



FOOD OR FOE?

NAVIGATING HIDDEN DANGERS IN THE PET FOOD AISLE // BY KAREN E. LANGE

DOODLES LOVED HIS "LITTLE TATERS": Once Patricia Cassidy started buying the sweet potato treats, wrapped in bacon or shaped like waffle fries, they quickly became part of the shih tzu's routine.

"I'd give them two or three times a day, when I'd go to work and come home, like you'd give a cookie," says Cassidy, who assumed if the treats were on store shelves, they were safe. The packages carried a promise: "100% satisfaction guaranteed." But there were also, in small print, words Cassidy now sees as a danger sign: "Made in China."

Cassidy, of Chattanooga, Tenn., got Doodles for her daughter when the little girl was 5. For six years, the dog had no major health problems. Then in July, within weeks of being fed the treats, he started vomiting. Soon he stopped eating and drinking. Over two months, as his kidneys gave out, he dropped from 16 pounds to 6, and Cassidy struggled to keep him alive with daily IV treatments. In his final days, she fed him with a teaspoon. On his last day, in September, he couldn't urinate and threw up yellow bile; he no longer recognized Cassidy or her daughter.

"He was part of my family. He was my best friend. How [can] you make it right?" says Cassidy. "Stop selling them, or put a warning label on [them]. At least warn the public—if I had the money, I'd put up a billboard."

Since 2007, jerky treats made from sweet potatoes, chicken, duck, or dried fruit have sickened a reported 3,600 dogs and 10 cats across the country, killing at least 580, according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. While some products have been recalled, many other jerky treats and the non-jerky sweet potato treats Cassidy and her vet suspect of harming her dog remain on the shelves. Too few complaints have been made against those individual brands to force recalls. A seven-year FDA investigation of jerky treats has failed to identify the responsible ingredient or contaminant, despite extensive tests and even inspections of Chinese factories.

"Some of the best minds in veterinary medicine are scratching their heads," says William Burkholder, FDA veterinary medical officer.

Last fall, the agency issued another appeal to owners and veterinarians to report suspected jerky-related illnesses and advised owners to be careful about feeding such treats. Many owners are taking extra precautions and trying to avoid all products from outside the United States, especially those from China. That can be hard to do. Much pet food manufacturing has been outsourced by U.S. companies. Many ingredients come from overseas, making oversight more challenging and increasing the chance of contamination.

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Currently, the pet food industry is largely self-policed. The Association of American Feed Control Officials checks products to ensure that they meet its nutritional guidelines and the listed ingredients are safe. Products that meet the standards can carry the AAFCO statement.

As an additional safeguard, many companies test their food before they distribute it, checking for known toxins such as melamine, which Chinese manufacturers added to animal feed until recalls and investigations in 2007 following the deaths of U.S. pets. When large numbers of people complain to the FDA, companies usually issue recalls fairly quickly, says Burkholder.

Yet some within the pet food industry itself say the system remains dangerously lax. John Gigliotti, CEO and founder of Whole Life Pet Products, points out that the FDA does not require new pet food factories to be inspected. “The real danger is in the ability of new companies to enter the marketplace, produce food or treats in an uninspected facility, and sell them anywhere in the country with no restric-

tions,” he complained in an interview with veterinarian Barry Kellogg of the Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association, an HSUS affiliate. “This is a key issue due to tremendous growth of the pet industry and how that attracts thousands of new products to ... the market each year.”

A measure of relief could come with proposed FDA rules for the manufacture, storage, import, and transport of pet food. Prompted by the Food Safety Modernization Act of 2011, the rules would increase regulation and oversight of those who make and sell pet food. Safety advocates are hoping for rules as stringent as those that govern human food.

After losing Doodles, Cassidy carefully reads the labels of the food she buys for her surviving dog. And she feeds him only two types of treats: dog bones and frozen sweet potato fries sold for human consumption.

Even so, Burkholder says, there’s no guarantee—for Cassidy or any other owner—that a product won’t harm their pets. “There is no foolproof method to avoid contaminated food under any and all circumstances. ... Bad things happen.”

HELP PROTECT YOUR PET FROM HARMFUL FOOD

LOOK CLOSELY. Before you buy pet food or treats, check ingredients, expiration dates, the place of manufacture, and whether the food carries the AAFCO statement. If you don’t recognize an ingredient, or if it’s not clear where the product was manufactured, call the company’s customer relations line.

STAY ALERT. Any pet food can be recalled for a variety of reasons. Check the FDA recall list and sign up for safety alerts at humanesociety.org/petfoodsafety.

HOME HYGIENE. Wash food and water bowls daily, and keep utensils and counters clean. Store kibble in a cool, dry place, and keep opened cans in the refrigerator. Don’t buy bags so large they get old, and don’t store refrigerated food more than a few days.

MIX IT UP. Some owners rotate food and treat brands to lessen their pet’s exposure to any potential hidden contaminants. Homemade treats with human-grade ingredients are another way to decrease risks (see recipe, p. 36). If you opt to feed your pet a homemade diet, first consult a vet who is knowledgeable about pet nutrition.

WATCHFUL EYE. Anytime you feed your pet a new food or a new package of a customary food, observe his reaction. If he shows symptoms such as vomiting, diarrhea, or lethargy, stop feeding the product and take your pet to the vet. Keep the packaging and any leftover food in case you need to file a complaint.

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