Alert — Feeding This to Your Pet Could Cause Allergic Reactions

If you have a pet with allergies or one who needs certain proteins to manage food sensitivities or a bowel disorder, you'll want to watch out for this — discovered after the horsemeat food fiasco triggered concern about pet foods.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A pet food study revealed that the U.K., like the U.S., has a problem with mislabeling of dog and cat foods
- Of 17 pet foods DNA-tested for the presence of specific animal proteins, 14 contained one or more proteins not listed on the label
- The U.K. researchers concluded that pet food manufacturers need to show greater transparency to customers when disclosing the types of animal proteins in their products
- Studies conducted on U.S. dog and cat foods have also uncovered significant discrepancies between label ingredients and actual ingredients
- If you have a pet with allergies or who needs a novel protein diet to manage food sensitivities or a bowel disorder, contact the manufacturer of the pet food you buy and ask how, and how often, they verify the authenticity of their ingredients

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published May 4, 2015.

Many of you may remember the horsemeat scandal in Europe two years ago. Long story short, it was discovered in January 2013 that human foods advertised as containing beef actually contained horsemeat. In some cases 100% of the meat content was horsemeat, not beef. Other "beef" products contained random meats such as pork.

The problem came to light when analysis of frozen beef burgers sold in several Irish and British grocery stores revealed the presence of horsemeat. Horsemeat is considered a taboo food in many countries, including the U.K. and Ireland. The same analysis found that 23 out of 27 samples of beef burgers also contained pig DNA. Pig is a forbidden food in Muslim and Jewish communities.

While the horsemeat issue wasn't food-safety related, its discovery pointed to a serious breakdown in the traceability of the food supply chain, which increases the likelihood that harmful ingredients could also be present in the human food supply. The scandal eventually spread to 13 other European countries.

UK Researchers Test Pet Foods for Labeling Accuracy

Prompted by the horsemeat scandal, a team of researchers at the School of Veterinary Medicine and Science at the University of Nottingham (U.K.) evaluated the presence and authenticity of animal sources of protein in a selection of popular canned pet foods sold in the U.K.

The researchers first DNA-tested 17 canned pet foods for the presence of cow, chicken, pig, and horse. Then they compared their findings with the information on the pet food labels.

No horsemeat DNA turned up, however, there were abundant proteins from unspecified animals in 14 of the 17 foods. Those 14 samples contained cow, pig, and chicken DNA in various amounts and combinations that were not explicitly identified on product labels.

Seven of the 14 prominently labeled "with beef" contained between 14% and 56% cow DNA. Only 2 of the 7 contained more cow DNA than pig and chicken DNA combined. Of the remaining 5 samples, 3 contained more pig than cow DNA.

The 6 foods prominently labeled "chicken" or "with chicken" contained from 1% to 100% chicken DNA, and 2 of the 6 contained more pig or cow than chicken DNA.

One tested product that U.S. pet owners may recognize is Hill's Prescription Diet R/D Feline Weight Loss, which was labeled as containing chicken, but no chicken DNA was found. Other examples:[1]

Dog Food	Beef	Pork	Chicken
Bakers As Good As It Looks Succulent Stew with Beef	15%	22%	63%
Butcher's Natural Nutrition with Beef and Liver	51%	0%	49%
Cooperative Gourmet Terrine with Chicken and Game	87%	12%	1%

Cat Food	Beef	Pork	Chicken
Cooperative Supreme Chunks in Gravy with Beef	14%	13%	73%
Felix Complete with Beef	19%	36%	45%
Gourmet Solitaire with Beef	56%	24%	20%

Pet Food Industry Needs to Show Greater Transparency to Customers

The University of Nottingham researchers concluded that:

> *"There is a need for the pet food industry to show greater transparency to customers in the disclosure of the types of animal proteins (animal species and tissue types) in their products.*
>
> *Full disclosure of animal contents will (a) allow more informed choices to be made on purchases which are particularly important for pets with food allergies, (b) reduce the risk of product misinterpretation by shoppers, and (c) avoid potential religious concerns."*

Their findings were published in March 2015 in the journal Acta Veterinaria Scandinavica.[2] While these findings relate to pet food sold in Europe, the U.S. has its own mislabeling concerns.

US Pet Foods Are Also Frequently Mislabeled

In 2012, a survey of dog foods found that 10 out of 21 were mislabeled.[3] Some products contained animal protein not listed on the ingredient label, some contained none of a listed animal protein, and several contained high levels of gluten but listed no gluten source on the label and/or were labeled either gluten- or grain-free.

In August 2014, another pet food labeling study was published in which 20 of 52 dog and cat foods were mislabeled.[4] Of the 20, 16 contained meat species that were not listed on the product label, with pork being the most common unlisted ingredient. In three cases, one or two meat species were substituted for other meat species.

If you have a pet with allergies or who needs a novel protein diet to manage food sensitivities or a bowel disorder, contact the manufacturer of the pet food you buy and ask how, and how often, they verify the authenticity of their ingredients.

Another option is to feed your dog or cat species-appropriate meals from your own kitchen with fresh ingredients you select. If you decide to give it a try, remember that balanced nutrition is critically important when preparing homemade pet meals.

Sources and References

Discovery News March 31, 2015

[1] DailyMail.com, April 1, 2025

[2] Acta Veterinaria Scandinavica 2015, 57:7

[3] PetfoodIndustry.com, August 27, 2012

[4] Food Control, Vol 50, April 2015, pp 9-17