

Pet Food Recall - Just the Facts, Ma'am

Dr. Janice Huntingford
Essex Animal Hospital

The pet food recall has been a big news item in the veterinary and pet owning community. There are a lot of headlines about numbers of pets affected and how many foods are affected. Many of the news reports and blogs from the last several weeks have stated that tens of thousands of animals were affected or died, costing owners tens of millions of dollars. It is important to remember that these numbers are based on assumptions extrapolated from small amounts of data and are not true. In reality only a small number of pets have been affected.

Diagnostic labs are reporting more blood tests for kidney disease and they are seeing more disease, but they do not know if this is due to more awareness and health screenings or the problem with melamine. Kidney disease is a disease of aging, particularly in cats, but also in dogs. It is difficult to say whether melamine is actually implicated or not. I will say a) most testing has been normal; b) we are catching some disease early; c) now 6 weeks out from the recall it seems the cases decreasing. Also, health screenings are a good idea for all pets – especially our senior pets. Many hidden diseases can be caught and treated early with proper health screenings. This is another good reason to see your veterinarian.

Here are some frequently asked questions that I have been answering lately:

Is it the aminopterin or the melamine that caused the sickness?

The aminopterin (or rat poison) announced by the New York lab could not be verified by testing done at the FDA and Cornell and any information about the known toxicity of melamine is not readily available. Most now believe this identification of aminopterin was announced too early – without verification - and it is not the problem. Scientists are still unsure of why or even if the melamine is causing the problem. However, the melamine is useful as a marker for pets who have eaten the affected foods. According to scientists, the melamine is detected in the urine of these pets and does seem to be a consistent finding.

So, what can I feed my pet? I don't think anything is safe...

If the diet you are currently feeding your pet is not on any recall list, then continue to feed that diet. MOST pet foods you can buy today are safe. The odds are with you that your pet will be just fine. If your pet's regular diet has been recalled, contact your family veterinarian. He or she has THE best resources available to help you make an informed decision about a new food. Save some of the food for sampling later. Most of the high quality brands available today do not contain these gluten plant protein sources and are considered safe

Key points to keep in mind:

1. A very small percentage of pet foods are involved and the vast majority of pets continue to thrive on commercial pet foods. I strongly believe you can have confidence in the high quality brands of commercial pet food – most don't use wheat, rice or corn gluten.

2. We do not know the number of pets affected and frankly would not speculate on that, but many laboratory facilities are working round the clock to determine the cause and to ensure that it won't happen again.
3. The government continues to look for any offending substance. We do not yet have a definitive answer, but we hope that it will be found and we will have the answers.
4. Pet owners should feel safe feeding dry pet foods and canned foods that are not on the recall list. **Check the list, read your pet food labels.** Please follow the advice of your family veterinarian.
5. There is a great deal of mis-information on the internet and blogs. Trust your family veterinarian who is up to date and your source for medical advice.

This story will have international trade issues and perhaps even human health implications. For now and for our pets your best bet is to read the labels and do not feed any food on the recall list. This contamination issue will not be easily resolved. It is being taken very seriously at the FDA. Because the source of the problem lies in over seas suppliers we may never know all the answers. However, the pet food industry will be forever changed. Much more scrutiny and care will be given to supply chains, testing and quality control – even in an industry that for the most part has done an amazing job at all this for decades.