



A Consumer's Guide: Ensuring the Safety of Pet Food

Authored by Claire M. Murphy, Graduate Student; Olivia N. Schertz, OMALS student, and Laura K Strawn, Associate Professor & Extension Specialist, Department of Food Science and Technology, Virginia Tech

Introduction

As of 2021, 70% of U.S. households, approximately 90.5 million, own a pet dog, cat, bird, horse, fish, reptile, or small animal (APPA, 2022). This number is up 14% (as 56% of U.S. households owned a pet in 1988), and it continues to rise annually.

Between 2017 and 2021, animal food and veterinary medicine products were implicated in 114 recalls (FDA, 2022b). For example, in December 2020, there was recall of dog and cat food products containing an ingredient contaminated with aflatoxins (FDA, 2021). This pet food contamination event led to more than 110 dogs dead, and more than 210 sick dogs (Gibson, 2021). FDA has stated these figures are approximate and may not reflect the total number of pets affected (Gibson, 2021). Pet owners should be mindful of the potential risks when buying, preparing, and storing a pets' food.

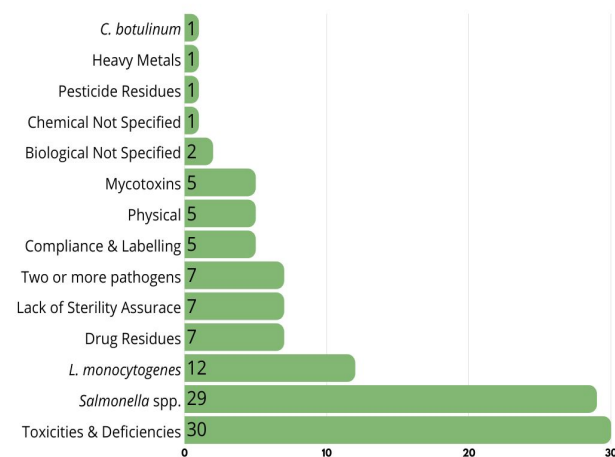


Figure 1. Number and reasons for recalls of Animal Feed Products from 2017 to 2021 (data from FDA 2022b).

Buying Pet Food

The type and brand of food you buy for your pets should be at the discretion of you, and your veterinarian. No matter what type of food you are purchasing, only buy pet food products/treats that are in good condition. Always check the packaging for visible signs of damage, such as dents, tears, punctures, and discolorations.

Preparing and Handling Pet Food

How you prepare and handle pet food is important to maintaining the safety and quality. Here are some best practices when preparing and handling pet food:

- Before and after handling pet food and treats, wash your hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and water.
- Have designated scooping utensil and storage containers that are only used for pet food in order to avoid cross contamination.
- Do not use your pet's food bowl as a scooping utensil.
- Wash pet food bowls and scooping utensils with soap and water or in the dishwasher after each use.



Figure 2. Proper washing of pet food bowl. Photo courtesy of Laura K. Strawn. Authors are not endorsing any product or brand.

Storing Pet Food

Ensuring the proper storage of pet food can assist in maintaining its safety and maintain the products' nutritional value. Here are some best practices for storing pet food:

- Store pet foods and treats in the original container. This allows you to have the UPC code, lot number, brand, and manufacturer information easily available, in case of a product defect or recall.
- If you need to pour dry pet food into another storage container, make sure it's clean, dry, and has a lid that fits snugly (to keep rodents or other pests from the pet food/treats). Alternatively, take a picture of the UPC code, label and lot number for your record.
- Store dry pet food, and unopened, canned wet pet food in a cool (below 80°F) and dry place.
- Tightly cover, and refrigerate canned or moist pet food at or below 40°F.
- Keep pet food in a secure location to prevent your pet from eating an entire supply at once, or members of your household from consuming (e.g., small child).



Figure 3. Examples of the correct storage of canned moist pet food being tightly covered and held at proper temperatures. Photos courtesy of Laura K. Strawn. Authors are not endorsing any product or brand.

Raw Pet Food

Raw pet foods pose a health risk to pets and pet owners, if certain best practices are not followed (e.g., washing hands after handling, or preventing cross-contamination by cleaning and disinfecting objects that touch raw food). A raw pet food diet can include organ meats, muscle meats, whole or ground bones, raw eggs, pet-safe fresh fruits and vegetables, and dairy products. This also includes feeding your pet frozen or live reptile, amphibian or rodents. Raw pet diets can be homemade, store-bought, freeze-dried, or dehydrated. Pathogenic microbes, like *Salmonella*, have been found in different raw pet food ingredients. These microbes could make you or others in your household sick, if you/they handle

raw food or touch objects that were used when preparing raw food (e.g., a child touching a pet food bowl). If you choose to feed your pet(s) raw food diets, you may follow these best practices (precautions):

- Wash your hands with soap and water after handling raw pet food products and ingredients.
- Thoroughly clean and disinfect all surfaces and objects that come in contact with raw pet food including countertops, the inside of refrigerators and microwaves, kitchen utensils, mixing spoons, feeding bowls, and cutting boards.
- Carefully handle raw and frozen meat and poultry products. Freeze raw meat and poultry products until you are ready to use them, and thaw them in your refrigerator or microwave, in secondary container (to avoid spills/leaks).
- If you use raw ingredients to make your own cooked pet food, ensure that you cook all ingredients to proper internal temperatures by measuring with a food thermometer.
- If your pet consumes a raw food diets, don't let your pet lick your face after eating. If you do play with your pet after they have eaten, wash your hands, and or any other parts of your body they licked.



Figure 4. Steps in safe handling of raw pet food; (i) wash hands thoroughly, (ii) Clean and disinfect all surfaces that the raw food touched and (iii) ensure to store ingredients at the proper temperatures. Figure developed by Claire M. Murphy using Canva.

How to Report a Pet Food Complaint

If you think your pet has become sick or injured as a result of consuming a pet food product, you should report your complaints through the Safety Reporting Portal. This goal and purpose of this reportable food registry is to reliably track patterns of adulterated feed and pet food products.

In Virginia, you can also contact the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Service's Agricultural Commodities Program (804-225-4558).

References and Resources

American Pet Products Association, 2022. 2021-2022 APPA National Pet Owners Survey. https://www.americanpetproducts.org/pubs_survey.asp

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). 2021. Pet Food Safety. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/keeping-pets-and-people-healthy/pet-food-safety.html>

Food and Drug Administration (FDA), 2022a. Pet Food. Available at: <https://www.fda.gov/animal-veterinary/animal-food-feeds/pet-food>

Food and Drug Administration (FDA), 2022b. Recalls and Withdrawals. Available at: www.fda.gov/animal-veterinary/safety-health/recalls-withdrawals

Food and Drug Administration (FDA), 2021. FDA Alert: Certain Lots of Pet Food from Multiple Brands Recalled for Aflatoxin. <https://www.fda.gov/animal-veterinary/outbreaks-and-advisories/fda-alert-certain-lots-pet-food-multiple-brands-recalled-aflatoxin>

Food and Drug Administration (FDA), 2018. Get the Facts! Raw Pet Food Diets can be Dangerous to You and Your Pet. Available at: <https://www.fda.gov/animal-veterinary/animal-health-literacy/get-facts-raw-pet-food-diets-can-be-dangerous-you-and-your-pet#recalls>

Gibson, K., 2021 More than 100 dogs have died after eating recalled pet food. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/dog-food-recall-more-than-110-dogs-have-died-after-recalled-pet-food/>

Visit Virginia Cooperative Extension: ext.vt.edu

Virginia Cooperative Extension is a partnership of Virginia Tech, Virginia State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and local governments. Its programs and employment are open to all, regardless of age, color, disability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, military status, or any other basis protected by law.