

Pet stores are pulling Chinese-made dog treats after years of mystery dog illnesses and deaths

No more Chinese dog treats for you. (AP Photo/The Grand Rapids Press-MLive.com, Zach Gibson)

Petco, one of the country's largest pet retailers, announced on Monday that it has pulled all Chinese-made dog and cat treats from its shelves, citing concerns that the foreign made pet foods could be linked to a series of yet unexplained sicknesses and deaths among pet dogs in the United States. The move, the first by a national pet store, comes despite the FDA's inability to tie the illnesses specifically to Chinese-made pet foods. And there's reason to believe it might signify the beginning of a swift industry-wide precautionary movement away from such imports.

Thousands of pets have fallen ill since 2007, and hundreds more have died. In all, the FDA has fielded some 5,000 complaints of pet illnesses directly tied to the consumption of chicken, duck, and vegetable jerky treats made in China. But despite testing more than a thousand samples, inspecting factories in China, and soliciting third party input, the agency has yet to establish the cause.

"We are frustrated," Martine Hartogensis, who oversees the FDA's investigation, told my colleague Brady Dennis last year. "It's been a long, winding, twisting road . . . [But] we haven't given up."

Pet retailers have proven less patient.

Last May, Petco announced it would start taking steps to remove China-made dog and cat treats.

"We know some pet parents are wary of dog and cat treats made in China, especially Chicken Jerky products, and we've heard their concerns," said Jim Myers, Petco's chief executive, in a statement.

Petco has not carried any dog or cat food from China for several years. The announcement Monday applies only to treats—in particularly ones made with jerky and rawhide, according to Lily Gluzberg, a spokesperson for the company. Petco is also expanding its offering of treats made in the United States.

PetSmart Inc., which, like Petco, operates more than 1,300 stores nationally, has already pledged to remove all Chinese-made pet treats from its stores by spring. Together, PetSmart and Petco control more than half of the pet market in the United States, according to data from market research firm, IBISWorld. The rest of the industry is controlled by smaller family-owned stores, franchises, and chains, many of which will likely be cornered into following suit—if they don't already shy away from Chinese-made treats —especially if consumer fears of the foreign-made treats continue to grow.

Even Nestle Purina and Del Monte, which own brands such as Waggin' Tail and Milo's Kitchen, stopped selling chicken jerky dog treats made in China back in 2012, calling the shift precautionary.

Growing concerns over the possibility of contamination have come amid a boom in Chinese dog and cat food imports. The Chinese diet traditionally favors dark meat over white meat, leaving an abundance of the latter, which is preferred for pet food.

Chinese cat and dog food imports ballooned to some 86 million pounds in 2011, the latest date for which the FDA has data. That marks a nearly 500 percent increase from 2005, when imports fell short of 16 million pounds.

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