



[Home](#)

[Current Issue](#)

[Also In This Issue](#)

[Features](#)

[Editorial](#)

[Letters](#)

[Last Month's Issue](#)

[Back Articles](#)

[Sample Articles](#)

[In Future Issues](#)

[Search](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Links](#)

[Surveys](#)

[Customer Service](#)

## Pet Food Disaster

How to protect your dog from being a victim of defective pet foods. Whole Dog Journal takes a look at the history of pet food recalls.

By Nancy Kerns

Déjà vu all over again . . .

In October of 2004 we published an article ("When Foods Go Bad") that discussed how owners could protect their pets from serious harm from contaminated or toxin-adulterated food. It outlined the lessons learned from the three previous commercial **pet food** disasters: the 1995 event involving vomitoxin in Nature's Recipe dry foods; the 1998 aflatoxin event involving **dry dog foods** made by Doane Products; and the still-unidentified problem that sickened and killed dogs who ate certain lots of Go! Natural dry food in 2003.

Since then, there have been two more well-publicized **pet food recalls**: the afla-toxin poisonings caused by some dry foods made by Diamond Pet Food in late 2005, and the very recent event involving canned and at least one dry pet food made with (in the leading theory) contaminated wheat gluten.

These events – the most recent one in particular – have given us all quite a bit to think about, from the local (how did my pet store

respond to news of the recall?) to the global (how does the global economy affect us?); from the specific (what foods are safe to buy for my dog right now?) to the general (what types of food pose the greatest risk to their consumers?).

### Lessons learned

Past recalls have taught us the following:

- You should always store **dry pet food** in the bag it came in. This helps keep the food fresh, but more importantly, keeps the date/code information with the food. If a problem arises, this information will be critical to a proper response and/or investigation. If you feed canned food, rinse each can and keep it for at least a week or two.



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■ Don't feed your **dog** any food that looks or smells bad or abnormal. If a dry food is covered with green, hairy structures, it's moldy and should not be fed! Contact the food company or your local retailer and ask for a replacement. Usually, you will be asked to bring the food to the store from which it was purchased for a replacement. It helps if you retained the receipt, proving it was purchased from that store.

**In most cases, the amount of damage done by defective pet food depends upon how much of the food the animal ate. Pay attention if your dog is reluctant to eat, refuses his food, or becomes ill, and stop feeding that type of food.**

■ Owners should always be alert to the response of their dogs to their food. Vomiting or diarrhea are the most obvious signs of a problem with the food, but any changes in your dog's elimination and consumption patterns changes are notable. If we've said it once, we've said it a thousand times: write down and date any odd response or change in a notebook or on your calendar. Your memory is not as good as a written record.

■ With all but perennially fussy dogs, it's significant when a dog declines or is reluctant to eat a food. This is important every time you open a new bag or can, but is also significant if the dog becomes increasingly reluctant the deeper you reach into the bag of food. In past cases where foods sickened animals, the individuals who ate the most of the bad food fared the worst . . .

■ . . . so, stop feeding the food if your dog won't eat it, or if he becomes very reluctant to eat it, and contact its maker. Give the company the date/code information, ask specifically if the company has received any other reports about that food recently, and ask what the company will do for you.

■ The same goes, of course, if your dog becomes ill after eating a food. Stop feeding the food. Contact your veterinarian to discuss your dog's symptoms, and make sure the vet makes a note of your discussion in your dog's file. Get any sick dog to the veterinarian ASAP!

■ Following a bad reaction to one food, do provide your dog with another food, from a different company, while you monitor his response. If possible, feed him a product you can confirm is made (not just sold) by a different manufacturer. By the way, we don't recommend feeding a combination of commercial foods at the same time. In case of a reaction, you may be confused as to which food caused the problem, and will have to suspect both products. (See "Switch, But Don't Mix," June 2004 for more information.)

■ Contact the maker of the suspect food to discuss, date/code information in hand. Be prepared to give the company your veterinarian's contact information, also. When you contact the manufacturer, persist until you are satisfied that the company representative will record your complaint (including your dog's symptoms and the date/code information from the food).

If you feel brushed off, ask to speak to the company's veterinarian, nutritionist, or customer service supervisor – anyone who can discuss the issue with you further. A over-casual or defensive response from the company, in our opinion, is grounds for a "divorce." We would avoid that company's products in the future. There are too many good foods on the market today to pledge your undying loyalty to a company that can't wholeheartedly support its products.

■ Ask your veterinarian to report the suspected product injury to his or her state veterinarian and the FDA. Please note that this might take some real effort! See "Problems With Reporting System," left.

**You get what you pay for**

During the Menu Foods/wet foods/wheat gluten incident, we quickly lost patience when hearing owners who said, “We thought we were paying for the best foods available for our pets, and now this!” If an ingredient is needed to make other ingredients resemble meat, when meat could (and should) be used instead, you’re not dealing with a top-quality food.

One of our most dearly held principles of dog food selection is that whole food ingredients are more desirable than food “fragments.” This means wheat, yes; wheat gluten, wheat mill run, wheat bran, no! Chicken meal, yes; chicken by-product meal, no! This is for two main reasons.

First, unprocessed foods enjoy less exposure to potentially harmful agents in the course of processing, storage, and transport. Second, fresh and minimally processed foods are more nutritious than ingredients that are several operations (and perhaps many months and many miles) from harvest. Processing reduces the vitamin content of many foods, and can destroy any unique nutrient properties they may contain, such as antioxidants, flavonoids, and enzymes.

In some cases, the fractions used in low-cost pet food are truly “fillers,” and comprised of the part of a raw food that human food manufacturers have little use for; peanut hulls and cereal fines come to mind here. In other cases, pet food formulators utilize certain fractions to provide just the right amount of a needed nutrient or attribute. Tomato pomace and beet pulp are examples of truly functional fragments.

We’re also sticklers for the use of whole meats from named species of animals (i.e., chicken rather than poultry; beef rather than “meat”) and meals made from whole meats from named species (chicken meal rather than poultry meal). All animal proteins (even by-products, which tend to be of lower quality than muscle meats) have more to offer dogs (and especially cats) than plant-derived proteins, especially wheat gluten and corn gluten (a case can be made for a certain amount of rice gluten).

We can’t think of any pet food recall in the past 10 years that was due to a problem with the meat (or meat by-products, to be fair) in the food. If one arises, however, we’ll bet the farm that the animal proteins in question will be low-cost by-products, rather than high-priced muscle meats.

In our opinion, the presence of an inexpensive fraction or by-product high on the list of a pet food’s ingredients should warn you that the maker of the food has cut a corner. If the food contains several fractions or inexpensive ingredients, its maker is definitely utilizing “least-cost formulation,” as in, “What’s the cheapest way to make a food and still meet these nutrient levels?” The more fractions and other inexpensive ingredients a food contains, and the lower a product’s price, the less confidence you should have in its quality.

Of course, pet foods that meet all of our selection criteria tend to be far more expensive than grocery store brands. You can’t buy filet mignon at a hamburger price, and you can’t expect top-quality ingredients to go into a product that retails for pennies per pound.

### **Hallmarks of quality**

Buying products that contain whole food ingredients (and do not contain by-products) is one way consumers can tilt the odds in their favor. Another way is to choose products sold by companies that readily share information about their products with consumers.

This has been a long time coming, but it’s a trend that is picking up steam (at least among the companies that aspire to the “premium foods” segment of the market). When WDJ began publishing in 1998, not a single pet food company would tell us where their products were made. Today, many disclose that information and much more. Some disclose the origin of their ingredients, or offer certification that confirms the quality (and traceability) of their ingredients.

Still others are eager to discuss the quality controls they exert on their manufacturing process, including in-person supervision of co-packers, independent audits, and certification from outside inspectors such as the American Institute of Baking.

We understand all the various justifications that pet food companies have for not disclosing information about their ingredients or manufacture. But the advantages of nondisclosure are all theirs.

Too much disclosure is a risk in a competitive market, but truthful information about ingredient quality and good manufacturing practices helps pet owners discern and appreciate the differences between products – and win their long-term loyalty.

### **Ye of lost faith**

Given the scope and severity of the latest pet food recall, we don't blame dog owners who are considering feeding their canine companions a home-prepared diet, due to anxiety over the safety of commercial food. We support the impulse, though we do feel there are better reasons to feed a home-prepared diet (for example, we strongly feel that a well-formulated diet of fresh and varied ingredients is healthier for dogs). Don't just jump into the practice with a recipe off the Internet, however; these diets require a little homework.

Last month, we began a series of articles on how to formulate and prepare a complete and balanced diet for dogs using fresh, species-appropriate ingredients. The series will discuss cooked and raw diets, those that contain bone and those that do not, and those that contain grains as well as grain-free diets. The second installment starts on page 8, and the series will continue through the July issue.

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