

How can we learn from a pet food recall?

by Lucy Postins

A Commentary by Lucy Postins, Pet Nutritionist for The Honest Kitchen

Consumers should take time to read pet food labels, familiarize themselves with what various ingredients really are, research the companies who make the products they buy - and then decide what they would (and would not) like their pets to eat.

As pet owners come to terms with the gravity of this most recent, widespread tragedy in the pet food industry, it is important to learn as much as possible from what has occurred, to protect our animal companions and to try to evoke change in an industry that has become a 'catch-all' for industrial and human-food by-products and off-casts.

Many people are relying on the Internet for resources on the recall. Don't forget elderly neighbors, family members or others who might not have computer access and still might be unaware of the gravity of the situation. The extent of this latest recall makes it impossible to convey brand names, lot numbers, batch codes and UPC's effectively without computer access. Helping those who are still in the dark, to double check the food they've bought, could still save lives.

Pet Industry regulations allow manufacturers to use ingredients that most people would never knowingly give to their animal companions. Many conventional 'grocery brand' pet foods contain by-products, such as feet, beaks, feathers, blood, and other animal parts unfit for human consumption. Chemical preservatives including Ethoxyquin, TBHQ, BHA and BHT, are utilized to prolong the shelf life, and grains or grain-parts that are hard to digest and mostly unsuitable for cats and dogs (wheat, corn, rice and soy), are often used as a protein source instead of meat.

Understanding what various pet food ingredients are -- and why they are included in some products -- is an important part of a pet owner's responsibility when selecting a food for their companion. The AAFCO (American Association of Feed Control Officials) formal definition of gluten is "The tough, viscid nitrogenous substance remaining when the flour or wheat or other grain is washed to remove the starch." Why is it included? It costs far less than meat and other wholesome ingredients!

Many customers have been particularly shocked to discover just how many different brands can be made by one major conglomerate (even well respected products that are not affected by the recall). And more disturbing, a vast number of products under so many different labels, names and price points, could all contain the same exact low-grade ingredient. In many cases, products with appealing names and labels that are marketed as 'veterinary' or 'natural' in some way, have turned out to be exactly the same as the generic store brands that are sold for a fraction of the cost!

The following checklist can be used to develop some insight into companies that a customer is considering:

- * Are they willing to share ingredient data with customers?
- * How do they rate in independent publications like the Whole Dog Journal?
- * How well do they respond to a basic customer service questions? What about complex inquiries warranting a nutritional consultation?
- * Do they use whole, or organic ingredients?
- * What are their product innovations or other features that set them apart from their competition or somehow raise the bar?
- * What are the company's values?
- * Is the company privately owned? Are they willing to disclose who they are owned by?
- * Will they disclose if they make their own products or contract out manufacturing to another vendor? The Pet Food Aisle can be a daunting place, with an overwhelming array of pretty packets and marketing tactics dwelling on the shelves. Pet owners must take the time to understand the options available for their budget. Most products that are sold in convenience stores or supermarkets (with the exception of some natural and health food stores) are sub-standard.

Pet guardians should buy from specialty pet stores with staff who will take the time to walk them through the options. If you can't get the advice you need, shop elsewhere. A store who has taken the time to carry more reputable, high class brands, as well as raw and natural products, will generally have well trained staff who can help owners in their purchasing decisions. The Whole Dog Journal is an excellent, unbiased resource for product reviews and opinion.

As more customers begin to educate themselves on the issue of pet food manufacturing and then start to expect better quality, the industry will slowly but surely be forced to look at itself and re-address what ingredients are acceptable for use in pet food products. Perhaps even AAFCO will reconsider some of the obscene substances that are unfit for human consumption, currently allowed in pet foods, and they'll become obsolete altogether.

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