

OSU Lab working with Oregon vets, public as pet food recall continues

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CORVALLIS, Ore. — “The national recall of pet food that is suspected of killing hundreds of dogs and cats around the country — and making numerous others ill — is a difficult puzzle to solve because there are not yet reliable tests for the suspected toxin in the food, and uncertainty even remains about what contaminant is responsible.

Scientists around the country are still trying to determine the exact cause of the poisoning and many suspect a toxin called aminopterin, according to Jerry Heidel, director of the Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory in Oregon State University’s College of Veterinary Medicine.

“There are no readily available methods for routine testing of samples for the presence of aminopterin,” Heidel said, “but several veterinary toxicology laboratories are working to validate such a test.”

Aminopterin is used as a rodent poison in countries outside the United States, according to various reports. But the Food and Drug Administration also has said that melamine, a chemical used in plastic cutlery and fertilizers, was found in imported wheat gluten used in the recalled pet foods. Aminopterin was not found during the tests, FDA officials added.

OSU’s Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory has been assisting local veterinarians work up cases that fit the profile of the poisonings: exposure to recalled food and sudden renal failure. The lab provides diagnostic testing services to practicing veterinarians, both in the college’s teaching hospitals and those in private practice.

“We have tested specimens from at least one dog and one cat that were fed one of the recalled pet foods and have found changes in the kidney consistent with patterns found in other animals around the country,” Heidel said. “But until aminopterin is positively identified as the culprit, and a test for the toxin is validated, all that we can do is suspect a link.”

The national recall of pet food that is suspected of killing hundreds of dogs and cats around the country, and making numerous others ill, is unusual in its scope and severity, said an OSU veterinarian who has conducted research with the pet food industry.

“It is a unique case,” said Jean Hall, an associate professor in the OSU College of Veterinary Medicine. “The pet food industry has had a trusted history for decades and has made a number of advances in commercial pet food that are helping pets live longer and healthier lives. So a recall of this nature is a disappointment to the industry as well as a tragedy for affected pet owners.”

Hall said the impact could have been worse but the tainted pet food was identified early and a recall was announced immediately.

She suggests that dog and cat owners consult with their family veterinarians on what diet to feed their animals and visit the website of the American Veterinary Medicine Association for a list of recalled foods and what to do with them: <http://www.avma.org/aa/menufoodsrecall/default.asp>

The site also has answers for frequently asked questions relating to the recall, including symptoms of illness in dogs and cats. Signs of illness, according to the AVMA, include loss of appetite, lethargy, depression, vomiting, diarrhea, changes in water consumption, and changes in the frequency or amount of urination. The illness affects the kidneys.

The OSU veterinarians suggest that pet owners check the list of foods that have been recalled “ and if their animals have been exposed, to contact their local veterinarian. “Most pet foods have not been affected, but it is important to check the list of recalled foods,” Hall said. “On the flip side, pet owners should be aware that some pet foods can treat or even cure disease, so changes in diet should be carefully thought out. When in doubt, consult with your local veterinarian.”

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