

Owners scramble for safe pet food

Something was wrong with Booger.

Moria Cain's 16-year-old mixed-breed dog was acting strangely, and it wasn't long before the vomiting and pools of blood started to appear.

Cain, who lives outside of Corpus Christi, coaxed Booger into her car and made the 45-minute trip to an area veterinarian, where the doctor diagnosed the dog with a urinary tract infection.

But the problem wasn't with her dog's bladder.

Almost a month after her dog's symptoms appeared, a nationwide list came out with more than 100 recalled pet food brands, which now are linked to numerous animal deaths, according to authorities.

"She's OK now," Cain said, adding she has since changed dog food brands. "But I was already grieving. I thought that it was age or other things catching up. It's such a horrible thing to begin with and then to find out that it's something we think we're doing for our pets' benefit. Then to find out that the food was harmful - it's absolutely devastating for anyone who has gone through this."

Cain was one of the lucky ones. Although the Food and Drug Administration has confirmed about 15 pet deaths, anecdotal reports suggest hundreds may have died.

The FDA reported products made with wheat gluten were contaminated with melamine, a toxin used in fertilizer and plastic. Pet food manufacturers such as Menu Foods, Inc., Nestle Purina, Hill's Pet Nutrition and Del Monte have recalled dry and soft food because of the toxin.

About 471 kidney failure cases have been reported nationwide and the number is expected to climb. The recall started in early March when Menu Foods recalled about 60 million cans and pouches of wet or moist food. Recalled brands include Hill Country Fare, Iams and Eukanuba.

Pet stores around the country have removed from the shelves dog and cat food believed to be contaminated but the majority of dry food remaining on shelves is safe, said Dr. Stacy Eckman, veterinarian at Corpus Christi's The Banfield Pet Hospital in PetSmart. The clinic has treated four animals that have eaten the affected foods and have exhibited symptoms relating to the toxin.

One pet was euthanized because of kidney failure. Symptoms include decreased or increased urinary function, lethargy, vomiting and diarrhea. Owners should take their cat or dog to a veterinarian immediately if these symptoms occur, Eckman said.

Dr. Wallace Graham, veterinarian at Wooldridge Creek Animal Hospital, also has seen pets suffering from illness with the telltale symptoms. A 4-year-old, 3 1/2-pound Chihuahua died from kidney failure. Tests to determine melamine poisoning have not been confirmed, he said, but the small dog was fed recalled food and had a preexisting kidney problem.

"We've had lots and lots of phone calls and lots of owners wanting their pets checked," Graham said. "We've also had requests for homemade diets - it's not so good but it will get you by in the next three to four weeks if you're worried."

Homemade diets should be temporary, Graham said.

The veterinarian suggests a protein source and a complex carbohydrate for dogs. For example, he suggested boiled boneless chicken or hamburger and brown rice. Mixing in cottage cheese adds a fat source. Pet vitamins also are good to include, he said. Chicken and rice also is OK for cats but not for an extended period.

Petco, on Saratoga Boulevard and Staples Street, offers holistic and organic foods as well as natural pet food, which doesn't use chemicals, said general manager Mark Keefer. The pet store has removed all recalled brands from shelves and provided customers with an updated list. PetSmart, on South Padre Island Drive, also offers organic and chemical-free foods, said general manager Kenneth Morvant. Morvant does not recommend feeding animals human food, he said.

Both stores have removed about 10 percent of their pet food stock.

April Koster, with Rascal, her Jack Russell Terrier in tow at PetSmart on Tuesday, was worried about the recall. The 60-year-old already has stopped feeding the puppy its favorite chicken treats because of the ingredients.

"Rascal went to the vet - he had to go anyway for his shots - but he's OK," she said. "I worry because you never know. In fact, I've been on the Internet to find out how to make my own food."

Koster said she would begin experimenting with different recipes in case the recall expands.

Ginger Garza, who was perusing cat food at PetSmart, said the recall is scary and she's not convinced that the toxin hasn't contaminated all brands. Garza, who owns Gabbi, a Maine Coon cat, said her feline friend hasn't shown any unusual behavior.

"That's why I'm here," said the 49-year-old. "I don't know if she'll eat new food but I'm afraid to give her what she was eating. Gabbi is doing good - she's my pride and joy. I've already lost a cat to cancer, and I don't want to lose her."

About the Author

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