

Condition Can Be Fatal, Linked to Eating Dry Dog Food

Dozens of dogs in one country developed a rare, devastating disease that interferes with their ability to swallow, which can starve them nutritionally. Then they're at increased risk of deadly aspiration pneumonia. Here's what could be behind this troubling issue.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dozens of dogs in Australia fed a particular type of dry dog food have developed a rare, often devastating disease called megaesophagus
- Megaesophagus interferes with a dog's ability to swallow and remain adequately nourished, and also dramatically increases the risk for aspiration pneumonia
- To date, neither Mars Petcare Australia (the manufacturer) nor Melbourne University scientists have uncovered a definitive link between the food and megaesophagus
- Possible causes include an unknown toxic byproduct of the manufacturing process, a massive immune response triggered by something in the food that targets the esophagus or a neuromuscular toxin
- Australia's pet food industry is self-regulated; concerned pet parents and veterinarians are calling for tighter regulation

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Six months ago in December 2017, nine police dogs in Australia developed the rare but horrible disease known as megaesophagus, and sadly one of them was euthanized when it was determined the disease had destroyed his quality of life.

When food or liquid is swallowed, it travels through the esophagus, which is designed to expand and contract rhythmically to move foods and liquids to the stomach. When the esophagus is functioning as it should, food moves from the mouth to the stomach within seconds.

In megaesophagus, there are issues with nerve and muscle functioning that cause a motility problem. The esophagus stretches out and muscular contractions aren't efficient. As a result, food doesn't always reach the stomach. It can build up in the esophagus, which eventually causes the dog to regurgitate.

Regurgitation can occur within minutes of swallowing food, in which case the food looks exactly as it did going in. If regurgitation occurs hours after eating, the food reappears in a tubular or sausage shape.

Constant regurgitation predisposes animals to aspiration pneumonia, which occurs when a dog inhales during an episode of regurgitation, bringing food into the lungs. This can cause a terrible, possibly life-threatening infection. The dogs in Australia had one thing in common — they were all eating Advance Dermocare dry dog food produced by

Advance Dermocare Is a Dog Food Made and Sold in Australia

Here's how the website Pet Food Reviews in Australia describes the Advance Dermocare formula:

*"Advance Dermocare is targeted at dogs with itchy skin or allergies, but in reality it's nigh on a vegan food. Most would assume a dog food would be meat-based, or at least contain a significant amount of meat, but given most people wholeheartedly trust these brands the truth is rarely realised. Advance know this, and that's why they sell you 'super premium' rice and corn at an incredible mark-up."*²

And here are the first 10 ingredients in this nearly-vegetarian, grain-based, biologically inappropriate dog food:

1. Rice
2. Maize (corn) gluten
3. Maize (corn)
4. Chicken fat
5. Tuna
6. Pilchards (sardines)
7. Natural flavor (chicken)
8. Beet pulp
9. Iodized salt
10. Sunflower oil

The pet food reviewer concludes, "I've rated the food 2 stars, which is all I can do until science proves rice and corn is better for a dog than meat."

Over 100 Dogs Have Developed Megaesophagus so Far

In January, Mars began running tests on Advance Dermocare — including for heavy metals, pesticides, and potential neurotoxins known to trigger megaesophagus — on both the food and at the factory where it's produced. The company reported it could find no causal link.³

In March, Melbourne University, which is also investigating the issue, requested that veterinarians across Australia report cases of megaesophagus, and when the reports started coming in, Mars issued a voluntary recall of their product. By the end of April the number of dogs ill with megaesophagus after eating Advance Dermocare had risen to 74, and as of early June, it is over 100.⁴ Mars is offering to reimburse owners' vet bills and pay the cost of a new dog for families whose pets were euthanized.

Melbourne University veterinarian Dr. Caroline Mansfield believes it will likely take months to determine if there's a definitive link between the dog food and megaesophagus. "Most of the testing has never been done in dog food before," says Mansfield, "so we actually have to validate the tests in that particular food."

Interestingly, Mansfield also mentioned that in Latvia a few years ago there was a different dog food associated with a spike in megaesophagus cases, but no causal link was ever found. And as it turns out, many dogs from around the world have been affected by this strange condition linked to dry, processed food. Watch this veterinary pathologist's account of discovering the problem:

Australia's Pet Food Industry Is Unregulated

Australia leaves pet food regulation to pet food manufacturers (i.e., the pet food industry is self-regulated), so when Mars first learned of a potential problem in December, the company was under no obligation to report it to veterinarians or any government authorities. Mansfield and several pet parents of dogs who developed megaesophagus after eating Advance Dermocare are calling for change.

"If something like this can happen with such a particular product, I think it's really important that we try to identify what that causative link is so that we can prevent potentially other conditions occurring with other diets or other food," Mansfield said. "I do believe there needs to be tighter regulation of the pet food industry. I think Australia is well overdue for having pet food regulation and there is a quality control."

What Might Be Causing the Outbreak of Diet-Related Megaesophagus

Based on how dry pet food is manufactured, it's possible an unknown toxic byproduct of the extrusion process is the culprit.

For example, we know that advanced glycation end-products (AGE) are a byproduct of processed pet food. AGEs are compounds that form as the result of what is known as the Maillard reaction. When heat-processed proteins join with carbohydrates, the biochemical result is a compound that can cause widespread inflammation and damage in the body.

Advanced glycation end-products have been extensively studied in humans, and have been shown to exacerbate diabetes and interfere with kidney function. AGE has also been linked to aging, Alzheimer's disease, cancer and more recently, neurologic disease such as intervertebral disc disease.

Since megaesophagus is typically an autoimmune disease, a second possibility is that something in the Advance Dermocare triggers an overwhelming immune response that targets the esophagus. It seems that if there isn't an immune component, then there's a neuromuscular toxin in the food that is causing the condition.

While pet food in the U.S. is regulated (though regulations are haphazardly enforced), like Australia, we don't test dry food or any processed pet food for contaminants or byproducts of the manufacturing process.

Poor-quality ingredients, constant recalls, devastating situations like this one, and an exploding population of pets with chronic digestive issues, allergies and degenerative disease are pushing an ever-increasing number of pet parents to explore homemade diets, fresh food diets made by smaller, transparent pet food producers, raw diets and other alternatives to processed pet food.

If you're feeding your own animal companion a processed diet and you're concerned about what's in it or how it's manufactured, search the bark and whiskers website for more information on choosing a diet you can trust. There are dozens of articles here that can help you become more knowledgeable about pet nutrition so that you can make the best diet choices for your own dog or cat.

If you want to help effect change in the U.S. pet food industry, consider becoming a member of the Association for Truth in Pet Food, which is the only organization out there committed to holding the regulatory agencies and AAFCO accountable.

Sources and References

[PetfoodIndustry.com March 28, 2018](#)

¹ [News.com.au, March 25, 2018](#)

² [Pet Food Reviews](#)

³ [ABC.net.au, April 30, 2018](#)

⁴ [PetfoodIndustry.com, June 6, 2018](#)
