for your pet long term. Put it this way, if the pet food industry is trying its hardest to produce top quality diets and falling short, it is too simplistic to assume the ingredients we think are healthy for pets are balanced long term, 4) Learn more in-depth pointers from Tuft’s Veterinary nutritionists regarding “picking a pet food”:

 <https://vetnutrition.tufts.edu/2016/12/questions-you-should-be-asking-about-your-pets-food/> 5) Click on the “Canine Nutrition 2019” link on our website for our hospital’s informational guide to understanding the pet food market.

It is my hope that the information provided helps guide all the families in our veterinary community with regards to diets for their beloved cats and dogs. Please continue to contact our hospital, or reach out if you have not already, regarding any guidance or concerns you might have on the topic. Each patient and case should be assessed individually and we will work together to ensure we are comfortable and thoughtful in our nutritional choices.

 Sincerely,

 Dr. Michelle Parker