



Are the pet foods we are feeding our pets causing heart disease?

By Dr. Janet Olson, DVM, DACVIM (Cardiology)

There is growing concern in the veterinary profession that there may be a correlation between dogs being fed certain pet foods and the development of dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM).

Dr. Joshua Stern, DVM, PhD, DACVIM (Cardiology) at UC Davis, School of Veterinary Medicine starting seeing a pattern of dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM) in golden retrievers, a breed not typically known for developing this condition. Blood tests revealed that this patient population had low taurine levels which historically has been known to cause dilated cardiomyopathy in both dogs and cats. Upon further investigation it was found that many of these dogs were being fed the same grain-free diet.

Veterinarians across the county have since reported additional cases of dilated cardiomyopathy associated with low blood taurine levels in golden retrievers as well as other breeds being fed either grain-free or diets that contain atypical or unique ingredients. This finding begs the question, is there a correlation between certain pet food ingredients and the development of DCM and if so, what is the common link or factors involved? This health concern has garnered the attention of the FDA as well as a group of board certified veterinary cardiologists and nutritionists.

According to the FDA report released 7.12.18: The FDA is investigating a potential connection between diet and canine heart disease. The FDA is alerting pet owners about reports of canine dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM) and dogs eating certain pet foods containing peas, lentils, other legume seeds or potatoes as main ingredients. High levels of legumes or potatoes appear to be more common in diets labeled as "grain-free", but it is not know how these ingredients are linked to cases of DCM. This is considered an FDA reportable condition. For more information click this link:

<https://www.fda.gov/AnimalVeterinary/NewsEvents/CVMUpdates/ucm613305.htm>

Guidelines compiled by a group of veterinary cardiologists and nutritionists for clients, as noted on the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine website, include the following:

1. Evaluate the diet that you are feeding your pet. If the diet is boutique, contains exotic ingredients, or is grain free, you may consider a diet change to one without

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these properties. Talk to your veterinarian about the FDA announcement and what diet may be best for your dog.

2. If you are concerned about your dog based on what you are feeding, watch closely for signs of heart disease such as weakness, slowing down on walks, coughing, fainting or trouble breathing. Your veterinarian may also recognize early heart disease by hearing a heart murmur or abnormal heart rhythms. If you observe these things or your veterinarian is concerned, additional testing may be indicated such as x-rays, blood tests, EKG, or heart ultrasound (echocardiogram).
3. If your dog is diagnosed with DCM, particularly if eating a diet that meets the criteria listed above:
 - Ask your veterinarian to test blood taurine levels.
 - Report the findings to the FDA.
 - Change your dog's diet as directed by your veterinarian's recommendations.
 - Ask your veterinarian to help you identify a dose for taurine supplementation.
 - Seek guidance from a veterinary cardiologist.
 - Follow the instructions from your veterinarian or veterinary cardiologist as repeat evaluations and other medications may be needed. It can take multiple months to see improvement in many cases of diet-related DCM.

Although the focus for this condition has been on dogs, I recently diagnosed a cat with DCM associated with a low blood taurine level being fed a grain-free diet. Albeit one case at this time, it warrants attention as once we start looking, others will most likely follow. Therefore, I would recommend that the guidelines outlined above include cats.

For more information on this issue, please refer to the following:

1) A blog written by Dr. Lisa Freeman, a board certified veterinary nutritionist on her Petfoodology website which can be referenced through the following link: <http://vetnutrition.tufts.edu/2018/06/a-broken-heart-risk-of-heart-disease-in-boutique-or-grain-free-diets-and-exotic-ingredients/>.

2) Articles posted on the UC Davis Veterinary Medicine website

- UC Davis Investigates Link Between Dog Diets and Deadly Heart Disease: <https://www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/news/uc-davis-investigates-link-between-dog-diets-and-deadly-heart-disease> and an Update from Nutritional Services on Concern Between Diets and DCM in Dogs: <https://www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/news/update-nutrition-services-concern-between-diets-and-dcm-dogs>