

To Grain-Free or Not to Grain-Free



Talking to clients about pet nutrition can be a daunting task with the increased interest over the past decade in feeding pets what were once considered “unconventional” or “nontraditional” diets, such as raw, vegan, homemade, and grain-free.

The Shifting Dialogue Surrounding Grain-Free, Vegan, Raw, and Boutique Diets

by Jen Reeder

Pat Fay was surprised when a veterinarian heard a heart murmur during a routine exam of her 17-month-old standard poodle, Lucy—and shocked when a veterinary cardiologist diagnosed the young dog with dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM).

“We bought her as a puppy from a breeder who shows standard poodles and has absolutely no genetic dilated cardiomyopathy in their gene line,” she said.

Eager to help her beloved dog, Fay followed the cardiologist’s recommendations to start heart medication and stop feeding a grain-free diet. Since Lucy’s health improved within six months—and because Lucy is participating in the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) investigation into a potential link between canine DCM and certain diets, many labeled “grain-free”—Fay now shares her concerns about diet-related DCM with other pet owners, including users of a private Facebook group with about 20,000 members.

Links to Diet

Fay regrets that when Lucy was a puppy with a sensitive stomach, she

asked for advice at a boutique pet store and started Lucy on a grain-free food now being investigated by the FDA.

“You want to do the best for your dog baby and we got caught up in the hype of all of it,” she said. “We did a boutique dog food thinking we were doing the absolute right thing by her.”

Allison Heaney, DVM, MS, DACVIM (Cardiology), cardiologist at several Petcardia Veterinary Cardiology locations, including AAHA-accredited Wheat Ridge Animal Hospital in Wheat Ridge, Colorado, diagnosed Lucy with DCM in June 2018 and recommended switching from the grain-free food.

She’s treated numerous patients whose conditions have improved with medication and a diet change—and some with just a diet change. In

one instance, a dog with DCM and heart failure was referred by another veterinary cardiologist who had already advised medication, taurine supplementation, and other protocols. The only thing left was to change food, which she did. On the next visit, the dog’s heart was dramatically smaller.

“Now we’ve had enough cases in which we switch foods and they improve,” she said. “I definitely know there’s something happening and it’s for real. I don’t know exactly why that food switch would make a difference. What is the deficiency? Is it a toxicity? Is it a malabsorption? I have no idea, but we’ve seen enough that have reversed that it’s not . . . propaganda.”

While some clients are quick to follow Heaney’s recommendations—one woman feeding a vegan diet to her two-year-old dog with DCM immediately asked where to get

traditional pet food when she learned the diet might be contributing to her pet’s heart disease—others resist or flatly refuse to alter their pet’s diet.

“It’s really frustrating,” Heaney said. “A client [I had] yesterday wouldn’t change the food. She said, ‘I’m not going to change until I have a specific answer as far as what the problem is.’ And I was like, ‘I don’t know why people are dying of vaping, but you know what habit I’m not going to pick up right now? Vaping.’”

Public Perception

Heaney is concerned that perceived expertise on nutrition seems to have shifted to pet stores.

“That has not done us any favors,” she said. “I think that as a profession we’re going to have to, in some way, shape, or form, take the reins back and define what is good pet food for dogs.”

Talking to clients about pet nutrition can be a daunting task with the increased interest over the past decade or so—potentially sparked by the FDA’s 2007 recall of melamine-tainted pet food—in feeding pets what were once considered “unconventional” or “nontraditional” diets, such as raw, vegan, homemade, and grain-free. Many boutique pet foods are now marketed with buzzwords like *organic*, *natural*, *grain-free*, *nongenetically modified*, and *human-grade*.

So perhaps it’s unsurprising that the FDA’s 2018 announcement of an investigation of a possible link between canine DCM and certain foods, many of which were labeled



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—JOE BARTGES, DVM, PHD, DACVIM, DACVN

“grain-free,” has received strong pushback from consumers. (A representative from the FDA declined to comment on the status of the investigation for this article, instead referring to previously published material on the FDA’s website.)

Cassie Panning, BS, CVT, VTS (Nutrition), at the University of Minnesota’s Veterinary Medical Center, has been a veterinary technician for more than 16 years. She’s seen increased interest in grain-free diets for pets as gluten-free diets have grown popular with humans.

“There are many people who think that the alerts by the FDA are made up and a big conspiracy from the big pet food companies,” she said. “When you are on the front lines and seeing dogs die from something that is preventable, it is really sad. While the research is ongoing and we still don’t know a cause or the exact link, until we know more, it seems silly to not feed something else.”

Panning noted that veterinary technicians can be the front lines of

communication with clients. They can go over nutrition recommendations for new puppies and kittens, and they should feel comfortable discussing feeding management and foods. She said they should also be able to teach clients body condition scores so that pet owners feel empowered at home.

She suggests a nonjudgmental approach when discussing nutrition with clients.

“We always stress that we only want the best for the pet and the clients. We often praise the clients for wanting what is best and then talk about concerns with their current diet,” said Panning. “Really listening to a client’s goals and finding a diet that works best for their pet and their lifestyle will help you get much further; any time a client feels that they are being shamed, they will put up a wall.”

Other Problematic Diets

Angela Rollins, DVM, PhD, DACVN, clinical associate professor of small-animal clinical services at the University of Tennessee, is glad

researchers are working on finding answers about the potential link between DCM and grain-free diets. With legumes being examined as a possible cause, until a study proves otherwise, she’s hesitant to recommend vegan diets for dogs because legumes are often the primary protein source in such foods.

However, she said there is plenty of evidence about the risks associated with raw diets. When communicating with clients about raw-food issues, she suggests emphasizing that they can introduce pathogenic bacteria like *Salmonella*, *Escherichia coli*, *Listeria*, and *Campylobacter*.

“All of these potential bacteria can make our pets sick, but they can also make the humans in the household sick as well,” she said. “These will be spread in your pet’s saliva and feces. Think about a cat on a raw-food diet. They’re then going to groom their entire hair coat, so they can be this walking ball of *Salmonella* all through your house. . . . I think there’s a significant risk of liability as a medical professional if we’re not warning our clients about those risks.”

Joe Bartges, DVM, PhD, DACVIM, DACVN, professor of medicine and nutrition at the University of Georgia’s College of Veterinary Medicine, served on the task force that created the *2010 AAHA Nutritional Assessment Guidelines for Dogs and Cats*.

He said the guidelines included “unconventional” diets such as homemade, vegetarian, and raw as a nutritional screening risk factor primarily because veterinarians were less familiar with the diets at the time. He noted that what were

once considered unconventional diets have become major parts of the pet-food market and do not pose more potential danger than conventional diets. (He posited that a better term than *conventional* might be *heat-processed grain-containing diets*.)

"In the last 10 years, there have been many more dogs and cats harmed by issues with conventional diets—melamine/cyanuric acid, vitamin D, aflatoxin—than reported with unconventional diets," he said.

Bartges stated that obesity is the "number one" nutritional problem in dogs and cats (and people), so it should be the biggest nutritional concern for everyone.

Communication Is Key

Dawn Brooks, DVM, chief of staff at Littleton Animal Hospital in Littleton, Massachusetts, was also a member of the AAHA Nutritional Assessment Guidelines task force. She is passionate about the need for better, standard labeling on pet food bags to make it easier for pet owners—as well as veterinarians—to compare ingredients as well as amounts of nutrients like protein and sodium, as we can with packaging on human food.

"We need to try to make it so the consumer can compare bag to bag," she said. "Until we can do that, these companies can continue to make changes and confuse the client and get the

client to buy their food because they have the best-looking bag. And that's not how we should pick food."

Susan Hays, executive director of the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO), said the organization does not test, regulate, or approve pet foods. Rather, AAFCO works on the ingredient definitions and regulations, and companies can do feeding trials through different organizations to establish the nutritional adequacy of a formulation.

"When a company develops a new ingredient, then that ingredient needs to be approved or defined for use in animal food, including pet food," she explained. "That's where the AAFCO ingredient definition process comes in."

Hays also shared a hope to work with veterinarians in the future, such as possibly by offering training for CE units.

"I think that one of our interests is in working with the veterinary community," she said. "We just are not clear on exactly how to accomplish that."

Natalie Marks, DVM, CVJ, medical director of AAHA-accredited Blum Animal Hospital in Chicago, Illinois, said the conversation about pet nutrition is fluid, and that should be communicated to pet owners.

How to Respond to "You're in It for the Money" Accusations

Many veterinarians have had clients push back on nutritional recommendations with charges like, "You're in it for the money." Here's advice on how to respond to such accusations:

"I think in our country in general, we're seeing more people [who] are just distrustful of large corporations. That's a trend in pet food. . . . If they're concerned you're getting money from these companies, you could say, 'Listen, I don't care where you buy your food from. I'll write your prescription and you can get it from somewhere else. But I do truly think this is the best for your pet because of the science behind these diets for the pet's illness.'"

—Angela Rollins, DVM, PhD, DACVN

"If people knew the veterinary industry better, they would know that a lot of times that's the last reason that people go into the field. If you have a client [who] does want to have a respectful discussion, I think you can certainly have that. But the best advice I could give is to deflect and say, 'I think a better conversation is how we can find the best medical care for your pet.'"

—Natalie Marks, DVM, CVJ

“What I try to say to clients is, ‘What we’re talking about today doesn’t mean this is a diet or plan we’re going to be talking about in six months or six years from now, because things change: research changes, nutrition changes, your pet’s needs change, your needs change, their disease state changes,’” she said. “We’re not signing it in stone. I think sometimes that helps clients feel like, ‘OK, I can try this, but if I’m not comfortable with it, my vet is open for discussion. We can try plan B.’”

She said being open to compromise is important because nutrition is “a very charged and passion-filled topic,” particularly because so many people now consider pets to be family members. Additionally,

clients—particularly millennials and members of Generation Z—want options, according to Marks. That might include sharing contact information for a veterinary nutritionist if they insist on cooking for their pets themselves, for instance.

“My exam table I treat as a coffee table,” she said. “I want my client to sit down across from me and have a discussion as if we’re having coffee, person to person, about what is important to them for their pet.”

Marks recommends that the entire team at an animal hospital, including technicians, customer service representatives, and management, deliver the same messaging about nutrition to support the veterinarians.

Ultimately, she finds it encouraging that people are so interested in what they’re feeding their pets. In the past, nutrition tended to be a side note to the exam, but now many clients research the topic and ask more questions.

“We should be happy that pet parents are really cognizant and very concerned about what’s going into their dog or cat,” she said. “We just need to find a way to work with that a little better if that doesn’t necessarily coincide with what we’re recommending.” ✨



Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder trusts recommendations from her dogs’ veterinary team about nutrition.



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