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Grain-free doesn't mean problem-free

By Mona Miller, DVM



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grain-free diet link to taurine deficiency. It's possible that it involves the absence of grains, or conversely the presence of legumes. Or it's possible that legumes may interfere with an individual's ability to absorb taurine. Not all dogs that eat grain-free diets are negatively affected.

Grain-free diets became popular about 11 years ago, after a recall of pet foods contaminated with melamine from China. At that time, "boutique" diets became more available and popular. These diets included a variety of carbohydrates that substituted for grains - potatoes, peas, lentils, chickpeas, just to name a few.

This investigation allows the opportunity to discuss whether dogs in general need or benefit from grain-free diets.

According to a recent New York Times article, one veterinary nutritionist at Tufts Veterinary Medicine School, Dr. Lisa Freeman, says, "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." For the record, I agree completely. I advise my clients that dogs are not inherently gluten or grain-intolerant, just as humans as a species are not. There are definitely individuals who have gluten-intolerance, both humans and canines. These individuals will have problems with digestion and sometimes with skin allergies, and they should definitely avoid grains and gluten-containing foods. But for the rest of us, until or unless we develop a problem, it's perfectly fine to eat "mainstream" foods.

The Food and Drug Administration announced recently that it is investigating a link between grain-free dog diets and a certain type of heart disease called Dilated Cardiomyopathy. This is a new investigation, with cases reported by specialty veterinary hospitals across the nation in the past year. It appears to have involved a small percentage of the many dogs that eat diets with alternatives to grain. It is unclear what the exact cause-and-effect mechanism is, but may likely involve grain-free diets, decreased blood levels of taurine (a particular amino acid), and certain breeds or individuals within certain breeds.

Dilated Cardiomyopathy is a common heart failure problem in certain purebred dogs. It usually affects large breeds such as Dobermans, Great Danes and Boxers, as well as American Cocker Spaniels. It affects the heart muscle, causing decreased function and "sloppy" contractions, resulting in an enlarged poorly-functioning heart. There is most likely a genetic component in some breeds.

Taurine deficiency as a non-genetic cause of heart disease is not a new finding. In 1987, UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine reported that this particular amino acid deficiency in cat food caused DCM. The petfood industry as a whole stepped up and started to include taurine as an ingredient in cat food; thus, it is a very rare condition nowadays. Most likely, a veterinarian who graduated from vet school after the late 1990s has probably not seen this type of heart failure in cats fed commercially balanced diets. The good news is that DCM caused by taurine deficiency can be a reversible condition in some individuals.

It is unclear what the significance is regarding the

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