

# ***Popular Grain-Free Dog Foods May Be Linked to Heart Disease***

**By Jan Hoffman**

July 24, 2018

From the New York Times

Bison and chickpeas / Wild boar and sweet potatoes / Kangaroo and lentils

These are just a few of the spectacularly popular selections of “grain-free” dog food that have deluged the pet food market in recent years. Dense with exotic proteins, teeming with legumes favored by health-conscious humans, they are promoted as delicious as well as nutritious — better for gluten-sensitive bellies, closer to the ancestral, protein-rich diets of the Yorkie’s savage forebears.

But earlier this month, the Food and Drug Administration announced that it is investigating a link between these diets and a common type of canine heart disease.

The condition is dilated cardiomyopathy, or D.C.M., in which the heart weakens and becomes enlarged. Symptoms include fatigue, difficulty breathing, coughing and fainting. Some dogs can abruptly go into heart failure.

D.C.M. is typically seen in large breed dogs that have a genetic predisposition for it, like Doberman pinschers, Irish wolfhounds, boxers and Great Danes. But CVCA, a practice of 19 veterinary cardiologists in the Baltimore-Washington, D.C. area, alerted the F.D.A. that it has been seeing D.C.M. among other breeds, including golden retrievers, doodle mixes, Labrador retrievers and Shih Tzus.

The common factor was a diet heavy in peas, lentils, chickpeas and potatoes — carbohydrates typically intended to replace grains.

Other veterinary cardiologists have also noticed the phenomenon. “The first clue for us was when we saw a household with two unrelated miniature Schnauzers with D.C.M.,” said Darcy Adin, a veterinary cardiologist who teaches at North Carolina State University’s College of Veterinary Medicine. “They were both eating the same boutique, exotic protein, grain-free diet.”

Her team has documented 36 dogs with suspected nutritional D.C.M., including poodles and dachshunds.

The possibility that expensive food, lovingly chosen, could make one’s adored pet devastatingly ill is sending shudders through dog owners.

“Don’t panic,” said Martine Hartogensis, a veterinarian who is deputy director for the Office of Surveillance and Compliance in the F.D.A.’s Center for Veterinary Medicine.

CVCA, the group that contacted the F.D.A., did a survey of 150 recent cases of D.C.M. Most of the dogs had been on grain-free diets. Steven L. Rosenthal, a partner, noted that they could not rule out other influences, but said that the group now sees eight to 12 new D.C.M. cases a month that are not associated with genetics.

The F.D.A. has recently received reports of some two dozen additional cases. Three dogs died.

Researchers do not know why these diets may be problematic — whether it's the absence of grains, the presence of legumes or something else.

But Lisa Freeman, a veterinary nutritionist and researcher with the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University, sees this moment as an opportunity to view grain-free diets skeptically. "Contrary to advertising and popular belief, there is no research to demonstrate that grain-free diets offer any health benefits over diets that contain grains," she said.

Grains are an important source of protein and other nutrients in many meat-based pet foods, she continued. "Grains have not been linked to any health problems except in the very rare situation when a pet has an allergy to a specific grain."

The F.D.A. said research has just begun on these uncharacteristic cases of D.C.M. One group, cocker spaniels and golden retrievers, do reveal low taurine levels. Investigators speculate that legumes may interfere with the dog's ability to make taurine or perhaps absorb it. Joshua Stern, a veterinary cardiologist at the University of California, Davis, is tracking 24 golden retrievers with low taurine levels who had been on grain-free diets.

But taurine levels in other affected dogs, including mixed breeds, are normal, which puzzles researchers. The F.D.A. requested that owners and veterinarians take blood and urine samples from affected dogs for comparative analysis.

For now, the pet food industry is holding its breath. Dana Brooks, chief executive of the Pet Food Institute, which represents most pet food manufacturers, said in an emailed statement: "While the exact cause of the reported illnesses has not yet been identified, P.F.I. shares the belief that any pet illness should be taken seriously, and we remind pet owners to consult their trusted veterinarians with any questions about their pet's health and well-being."

Veterinary experts recommend that owners with dogs on such diets review the reasons for doing so with their veterinarians.