

Feeding Kibble? Do This Now to Protect Your Dog's Heart

Consumers are panicking. The processed pet food industry is shaking in its boots. Can kibble without grains really be harmful to dogs' hearts? Find out why this is such an alarming development for pet parents and what you can do now to help keep your dog safe.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The news that grain-free kibble may be linked to diet-related heart disease in dogs is now spreading rapidly in the pet community
- The FDA is also now involved, issuing a consumer alert in mid-July about grain-free dog food and dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM)
- The processed pet food industry has also taken note, and is concerned that the FDA's alert is causing panic among consumers that may impact its bottom line
- If you're feeding kibble, consider transitioning to a more species-appropriate diet; if you're worried about your dog's heart health, make an appointment with your veterinarian
- Until much more information is available, it may be a good idea to supplement your dog's diet with foods high in taurine

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published September 19, 2018.

There's been a sudden and disturbing rise in cases of dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM) in dogs several years ago. DCM is a form of heart disease that is common in cats, but is rarely seen in dogs except for breeds predisposed to the condition, such as Great Danes, Boxers, Newfoundlands, Irish Wolfhounds, Saint Bernards, Doberman Pinschers and Cocker Spaniels.

The increase in canine DCM appears to be diet-related, since some affected dogs are deficient in the amino acid taurine, which can lead to DCM, and all of the dogs are eating grain-free kibble containing potatoes, peas, lentils and other legumes. For the record, meat is a primary source of dietary taurine; meat content is often low in plant- and starch-based kibble formulas.

The news about DCM, dogs and grain-free kibble is now spreading through the pet community like wildfire. Example: According to a report by an Indianapolis news channel, nearly three dozen canine patients at one veterinary clinic, including Labrador and **Golden Retrievers**, a Bulldog and mixed breeds, have developed DCM, and they all had one thing in common — a diet of grain-free kibble.¹

FDA Is Now Involved

In mid-July, the FDA's Center for Veterinary Medicine (CVM) issued a warning to pet parents:

“The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is alerting pet owners and veterinary professionals about reports of canine dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM) in dogs eating certain pet foods containing peas, lentils, other legume seeds, or potatoes as main ingredients. These reports are unusual because DCM is occurring in breeds not typically genetically prone to the disease.”²

Cases reported to the FDA included Golden and Labrador Retrievers, Whippets, a Shih Tzu, a Bulldog and Miniature Schnauzers, as well as mixed breeds. The diets of the dogs “... frequently list potatoes or multiple legumes such as peas, lentils, other ‘pulses’ (seeds of legumes), and their protein, starch and fiber derivatives early in the ingredient list, indicating that they are main ingredients.”

According to the FDA, reports from veterinary cardiologists indicate that affected dogs consistently ate the foods as their primary diet for months or years. The agency warns that changes in diet, especially for dogs with DCM, should be made in consultation with a veterinarian.

Medical records for four of the cases reported to the FDA, involving three Goldens and a Lab, showed low blood levels of taurine. However, four other dogs with DCM — a Miniature Schnauzer, Shih Tzu and two Labs — had normal blood taurine levels.

This is one of the reasons this issue is so complicated. Not every “atypical” dog who has developed DCM is taurine-deficient. In addition, we don’t know how ingredients typically found in grain-free dry diets are linked to taurine deficiency or other underlying causes of DCM.

The FDA is working with veterinary cardiologists and nutritionists to better understand the problem, and has also been in contact with pet food manufacturers. The agency is encouraging pet parents and veterinary staff to report cases of potential diet-related DCM in dogs using the electronic Safety Reporting Portal or calling their state’s **FDA Consumer Complaint Coordinators**.

In early August, the FDA’s CVM published a list of **questions and answers for consumers** regarding the investigation into a possible connection between diet and canine DCM.

Pet Food Industry Response

As we know, big pet food loves non-animal meat, plant-based ingredients because they’re plentiful and cheap. The industry spends lots of money looking for new, “innovative,” biologically inappropriate dog and cat food ingredients, and doing research to determine how much of those ingredients pets can tolerate before they develop digestive issues or other changes in their health.

Needless to say, pet food industry journal articles written in defense of their much-loved ingredients have been increasing in number since mid-July when the FDA issued its warning. Examples of some predictable headlines:

- July 13, 2018 — **Potatoes, peas, lentils correlated to dog heart disease.** The FDA does not yet know how these ingredients are linked to cases of dilated cardiomyopathy in dogs.³
- July 19, 2018 — **Not all legumes implicated in FDA dog heart disease study.** FDA’s investigation is just beginning and not all legume seeds, a group including beans, are implicated.⁴

- Also July 19, 2018 — **Do peas and potatoes really cause heart disease in dogs?** As opposed to focusing on how to make a nutritionally balanced diet, some pet foods may be pushing the boundaries of extreme nutrition in a quest to find shelf space.⁵
- August 3, 2018 — **6 studies related to dog food and canine heart disease.** Evidence may suggest correlations between dog food ingredients, taurine and canine dilated cardiomyopathy.⁶
- August 9, 2018 — **Don't panic yet about peas and potatoes in dog food diets.** There is likely more to this DCM story than only grain-free pet foods.⁷

It's worth noting that since pet food ingredient studies are typically small and limited in scope, and even pet food trials before a new diet goes to market are of short duration, there are no long-term studies on the effects of feeding pets a biologically inappropriate diet for months, years or a lifetime.

'Unnecessary Panic' Could Have a 'Catastrophic Impact' on Big Pet Food

Here's what the magazine Pet Business, "The only publication devoted to helping pet retailers improve their profits," has to say about the FDA's alert:

*"While the FDA's recent announcement about a possible link between certain grain-free foods and heart disease in dogs could have serious implications for the health of many canines, there is a troubling lack of information behind this announcement — and that could very well result in an unnecessary panic that would have catastrophic impact on the pet food industry."*⁸

This statement doesn't speak well for either Pet Business or the pet retailers it serves. One would hope the first concern would be for the health of dogs and not pet food industry profits. The article ends with this:

"... [I]t seems quite premature for the FDA to speculate on a potential link between grain-free diets and heart disease in dogs, particularly given the mountain of evidence that we have to the contrary — in the form of the millions of dogs that have enjoyed great health while being fed these diets for years."

Of course, we all would want to know if real evidence of such a connection is found, including the manufacturers of grain-free diets. But in today's age of media sensationalism and click-bait culture, issuing premature warnings — particularly from trusted agencies like the FDA — seems like a recipe for disaster."

Pet Business seems to wish the FDA had kept the "secret" to itself until more information is available to avoid creating a potential financial disaster for the pet food industry. Once again, one would hope to see more concern for dogs and their owners.

If You're Concerned About Your Own Dog

Unfortunately, some processed pet food advocates are using the link between grain-free dog foods and DCM to try to push pet parents back in the direction of grain-based diets. However, the problem with grain-free formulas isn't the lack of grains. At a minimum, it's the high level of starchy carbohydrates coupled with the extreme high-heat processing methods used to produce these diets.

If you’re feeding kibble (grain-based or grain-free), this may be a good time to consider transitioning your dog to a more appropriate diet.

Until we have much more information on the link between canine DCM and diet, supplement all dogs with high taurine foods, no matter what type of diet they’re eating. An easy way to do this is to simply mix a can of sardines into your pet’s meal once a week. You can also find the taurine content of many other foods on page 2 of **this study** and also in this **Raw Feeding Community article**.

If you have a breed or breed mix known to be susceptible to DCM, especially if you’ve been feeding grain-free kibble, or if for some other reason you’re concerned about your dog’s heart health, start with a visit to your veterinarian.

Sources and References

¹ [WISHTV.com, August 6, 2018](#)
² [FDA.gov, July 12, 2018 \(Archived\)](#)
³ [PetfoodIndustry.com, July 13, 2018](#)
⁴ [PetfoodIndustry.com, July 19, 2018](#)
⁵ [PetfoodIndustry.com, Do peas and potatoes really cause heart disease in dogs? July 19, 2018](#)
⁶ [PetfoodIndustry.com, August 3, 2018](#)
⁷ [PetfoodIndustry.com, August 9, 2018](#)
⁸ [Pet Business, July 17, 2018](#)
