

SECRETS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT CORN



By Rodney Habib

A few months ago, holistic veterinarian Dr Karen Becker was a guest on my radio show, In The Dish (which has since found a new home with the Dogs Naturally family and is now called On Air with Dogs Naturally). Dr Becker and I discussed the dangers of grains in the veterinarian lines of pet foods and in other commercial pet foods found on pet store shelves. We finished the show and I didn't think much about it – until the next morning when I awoke to hundreds of messages on my Facebook page from an angered veterinarian community. They felt that we unnecessarily attacked the bags of processed pet foods they carry on their shelves.

After going over each comment, I found the main point of most of the remarks was that corn and grains are terrific for our pets.

Really? That's news to me.

To be clear, this wasn't a shot at veterinary foods, nor was it a shot at any particular manufacturer for adding corn, rice, or any grains into their pet food formulas. And I'm not going to talk about whether these ingredients are appropriate or not for dogs. Let's say, just for a minute, that corn and starches are just as nutritious and wonderful as the vets claimed. Let's focus on a bigger and much less talked about problem. A problem that starts, not with corn, but the farms where that corn comes from.

Have a seat on that hay bale over there, Jimmy. It's time for a story.

When you think of a farm do you envision a beautiful red barn, maybe a silo, and acres of bountiful goodness, just like Mother Nature intended? Smell that fresh air and look at all those beautiful rows of nutritious foods. Ah, I can see now why vets think this corn stuff is a really good idea.

But wait! What are those containers behind the barn? Well, Jimmy, those are pesticides and larvacides – and that bag over there is a fungicide. But look at the corn, Jimmy! There are no bugs on that stuff. It's special corn called genetically modified.

Welcome to today's farmer and the transformation of foods! Without focusing on the hundreds of problems this presents, let's talk for a moment about the following statement that was quietly made by the Pet Food Industry: "Problems with toxic mold residue may worsen as farmers blend tainted corn held in storage bins."

Not that any of us needed something else to worry about, but there's a new danger in your dog's pet food bag and it goes by many names. My nanny, God love her, would probably call it mold. However, science has given it more official names - like aflatoxins and mycotoxins.

I can hear you now... "Afla-whaaaa?" "Myco-who?"

Well, pull up a chair, Jimmy. I'm about to tell you how things really work on the farm these days.

A lot of marketers spend a lot of time and a lot more money trying to convince the public, pet owners, and veterinarians that corn and certain grains are an excellent source of proteins, vitamins and minerals. But has anybody taken a moment to research what's been happening back on the farms where that corn comes from?

Here are some interesting bits I found at Reuters.com:

"Dog food recall underscores toxic danger in drought-hit U.S. corn."

There's more. "Aflatoxin is the byproduct of a mold that flourishes in dry conditions, and last year's historic drought in the US Midwest put everyone from farmers to grain handlers and food industry officials on high alert. According to crop insurance data from the US Department of Agriculture, payouts for mycotoxins, of which aflatoxin is the most common, totaled nearly \$75 million, triple the level of a year ago."

Seventy-five million bucks in insurance claims. Triple the level of a year ago!

Now you shouldn't need me to tell you that eating mold is a really, really bad idea. But for those of you who scrape the green stuff off your bread and eat it, this might be news. Molds like aflatoxins and mycotoxins can cause kidney and liver damage, suppress the immune system and disrupt the absorption of nutrients - among a bevy of other problems you don't want to happen to your best friend!

So we now know the poor farmers who were suffering from last year's drought have corn and other grains that are loaded with mold. And I know what you're thinking: the farmers just throw that moldy stuff out, right? Not exactly.

You see, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) found a use for it. They granted approval so more aflatoxin-ridden corn can be blended with the "good" corn in animal feeds.

Professor of agriculture from Iowa State, Charles Hurburgh explains, "Livestock producers may be willing to purchase contaminated corn ... There will probably be a discount to the price received, but there may be no other options."

Basically, the so-called safe levels of molds that were once allowed in pet foods have now been raised so that crappy, moldy corn can be used up. On top of that, the pet food marketers can still say, "It's OK! We use the safest levels of aflatoxins deemed by the FDA, don't worry!"

And the really scary part is, the food wasn't all that safe in the first place! Mold contaminations have already caused a ton of pet food recalls over the last few years. Pets have died from eating pet foods contaminated with mold.

Dr Max Hawkins explains, "The pet food industry is no stranger to recalled products due to mycotoxins. The earliest documented aflatoxin outbreak dates back to 1974 when hundreds of stray dogs in India died due to the consumption of aflatoxin-contaminated corn (*Krishnamachari et al, 1975*). In December 2005, 76 dogs were



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killed from aflatoxin-contaminated petfood in the US, causing a large recall.”

Now with higher mold levels allowed, are we setting the stage for disaster?

Researchers have begun pulling food samples off the shelves and testing them for all types of molds. One facility, Alltech, has analyzed 965 samples to date. The samples included grains, protein sources, by-products and animal feeds, including dog food.

Here are some of the things they found:

98% of the samples were contaminated with one or more mycotoxins.

93% of the samples contained two or more mycotoxins.

39% of the samples contained more than five mycotoxins.

Is anyone going to do something about this? Will the FDA step in?

While the FDA issues guidelines on the acceptable levels of mold that can be present in grains, they don't watch the manufacturing of pet foods as closely as foods made for human consumption. This means if we don't wise up and research what we're feeding our pets, we're playing Russian roulette with those molds.

Trevor Smith, Guelph University professor and world leader in the field of mycotoxin research has this to say about molds in pet foods: “A shift in pet food ingredients is on. Instead of worrying about bacteria spoilage or disease contamination, like we have in the past, we now have to focus on removing mycotoxins.”

Smith explains that pet owners can help prevent their dogs or cats from consuming mycotoxins by avoiding cheaper pet food that's

more likely to contain vegetable cereals and corn or wheat fillers. He particularly urges pet owners to avoid food with significant amounts of rice bran.

“That's the ingredient that's often contaminated,” he says. “Although we have no exact numbers, we can estimate that when half of the food is of vegetable origin, there will almost always be some degree of contamination. If the food is mainly of animal origins, the chances of contamination are greatly reduced.”

In my opinion, grain based pet foods are a risky proposition. If you really want to feed foods with grains in them, then try to source human grade grains and avoid anything used for animal feed. Don't just look on the bag; contact the manufacturer directly and find out if the grains they use are for human consumption or animal feed consumption.

So, to those vets who were busy defending corn and grain on my Facebook page, I just have one question. Are you defending fresh, organic grains for human consumption or the moldy, genetically modified grains? 🐾



Rodney Habib is a pet nutrition blogger and host of the popular radio show, *In The Dish*. He is constantly trying to break the misconceptions of processed foods to shine a light on real foods for optimal health. Rodney owns Planet Paws Pet Essentials located in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia where he lives with his four fur kids.

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