

Food for Thought

How to choose safe and healthy foods for your pet

By Sondi Bruner

Earlier this year, the massive pet food recall from Menu Foods as a result of melamine-tainted wheat gluten sent a number of pet owners into a panic, as products under a multitude of brand names were suddenly pulled from store shelves. After the dust had settled, many people were left wondering which products they could still trust.

"It's definitely been a very stressful time for pet owners," says Dr. Janet Adam, a veterinarian at Vancouver's Granville Island Hospital who received many calls from concerned clients about the recall.

Much of the problem with identifying safe foods for your pet lies in the current labelling system, according to Dr. Michael Goldberg from the Vancouver Animal Wellness Hospital. He explains that while a product label will list an ingredient, such as beef, and indeed contain the required percentage of beef, companies are not obligated to specify where that beef comes from.

"It can be beef off the floor of an abattoir that's not fit for human consumption," he says. "You still absolutely can't be sure of ingredients. That's why the food recall is such a huge eye opener."

Although finding a safe food for your pet may seem daunting, there are many things pet owners can do to ensure the health of their furry friends. First of all, do your research. With the help of the Internet, look for pet food companies that stand behind their products and are working to improve animal welfare through research and scientific studies.

Your veterinarian can be a great resource when it comes to selecting the proper food for your pet's individual dietary needs. "The bottom line is



there's not going to be one food that's right for every cat or every dog," Dr. Adam explains.

On product labels, look for a seal of approval from the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) or the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA). These associations perform vigorous testing and hold manufacturers to the strictest standards, so their approval indicates that a particular pet food meets nutritional guidelines.

Also keep an eye out for quality ingredients. A product should list its meat type within its first five ingredients, such as specifying beef, chicken or lamb, rather than simply indicating "meat products." And avoid foods featuring grains or glutens as the main ingredient, as these are merely filler and shouldn't be the primary nutrient

source for your cat or dog.

Products containing preservatives such as BHA, BHI and ethoxyquin are also not the best choice, as there have been some links between these chemicals and cancers. Many sources also advise pet owners to stay away from foods that contain animal byproducts, but Dr. Adam and Dr. Goldberg say that byproducts aren't always reason to write a product off. Byproducts may constitute items like off-cuts, trimmings and organ meats not considered fit for human consumption, but that doesn't mean they're necessarily dangerous to your pet.

Another route is to contact the pet food company directly. If you have any doubt about a product, says Dr. Goldberg, the best advice he can offer is to call the toll-free 1-800 number provided by most pet food makers.

Of course, you can always make your own pet food, a practice that's grown in popularity since the recall. Start with a pet-specific cookbook such as *Better Food for Dogs*, by David Bastin, Jennifer Ashton and Dr. Grant Nixon, (Robert Rose Inc., 2002). While some vets like Dr. Goldberg recommend a raw diet, others advise cooked food. Whichever you choose, consult your own vet to ensure the food you're preparing is safe and contains the necessary nutrients.

At the end of the day, however, the recall shouldn't dissuade you from purchasing commercial pet food. Armed with the right information, you have the power to choose the best foods to help your pet live a long and healthy life. ■