

Grain Free Diets and Concerns Surrounding Diet-Related Dilated Cardiomyopathy

Before you read anything else, the foods carried in our clinic have not been connected to diet-related heart disease, so there is nothing to fear if you purchase your dog's food from us. In recent years, grain-free and raw, "boutique" diets have been a popular and often heavily advised choice for pet owners when they are deciding what to feed their pets. Despite marketers touting these diets as the healthy alternative to traditional kibble, recent studies suggest that there may be a link between these alternative diets and a form of heart disease called dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM). If you are currently feeding your pets a grain-free diet, there is no need to panic. There has been a lot of misinformation surrounding this topic, and the goal of this newsletter is to clear the air and assuage your fears about your pet's diet.

The first misconception most people have about diet-related dilated cardio myopathy is that it is solely caused by the low levels of taurine in grain-free foods. In fact, most dogs diagnosed with diet-related DCM are found to have normal levels of taurine. However, recent research suggests that DCM is more likely caused by toxic ingredients present in grain-free (chickpeas, lentils, etc.) and "boutique" diets (exotic meats, vegetables, and fruits). Exposure to these toxic ingredients can have an overall negative impact on your pet's health and should be addressed by a veterinarian immediately. If you still have concerns about your pet's taurine levels, you can always consult a veterinarian about supplementing their diet.

If your pet is diagnosed with DCM, it is important to ask your veterinarian to check their taurine levels and to strictly follow their care instructions. If they are eating a grain-free or "boutique" diet, you should consult your vet about changing their diet. If you have other pets in your home who are also eating a specialty diet, you may want to consider getting them tested for DCM even if they are not displaying any systems. Recovery from DCM is long and never guaranteed, so it is important to know the signs (weakness, avoiding exercise, shortness of breath, or fainting) and alert your veterinarian to any changes in your pet's health.

So far, researchers do not have a clear culprit that causes the development of diet-related DCM in dogs. Most pets diagnosed with DCM are either genetically predisposed to develop DCM (like Doberman Pinschers, Boxers, Irish Wolfhounds, Golden Retrievers, Labrador Retrievers, Doodle mixes, Shih Tzus, and Great Danes) or have normal levels of taurine. And while there have never been reported cases of diet-related DCM in cats, it does not mean they are immune, and you should watch your cats closely for any changes in their health. If you think your pet may be susceptible to DCM, you should consult your veterinarian when deciding what to feed them. **If you have any questions about your pet's diet or DCM, don't hesitate to consult us at the Folly Road Animal Hospital.**

The information in this newsletter was taken from an article written by Lisa M. Freeman, DVM, PhD, DACVN.

- What we know
 - DCM can be caused by nutrient deficiencies or toxins present in "boutique" or specialty diets (exotic meats, vegetables, and fruits) and grain-free diets (lentils and chickpeas).

- Grain-free diets are not the only diets related to taurine deficiencies and DCM. “Boutique,” raw and homemade diets have also been linked to health issues caused by nutritional deficiencies.
 - If your pet requires a home-prepared diet, you should consult with a board-certified veterinary nutritionist to make sure they are receiving the proper amounts of nutrients.
- Most dogs being diagnosed with DCM do NOT have low taurine levels.
 - Giving taurine supplements is unlikely to prevent DCM unless your dog has a confirmed taurine deficiency.
- What we don’t know
 - For most dogs, it is still unclear what is causing diet-related DCM.
 - Most dogs diagnosed with DCM are either genetically predisposed (Doberman Pinchers, Boxers, Irish Wolfhounds Golden retrievers, Labrador retrievers, Doodle mixes, Shih Tzus, and Great Danes) or they have normal taurine levels.
 - The FDA is actively studying diet-related DCM to resolve the issue as quickly as possible.
 - So far, the association between grain-free and “boutique” diets and DCM has only been reported in dogs, but that does not mean that it cannot occur in cats.
 - If your cat is diagnosed with DCM and is eating a grain-free or “boutique” diet, we recommend following the same protocol as was previously described for dogs.
- What to do if your pet is diagnosed with DCM
 - If your pet is diagnosed with DCM, ask your veterinarian to check their taurine levels and be sure to administer heart medications as directed by your veterinarian.
 - If your dog is eating a grain-free, “boutique,” or other specialty diet, you may want to consider changing their diet.
 - If your pet has a confirmed, low taurine level, consult with your veterinarian or a veterinary cardiologist about taurine supplementation.
 - If you have other pets in the household that are also eating alternative diets, it is recommended that they also be tested for DCM even if they are showing no symptoms.
 - Ultimately, not all dogs with DCM will improve, and improvements, when they do occur, can take over six months.
- Diet recommendations
 - It is important to consult a veterinarian when deciding what to feed your pet. If you have any questions about your pet’s diet, please do not hesitate to reach out.