

Salmonella Lurks in Pet Foods Too

When it comes to worries about food poisoning, human food typically gets all [the attention](#). But a growing number of recalls of tainted foods in the past few years involve pet products.

This week, Merrick Pet Care of Amarillo, Tex., recalled 248 cases of its Doggie Wishbone pet treats because of potential contamination with salmonella. And last month, Nestlé Purina PetCare issued a recall after some bags of its Purina One Vibrant Maturity dry cat food tested positive for salmonella. Indeed, over the past two years, pet food makers have issued [nearly three dozen recalls of pet food](#) and dog treats like pig ears because of salmonella concerns.

“The problem of salmonella in pet foods and pet treats, even in pet supplements like vitamins, is something people should be aware of,” said Dr. Casey Barton Behravesh, a veterinary epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The most recent recalls were a result of salmonella detected during random testing and not because of illness in animals or humans, but experts caution that tainted food poses threats to both pets and people. Last year, [the C.D.C. reported](#) that from 2006 to 2008, nearly 80 people, including 32 children under the age of 2, were infected with salmonella as a result of coming into contact with dry dog or cat food, marking the first time human infections were linked to dry pet food. Other recent salmonella outbreaks in humans have been linked to pig ears and pet treats made with beef and salmon.

“It’s important for people to know that after they feed their pets or give them treats, they should wash their hands, particularly before they prepare food or baby bottles or before they eat,” said Dr. Behravesh.

Dried pet food typically is heated to high temperatures that kill bacteria before it is shaped into different shapes of kibble. But dry food is not necessarily produced under sterile conditions, and contamination can occur at various stages in the production process, veterinarians say. Canned food, by contrast, is vacuum-sealed and sterilized but can be contaminated after it is opened if improperly stored or handled.

Pig ears, which are frozen, cleaned and flavored but not cooked, may become contaminated from the original animal carcass. One study in Canada found that 51 percent of pig ears purchased at stores contained salmonella; another study also found high rates of contamination, 41 percent, in pig ears sold in the United States, according to a [June report in The Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association](#).

“We know from past investigations that pig ears and similar treats that involve dried animal parts can be a risk for salmonella infection in people,” Dr. Behravesh said.

Raw meat, including scraps and bones obtained from butchers, is another common source of salmonella exposure in pets. In the June report, 45 percent of commercial raw meat diets fed to greyhounds tested positive for salmonella.

In the documented outbreaks involving humans, pets consuming the contaminated food or treats often didn’t show visible signs of food poisoning, though often a pet’s illness is never diagnosed by a veterinarian. Symptoms of food poisoning in pets are similar to those in people and include lethargy, fever, vomiting and bloody diarrhea that can last three to five days.

“A lot of people don’t realize pets can be just as vulnerable to these food-borne infections as we are,” said Kimberly May, assistant director of professional and public affairs at the American Veterinary Medical Association. Puppies and kittens as well as adult animals with compromised immune systems are most vulnerable.

To lower the risk of salmonella exposure to both humans and pets, the [American Veterinary Medical Association recommends](#) avoiding raw food diets and storing pet foods properly. Dry foods, treats and vitamins should be kept in a cool, dry place, away from the kitchen area, and food and water bowls should be washed often. Individually packaged pig ears are less likely to be contaminated than those from bulk bins.

Children, the elderly and people with suppressed immune systems should not handle pet food or treats. And hands should be washed before and after handling pet products.