

Pets and People: Week of Feb 11th

The Pet Food Crisis-Update

Almost all pet owners are aware of the pet food crisis that occurred from April to June 2007. There are several reasons why this problem affected us as pet owners and as consumers who ingest food imported from other countries.

During the period that the toxic compounds were creating a scare for pet owners, there was a great deal of confusion about which foods were affected and the reasons why pets were dying. It was not until a recently released toxicology study performed at the University of California-Davis Veterinary School that we finally understand what caused death and illness in hundreds of pets during the pet food recall last spring.

The study concluded that the combination of two chemicals acting together were responsible for last year's pet-food related deaths. The two chemicals, melamine and cyanuric acid were both suspected, however, there were no published reports of toxicology studies examining the combined affects of these chemicals acting in tandem.

Melamine is a man-made compound often used in fertilizer. In March of 2007, Food and Drug Administration investigators discovered melamine in wheat gluten produced in China and sold to U.S. and Canadian pet food manufacturers as a thickener. The addition of this compound can make the foods *appear higher in protein* than they really are. Cyanuric acid is used to stabilize chlorine in outdoor pools.

In the study, when either of these two compounds were added alone, there were no observable results, however, when fed in a combination similar to those found in the contaminated foods, kidney illness and death occurred.

When the cats in the study were fed both compounds, yellow-brown, fan shaped crystals appeared in the kidneys and in the urine. As a practicing veterinarian this is very helpful. We treat many cats for kidney disease and failure, and in the future we can detect these crystals and

put this type of poisoning on a list of differentials and hope to stop future crisis more expediently.

Additionally, we have just learned about the recently released results of a survey conducted by the American Association of Veterinary Laboratory Diagnosticians. Over 30,000 veterinarians were invited to participate, and 347 cases met the criteria for linking adulterated pet food with illness or death. 235 cats were affected of which 61 percent died; and 112 dogs were affected with a mortality rate of 74 percent.

There are several lessons to be learned by this crisis. First, we must ensure that the foods we consume are safe, and that the food be labeled accurately so we are not misled about the content. Remember, the melamine not only was one of two compounds poisoning our pets, but it also could have had the affect of distorting the amount of protein we believed we were providing in the food.

Congress has responded to the pet food crisis. There has been a new law enacted, the Food and Drug Administration Amendments Act of 2007. This act calls for better communication with the public in the event of human food or pet food crisis with posting on a web site in a single location “that is easily accessed and understood by the public”

The new amendments give the FDA two years to improve the labeling of pet foods to include accurate information about the ingredients and nutritional benefit in the pet foods we purchase.