



# Whole Dog Journal™

## Please Don't Panic About the "Grain-Free Thing"

Posted at 02:33PM – [Comments](#): (52)

### Are grain-free dog foods good or bad for your dog?

By [Nancy Kerns \(/authors/1.html\)](#)

**[Learn more about DCM in the September 2018 issue: "DCM in Dogs: Taurine's Role in the Canine Diet \(/issues/21\\_9/features/DCM-in-Dogs-Taurines-Role-in-the-Canine-Diet\\_21901-1.html\)"](#)**

I've been getting calls, emails, social media messages, and countless forwarded articles from other websites and publications – perhaps even from you! And the first thing I want to tell you is to take a breath!

The FDA recently issued a warning (linked [here \(https://www.fda.gov/animalveterinary/newsevents/cvmupdates/ucm613305.htm\)](https://www.fda.gov/animalveterinary/newsevents/cvmupdates/ucm613305.htm)) that it is investigating a possible link between diet and dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM) in dogs.

The warning spread like wildfire through social media channels, but unfortunately, it also rapidly got dumbed down to a ridiculous level; it quickly evolved into something like "grain-free foods cause canine heart disease," or worse yet, "boutique foods might kill your dog. The FDA characterizes the issue as a "potential association" between diets with very specific attributes (and certainly not ALL grain-free diets) and canine DCM – *not* a cause.

Please note that the FDA's headline did not say anything about "grain-free diets" causing heart problems – though almost all the blog posts and articles in other publications have been saying exactly that. If you read the FDA's statement, you will see that they said there may be a link between *some* grain-free diets and canine DCM, but there are *also* many other things going on that may be responsible for an observed rise in cases of canine DCM.

Linda Case, long-time animal nutrition expert and author of [Dog Food Logic \(/catalogs/default2.html?&product\\_id=20962\)](#), has written an [in-depth article for WDJ's September issue \(/issues/21\\_9/features/DCM-in-Dogs-Taurines-Role-in-the-Canine-Diet\\_21901-1.html\)](#) that goes into lots of detail about what is known about the dietary causes of DCM, including *several* issues regarding taurine and the amino acids (cysteine and methionine) that dogs use to produce taurine. [Click here \(/issues/21\\_9/features/DCM-in-Dogs-Taurines-Role-in-the-Canine-Diet\\_21901-1.html\)](#) to read her article about the connections between diet and DCM in dogs. Hint: It's not as simple as the possibility that the diets are lacking the amino acid precursors to taurine.

[[Whole Dog Journal](#) has covered taurine deficiency in the past, regarding [vegetarian diets for dogs \(/issues/13\\_4/features/Vegetarian-Dog-Food\\_16213-1.html\)](#), [low-fat dog foods \(/issues/11\\_12/features/Healthy-Low-Fat-Dog-Foods\\_16088-1.html\)](#), and canine [congestive heart failure \(/issues/5\\_4/features/Congestive-Heart-Failure-in-Dogs\\_5443-1.html\)](#).]

But for now, hopefully to put your mind at ease, I'm going to briefly discuss some of the pertinent facts that make the story a little more complicated than the "grain-free diets cause heart disease" headlines.

### What We Know About Dilated Cardiomyopathy in Dogs

The FDA received a report from Cardiac Care for Pets, a practice that employs 19 veterinary cardiologists in Maryland, Kentucky, Virginia, and Texas, that they had seen a spike in canine DCM cases – and not just in the breeds that have a genetic predisposition to developing DCM, but also in breeds that are not known for an inherited propensity for the condition. Their report also included the fact that all of the cases had something in common: all the dogs had been eating diets heavy in peas, lentils, chickpeas, and potatoes.

Other veterinary cardiologists were noticing the same thing. The FDA received reports recently of about two dozen additional cases, including three dogs that died of the condition. After reviewing the medical records of these dogs, the FDA felt it was prudent to issue a measured warning, in part to alert dog owners and veterinarians to be aware of signs of the condition in potentially affected dogs (which, it is hoped, will elicit more data). Its warning, specifically, stated that vets and dog owners should be alert for signs of DCM in dogs eating foods "containing peas, lentils, other legume seeds, or potatoes *as main ingredients.*"

That's our emphasis, but it is repeated in the FDA's warning:

"Diets in cases reported to the FDA frequently list *potatoes or multiple legumes* [our emphasis again] such as peas, lentils, other 'pulses' (seeds of legumes), and their protein, starch, and fiber derivatives *early in the ingredient list, indicating that they are main ingredients.*" [Again, our emphasis.]

What is a "main ingredient"? There isn't a legal definition, but in our book, it's anything in about the first five ingredients on the list. As you probably know, food ingredients are listed on labels (by law) in order of their weight in the formula before the food is cooked. The first four to six ingredients generally represent the majority of what is in the food.

That said, the FDA's warning also addressed "multiple legumes." Our readers should be alert to the fact that food manufacturers sometimes list smaller amounts of several similar ingredients, or several constituent parts or "fractions" of the same ingredient. This not only *visually* minimizes the seeming presence of those ingredients in the food, but also makes the total of the ingredients ahead of these fractions seem to be present in more significant

amounts than they actually are.

For example, it would appear that a food that lists its ingredients as "Chicken, peas, pea protein, pea fiber..." contains more chicken than any other single ingredient. But if you added up the total amount of pea-based ingredients, they would surely outweigh the chicken. This is what the FDA is getting to with its warning about "multiple legumes" – foods in which the legumes, taken together, might outweigh the animal protein sources.

## If You Feel Your Dog's Food is Connected to DCM:

Based on the FDA's report, here are our first take-away points:

- *No matter what your dog eats*, if she has any signs of DCM – including decreased energy, cough, difficulty breathing, and episodes of collapse – you should make an appointment to see your veterinarian ASAP, preferably one who can refer you to a veterinary cardiologist.
- If you feed your dog a food that contains *any* potatoes, peas, lentils, or other seeds of legumes (such as chickpeas/garbanzo beans, soybeans, other types of beans, and alfalfa seeds), *look at the ingredients list*. If the food contains one or more of these ingredients high up on the ingredients list, has several of these ingredients, and/or is a limited-ingredient diet – typically, one containing only one animal protein source and one or two carbohydrate sources – the possibility is good that the food is one of the type that is being looked at as possibly causing a higher incidence of DCM.
- In contrast, foods that are *not* limited-ingredient foods and contain just one of those ingredients, or that have one or two of these ingredients fairly low on the ingredients list (say, as the fifth or sixth or lower-level ingredient/s on the list), are *not* the kind of diet that has been connected with DCM.
- If you feed your dog a diet that meets the description of the foods that have been described by the FDA as potentially problematic (foods that have potatoes, peas, lentils, or other seeds of legumes as main ingredients), consider these points:

- Are you feeding your dog this food because it's the *only* diet you have been able to find that does not trigger other health problems in that dog? If so, continue feeding the diet, but carefully monitor your dog for any hint of signs of DCM. Also, discuss possible alternative diets and/or a blood test for taurine levels, with your veterinarian.
- Are you feeding your dog this food because you like the company, or it was recommended to you, or for no particular reason? Then consider switching to a diet that either contains fewer or none of these ingredients, and read on for more recommendations.

## Not All Grain-Free Foods Are Under Suspicion

Within a matter of days of the FDA's press release, we watched in dismay as the issue was reduced to, in the majority of cases, "grain-free diets cause heart canine heart disease."

Please understand that there *are* grain-free diets that do *not* contain potatoes, peas, lentils, or other seeds of legumes as main ingredients. For example, there are *many* raw diets, fresh-cooked/frozen diets, canned diets, and even *some* dry/kibble diets that are grain-free that do not contain potatoes, peas, lentils or other seeds of legumes. Not all grain-free diets have been implicated as concerning as regards canine DCM.

But, as we have been saying for some time (most recently [here \(/blog/Are-Grain-Free-Foods-Taking-Over-the-Premium-Dry-Dog-Food-Market-21620-1.html\)](http://blog/Are-Grain-Free-Foods-Taking-Over-the-Premium-Dry-Dog-Food-Market-21620-1.html)), grain-free diets have gotten inordinately popular for no particular reason. Many dog owners buy these products because they have heard some vague argument that "grains are bad for dogs" – an ill-informed blanket generalization we have fought against for ages. There is no particular advantage – and actually, several disadvantages – to feeding a grain-free diet (of any kind) to a dog who doesn't have any problems with eating and digesting grain.

## Points to Consider About Grain-Free Dog Food

- Grain-free diets are often far higher in fat and calories than many dogs require. In dogs who gain weight easily, there is a very real danger of having to reduce the amount of food that one feeds the dog so much (in order to keep him from gaining too much weight), that he is at risk to become malnourished. In other words, if you cut his portion of a super-high-calorie diet to a reasonable number of calories, he may not get enough of the vitamins and minerals he needs.
- Commercial diets that contain grains have been around longer and have been more thoroughly tested (in clinical settings and through common use) for far longer than diets that use increasingly novel non-grain sources of carbohydrates.
- As Linda Case explains further in her article in the September 2018 issue, certain types of diets (specifically, diets that contain lamb meal and rice diets, soybean-based diets, diets high in rice bran or beet pulp, and high-fiber diets heavy in soybeans), have been previously identified as possible dietary causes of low taurine levels in dogs – something that is known to contribute to the development of DCM.

Our advice has long been to feed a grain-free diet only to dogs who have a problem with digesting multiple grains. (And, if you know *which* grain is giving your dog problems, you could also find a food that contains different grains, instead.)

However, we would not want to be on the record as saying "all grain-free foods are bad." That's another ridiculous overstatement. There are some terrific grain-free foods on the market – and some dogs do far better on these products than any grain-containing foods they have been fed. Owners have to look for products that work well for their individual dogs – and be willing to change as their dogs' needs change.

## Overreaching by Those With an Axe to Grind

It was bad enough to see the FDA's warning reduced by a combination of poor reporting, poor reader comprehension, and social media hysteria to "grain-free foods cause canine heart disease." But some media outlets also included statements from an animal nutrition expert whose opinions on diets are consistent with those of the pet food industry corporate giants; she has repeatedly been quoted as implicating "boutique" pet foods in the current rash of reported cases of DCM. What's a boutique food? She doesn't define this, but we suspect it's anything made by any company whose annual sales are less than umpteen million...

This same expert has also implicated foods that contain "exotic ingredients," which she provided a partial list for in one article: "kangaroo, lentils, duck, pea, fava bean, buffalo, tapioca, salmon, lamb, barley, bison, venison, and chickpeas." Hmm.

All in all, we have lost track of the number of times she has been quoted as saying that pet owners should avoid "boutique, grain-free, or exotic ingredient diets" – and, unfortunately, this over-broad and ill-defined description is finding its way into more and more discussions of this concerning issue.

We have one more bone to pick with this expert; one of her articles on this topic suggests that dog owners do themselves a favor and "stop reading the ingredient list!" This makes us absolutely see red, as it harkens back to the "bad old days" of pet food. Twenty years ago, the making of pet food was a

black box. "You guys, we are the experts here, trust us!" was the message of Big Pet Food. Consumers could no more find out where a food was made or where its ingredients were sourced than find out where the company CEOs ate breakfast. A suggestion that consumers shouldn't worry their pretty little heads about what is actually in the food they buy for their dogs, and which is listed on the label by law for the *protection* of consumers and their dogs, is downright insulting.

We'd like to suggest that concerned owners keep reading labels and educating themselves about canine nutrition, and, for now, limit themselves to the facts that are currently known by the FDA about this spate of canine DCM cases ([here \(https://www.fda.gov/animalveterinary/newsevents/cvmupdates/ucm613305.htm\)](https://www.fda.gov/animalveterinary/newsevents/cvmupdates/ucm613305.htm) is that link again!). Also, Linda Case's excellent article in the September issue of WDJ will also help shed much-needed light on this complex and concerning issue.

## Comments (51)

I contacted my dog food company when I heard about the FDA DCM.

Because my dog has been on their grain free food for 4 years

the company is Nutrisource.

I sent them an email with my questions and concerns. they responded stating the following below email. My question to you, is now that they have added the supplemental taurine, do you feel it is safe to continue?

thank you

Email from Nutrisource:

Thank you so much for your question! We definitely appreciate your concern regarding the FDA's announcement and have been following any developments very closely ourselves.

At this time, not much is truly known about the relationship between grain-free diets and canine DCM other than the FDA has issued the notice that they are studying a potential connection. An early theory was that the underlying issue could be a taurine-deficiency issue. Given the uncertainty, we did decide to err on the side of caution and began adding supplemental taurine above the naturally occurring levels of taurine in all of our super premium diets.

We definitely understand that the decision to change diets is a big one. The FDA has offered guidance that any change should be made in consultation with a licensed veterinary professional. Please know that the diet you've been feeding meets all the guidelines and recommendations set forth by the FDA and AAFCO. If you do continue to have concerns about grain-free diets, we take great responsibility in making a wide variety of diets that also feature healthy grain options.

Thank you again for reaching out to us!

NutriSource Pet Foods

Posted by: thebam1332 | November 12, 2018 6:17 PM

I am looking through your list of recommended dog foods, and I can't find a single one that doesn't "list potatoes or multiple legumes such as peas, lentils, other 'pulses' (seeds of legumes), and their protein, starch, and fiber derivatives early in the ingredient list". And if the main ingredients aren't dominated by peas and lentils, then there are multiple similar ingredients (pea fiber, etc) listed not much further down the list. After reading your article on DCM and what I should be looking for in dog food, I paid the \$20 subscription to WDJ thinking your suggested list would provide the exact kind of dog food that meets your standards. As you suggested, I paid attention to the ingredient list of your suggested brands. But instead I find none that meet the criteria you give in this article. Very discouraging. Please explain what I am missing here. If peas and lentils and potatoes can't be listed in the top 5 ingredients -- then which kinds of dog food meet this standard? What exactly am I supposed to feed my dog? I am at a point where I think I will just keep feeding my dog what he has been eating all along. Frustrating.

Posted by: holmeskj204 | November 11, 2018 5:13 PM

I'm currently feeding my lab TOTW Pacific Stream, but she's been gaining a little weight and been gassy, so I was considering switching her food. One of the few I found that were fewer cal than what she's eating (she's already down two 2 cups a day so I'd not want to lessen her food more) is Earthborn Holistic Weight Control. But, it has peas as the second ingredient and pea fiber further down the ingredient list. I'm guessing this would qualify as one of the foods the FDA is referring to in regards to possibly causing DCM. Is that a fair assessment? I'd try the Pollock and Pumpkin version but really can't afford the pricetag. Thanks for any thoughts.

Posted by: Megan.Meigs | November 9, 2018 11:23 PM

I co-hosted an online group for dog rescue for years and have been an animal rescue volunteer for decades. I'm also a research nut and have extensive info on dog foods. A few people from our group used the raw food diet, but I couldn't deal with that. What all animal owners should REALLY ask themselves is: WHERE do the ingredients come from and WHERE are their dog foods manufactured. Recently, a recall was announced on CEREAL that had sickened MANY people and children. The grains and/or flour were IMPORTED! It was just announced that more brands of cereal are bad. The same thing happens in dog foods! If anyone is interested in more info on this, I can post a list of dog food manufacturers and where the dog foods are manufactured. Also, dog foods are graded. One IMPORTANT tip I can give you. DO NOT routinely give your dogs BOOSTERS! Vets push them for financial reasons and it has been PROVEN that after the puppy shots, the boosters, in the vast majority of cases, are NOT needed and can cause extreme harm! It is documented that the Rabies vaccine lasts at least 7 years.

Posted by: PAK | September 11, 2018 8:19 AM

There is an epidemic of cancer in humans and dogs. My previous dog had cancer and I immediately changed her diet to grain free with a holistic regime including supplements and flax oil and cottage cheese. The cancer protocol includes grain free dog food as the grains feed the tumor growths. My dog survived 3 years longer than the prognosis given with this change in her diet. This is why the increased popularity in grain free as cancer prevention. I still give my dog holistic grain free dog food and add egg chicken or beef with some greens and a supplement flax oil with cottage cheese. Earthborn primitive has Taurine added to the kibble.

Posted by: Jakirusell | August 30, 2018 9:56 PM

Whether you believe grains are good for dogs or not, it's frustrating to see such a knee-jerk reaction to the FDA report and the gross over-generalizations being made about grain-free foods. I can't believe how many vets whose blogs I've read and I've seen on TV recommending avoidance of ALL grain-free foods. This borders on malpractice, libel and slander, in my opinion. These unfounded "expert opinions" have the potential to do great damage to smaller companies who are making wholesome, healthy grain-free foods that DON'T contain potatoes, peas, lentils, etc. Either these vets don't know there are different types of grain-free, or they are blinded by the profit they make from selling grain-based diets in their practices.

Posted by: MsD | August 29, 2018 12:00 PM

Could someone please tell me what exactly is in Prescription Hills Z/D dog food?

Dry and canned. My Wheaten has been on it for quite awhile now and I've yet to find out what exactly is in it? Should I be concerned that she's been on it for so long?

Posted by: Summerduck | August 13, 2018 12:57 PM

I called several dog food companies and found out that Diamond Pet foods has added Taurine to their grain free, large breed and lamb diets. Also Fromm lists Taurine as a supplement in their grain free formulas. So there are options.

Posted by: the nose | August 13, 2018 11:29 AM

I am very well educated, myself, about dog food ingredients, but still cannot find a reasonably priced GRAIN INCLUSIVE and very good quality dry dog food locally OR online, because of the incredible number of grain free foods flooding the market. The vast majority of Americans don't understand anything even remotely scientific, so media misinformation and near hysteria are easily spread. Most people don't understand a dog food label, nor will take the time to learn to do that. I guess that "big" dog food companies have just bitten science phobe consumers in the buttocks!!! How fitting!!! Just sad that dogs have to suffer in the process.

Posted by: molablover | August 12, 2018 11:48 PM

One of my two rescues was scratching herself... 24/7.. no fleas, nothing the vet could find. Switching her to grain-free and chicken-free stopped the itching. a tiny bag of poultry based (grain free) treats started her scratching again. I have been trying to vary their (kibble..don't judge!) diet.. the caution on potatoes and legumes narrows my options.

Posted by: Lilbit'sMom | August 12, 2018 5:28 PM

My thoughts have been that dogs did not eat grain in their natural habitats, so I figure if it is not natural to them, then don't feed it to them. Just like the new medical research stating the same thing for humans, grains and low fat diets have made Americans obese and diabetic.

Posted by: suebroos | August 12, 2018 12:49 PM

sorry for the spelling errors couldn't see them as I typed on my ipad!

Posted by: elisa%26medea | August 11, 2018 8:11 PM

Hi!

First time posting I just hate a good quality food get mistakenly besmirched as I fear has happened because of a tiny amount of "legumes" way down the list. I noticed a number of people commenting on ORIJEN and the legumes etc listed at the end of the list. Not only do different fish make up the first 11 ingredients. but they give you the weight of the dog food that is comprised of fish and other ingredients), In a 13lb bag 11lbs came from fish and yes there are lentils and chickpeas but also pumpkin, kale pumpkin seeds, cod liver oil, whole pear glucosamine chondroitin, probiotics and some other fruits and veggies and seeds . HOWEVER their bag is very clear even telling you the amount of each fish in that bag. I am adding Taurine as I always did for my other rescued collies (they also had spotty past live being abandoned etc. and it was from their delicate stomachs that I learned that fish worked the best and my vet is a big fan of "boutique stores" s she is an animal lover first even though they,, like almost ALL vets offices very prescription diets which did not impress me with their ingredients OR their methods - (a vet admitted they will often offer to pay a students tuition if thy promise to carry sponce dieiet / prescription diet often exclusively). My most recent rescue collie has thrived on this Origen but he does get some other meat sometimes or cooked egg mixed in as while I am a vegan (and he also loves blueberries and watermelon. :) my fiancé is not so he will mix in a little of his food for taste.

I appreciate the info and thank you to the individual wistfully recalling "the good 'ole days" when there were a couple of choices with horsemeat, rendering plant product and other goodies sprayed with fast food fat to make the dog chow it down like a little kid with McNuggets. I am so grateful for the labels AND choices (even if some such as breed specific may be unnecessary). I will take that ANY day over food that used to give well loved dogs a top lifespan of ten - eleven years ....my collies all had issues and all lived to be about 15-16 . So for Archimedes I WILL read and research the food I feed my furry baby (also rescue collie with anxiety issues from sever abuse) because much like the one semester of nutrition that is "optional" to humman doctors many vets will admit their curriculum brushes over it and is focused on fixing problems (granted in a whole wide range of animals! )

Thank you WDJ for straightening out the confusion and hopefully calming the hysteria before everyone throws out good food.

Posted by: elisa%26medea | August 11, 2018 8:09 PM

Regarding sweet potatoes: Our answer comes from Linda Case, who wrote a LONG article that will appear in the September issue about taurine-deficient DCM (we will share it the "minute" we can):

"Since sweet potatoes is a type of potato and since this is a shot-gun warning - i.e. they are warning against all ingredients that replaced grains - then I would include them. However, not to bleat this over and over and over again.....it is unknown at this time which of the list of ingredients put out by the FDA are involved in taurine-deficiency DCM in dogs. Cooked potatoes are associated with resistant starches (which could end up in the large intestine and affect gut microbe populations), but legumes also come along with various types of starch, resistant starch, and have lower protein digestibility (in general) than animal proteins. (Legumes are also limiting, but not necessarily deficient) in methionine, one of the precursor amino acids for taurine. If I was a betting person, my money would be more on the various legume protein sources that are being used in these foods over potatoes. But again, this information is just not yet known."

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WDJ Editor Nancy Kerns

Posted by: WDJ Editor Nancy Kerns | August 8, 2018 8:29 PM

As far as the listing of ingredients in dog food goes, if there are four or five meats listed and then the legumes. Wouldn't the meats be all considered the first ingredient??? I know there may be different amounts of meat weight wise, but wouldn't the different legumes be considered the second, third fourth etc ingredients take Irige. Dog food for instance. They have legumes after the meats and then more if some of the legumes later in the ingredient list. Could this be clarified? I am really thinking that Origen could be one of the foods I should take my dogs off of, if legume content is really connected to DCM.

I had a dog put to sleep a couple years ago because of DCM and she was on nutrisca a garbanzo content dog food and Irigrn and other dog foods I considered good quality foods. She had heart worms when about a year old and know this could be what could be the only cause if her heart failure, but could also considerate as a possible cause or worsening of her DCM.

I have been mixing different high end foods and flavors for variety for of proteins for feeding my dogs now I may have to rethink

It all. I was looking at several brands ingredients lists after reading your article about clarification to the FDA's report/ possible warning. I based the foods I buy on info I read on the Dogfood Advisor.site.

I will wait and see what happens with this possible issue. I have only been feeding non grain foods to my dogs. My concern in feeding is based on GMOs and allergy possibilities with grains.

Thanks for your article!

Posted by: DK | August 5, 2018 5:25 PM

Thank you very much for a well written article that uses logic all the way through. I am a responsible breeder of Norwegian Elkhounds. I not only test and x-ray all my dogs hips, patellas, cerfs for eyes, sometimes thyroid but I also do genetic testing on all, through Genoscoper/MyDogDna, who, in Finland is actually a research group. Now they have collaborated with Mars (ugh), who just handles the testing here in the US. Genoscoper not only tests for those diseases that are commonly in specific breeds, but tests for everything (about 180) tests in all. All of these tests are based on those diseases (and traits) that are passed to offspring via a simple mode of inheritance (autosomal recessive), needing a gene from both parents, or a Dominant mode of inheritance, needing only a gene from one parent to potentially result in disease. Genoscoper (in Finland) has found the genetic markers for all of these diseases through years and years of research. For instance, they discovered the specific Glaucoma gene in the Norwegian Elkhound which is the same gene in the Karelian Bear dog, and used Elkhounds in England for their study trials as Glaucoma is a big problem in the UK. They run ALL THE TESTS, because they have found that there are markers in more than one breed and testing all is part of their research. They also test for DCM, which they originally found in the Standard Schnauzer. My general vet had know idea that this type of genetic testing is out there and has learned much about it. It's amazing to me that the vets involved in this research haven't included genetically testing these dogs that are affected with DCM and that they weren't aware that the Schnauzer was the first found to have the genetic marker. I noticed that one of the vets in the DCM study here was astonished to find that 2 Schnauzers (a breed normally doesn't have DCM?????) had DCM, and of course, implicated the food. Apparently the study is not being done by vets educated in every way. That, in and of itself is frightening to me. Also, through my own research, I found that one of the lead vets was on the board of Nestle Purina. For the record, my dogs have been on grain free or mostly, combined with natural food supplements, such as Wild Alaskan Salmon, bison, etc. Currently I am feeding SportDogFood along with Go Natural Chicken Defense, which actually has oats and barley in it, with peas far down the list. SportDogFood is grain free with no peas, flax, legumes or anything of the sort. I WILL NOT feed a GMO (pesticide sprayed on) infused food with grain. I will never feed a food with corn, a cheap protein filler. Probably feeding raw is best as long as you are thoroughly educated on this. I have some friends that have been feeding raw for years (after consultation with both their holistic AND regular vet, who happens to know nutrition).

Posted by: estee | August 5, 2018 3:58 PM

I switched from Orijen to Ziwi Peak beef. Orijen had listed in their ingredients: whole green peas, whole red lentils, whole chickpeas, whole green lentils, whole yellow peas, lentil fiber. I have no idea what this totals.

BUT, you never have ZIWI Peak on your "good" lists. I do not understand why not.

It is air dried, free range, etc. No grains, rice, soy or potatoes. No peas, lentils or tapioca. The ingredients is a short list. Why don't you recommend this.

Posted by: PhyllisB | August 5, 2018 1:00 PM

I respect the Vets who weigh in (like Vet-to-Pet) see above. After all, old time Vets have seen it all! And they've seen the change in reported pet illnesses. Back in the day, there weren't hundreds and hundreds of choices. PF was made using an uncomplicated list of ingredients. And basic vitamins and minerals. Granted ingredients weren't "first choice" retail sale worthy. But they were limited and straightforward. The problem with these new niche carbohydrates is how the manufacturers handle them. The first 5 ingredients in a PF are most important. And while you may have a meat protein listed as #1, it doesn't guarantee the proper ratio to other ingredients, especially if 3 versions of a pea or legume ingredient follow. Those are 3 places where a protein SHOULD be in place. Because carbs were only ever meant to be relative fillers. A dog does need "some" fiber in the recipe. But manufacturers are cutting costs by pushing the pea/legumes so much, it becomes a distraction for the PF buyer's attention. Fundamentally peas and legumes are not a natural food for a dog. Neither is rice or corn! Some dogs have a problem digesting them. Just as some dogs "can" develop sensitivity to grain (rice is high in arsenic and corn is heavily GMO'd) or potatoes (which can cause yeast issues). Thus, these added carbs should always be very low on the ingredient list. Never as a substitute for whole (non-soy) protein. I support the Vets who weigh in here, because they are aware of scientific studies. The trouble is, there should be waaay more scientific studies performed by manufacturers to develop better (commercial) PF diets. Commercial manufacturers will not publish their findings. But prescription food makers (aka Hills) will at least do the studies. And work with Vets. Granted an RX diet will never "cure" a pet of any illness/deficiency. But "could" be the better option instead of a general PF which may compound the pet's illness/symptoms. Regarding a healthy dog, the best path is always feeding as much (human edible quality) ingredients as possible. And understanding the correct supplements to use, including the right ratio of meat, muscle meats, calcium, or crushed bone. Some steamed vegetables can also be used to help rotate those carbs. Eggs and non-fat cottage cheese or yogurt, sardines are also good additions. Just don't trust ANY commercial PF kibble to be same meal 365 days of the year. For one thing, pets need natural moisture in their diets, coming from whole, fresh foods.

Posted by: Pacificsun | August 5, 2018 12:30 PM

I, too, really need to know if sweet potatoes are included in the "potatoes" category even though I believe they are an entirely different food. Would you please put an update in this article?

I'm considering switching to a grain-containing food that features duck and sweet potato. In addition to this, I'd like to know if string beans or green beans are included in the FDA's "bean" category (I'm guessing not but would like to be sure).

Finally, I'd like to know whether duck protein and its amino acids, etc., are any less digestible than chicken protein.

My dog's situation would be considered high-risk per the FDA: grain-free diet featuring four or five less common protein sources, lamb meal as the second ingredient, many legumes, and she's an English Cocker, one of only two breeds under 30 lbs to have a known predisposition to DCM, something about which I'd been unaware. Her hypothyroidism might further complicate matters. She has been doing SO well GI-wise on her current food compared to how she did several years ago on a grain-containing food by the same brand. It appears that I won't be able to find a safe food that doesn't reduce her protein intake by 10% and raise the carbohydrate component to make up the difference. In every brand I'm checking on your approved dry foods list, the grain-free versions contain about 34 % protein and the grain-containing ones by the same brands contain about 24%. She was doing better on the higher-protein formula, but I can't find one that would remove the legumes and potatoes. The only other options are the ultra-high-protein offerings, which would not be appropriate for my dog and that also would be too caloric and with too much fat usually, too. I have no idea if she was doing better because she had a sensitivity to a particular grain, because the grain-free formula had 4 times the amount of probiotics added to it compared to the same company's grain-containing formula, or because it had different meats in it (maybe she did better on duck/lamb meal/rabbit/wild boar/turkey mixture than she did on a basic chicken formula). I didn't buy our current food because it was grain-free, but I'm going to lose several properties of that food besides the grain-free aspect when I switch back to a grain-containing formula. For that reason, I'd like to know whether there is any reason to prefer chicken over duck in terms of digestibility. If not, then I may go with duck simply because that's the first ingredient in her current food, and she's doing well on that.

Posted by: ECSlover | August 5, 2018 12:02 PM

Thank you for this extremely helpful clarification about legume content. I had just bought a small bag of Weruva, an expensive grain-free food that's on WDJ's approved list and got the highest rating from another dog food rating site. Its 4th and 5th ingredients are lentils and chickpeas respectively and 2 more legumes appear a bit farther down, so it's now off the menu. Its six animal protein sources may balance out the legumes, but he refuses to eat it and his decision is final.

I also checked the ingredients of the prescription Royal Canin hepatic diet that I'd been feeding to my 15-year-old dog for her gall bladder and liver issues. She died last November ultimately from complications of DCM. Her special diet's first source of protein, soy protein isolate, is #5 on the list after two types of rice, corn and chicken fat. To its credit, it contains taurine, but here's proof that foods high in grain can also be overly reliant on legumes for protein. There's controversy about prescription diets and I've heard that vets actually get very little training about nutrition, but I did the best I could to deal with the old girl's multiple health issues. Sigh.

Posted by: Jessie | August 5, 2018 10:40 AM

I appreciate the information in your article and look forward to Linda Case's article in September. I DO NOT appreciate a veterinarian telling me that just because they went to Vet School for 8 years they know everything about pet nutrition. Especially since many vet schools are sponsored by "big pet food" companies that teach their version of "good nutrition". Consumers need to read the label, understand good nutrition for their dogs and other pets as well as themselves. I try not to recommend any pet food for a customer because I am not an expert on nutrition and I believe as does WDJ that there is no perfect mass produced pet food, even though they all claim to be the best. After reading at least 6 bags of grain and no grain dog foods I have found all of them contain peas or other legumes or potatoes in the 1st 6 ingredients. Now what do we do?

Posted by: the nose | August 4, 2018 5:16 PM

Thank you for the guidance in this article. Unfortunately we went grain-free years ago to control a recently-deceased dog's allergies. The brand we use has worked great for many years but is very high in pea and lentil protein so we now need to find a new dog food to protect the health of our other dogs. Fortunately, they aren't picky and will do well with any high-quality food. I just have to find an ethically-sourced one that meets my standards.

Posted by: Davis | August 4, 2018 1:42 PM

I have two older dogs who have eaten raw pretty much their whole life. No heart problems. I made their food myself until about a year ago when I switched to a local raw brand. Still healthy. Neither diet contained peas, potatoes or legumes - or any kind of grain. So I contacted my vet to ask whether I needed to be concerned, and whether they knew if it was the lack of grain, or the inclusion of potatoes, etc., which triggered the issue. They admitted they still didn't know. At 10 I prefer not to take too many risks, so I bought a taurine supplement for them. Excess Taurine is excreted by the body. It may be unnecessary, but it does no harm.

Posted by: puppypig | August 4, 2018 10:37 AM

The thought occurred to me that the main concern with the grain free foods is the lack of taurine, unless it's added in during the processing. Wouldn't it be prudent to check the dog's level of taurine by a simple blood test and if low add as a supplement or just add some grains/legumes that would make up any deficiency?

Posted by: packof5 | August 4, 2018 10:29 AM

Can you tell me if when referring to potatoes does this include sweet potatoes or just white potatoes? Or are just peas and legumes the issue.

Posted by: Mortymax | August 3, 2018 10:28 PM

I am so overwhelmed and frustrated in searching for the ideal pet food for my two dogs. I have tried homemade but afraid they won't get all the nutrition they need. In the past I had them on an expensive grain free dry food but my Pomeranian eventually refused to eat it. Now I have them on canned food recommend by Whole Dog Journey but still concerned when I look at the ingredients. In most of them two broths and sometimes water are in the first 5 ingredients. Does that count as an ingredient? All of them seem to have added fillers like peas, potatoes, alfalfa meal etc. Like all of you I want the best for my dogs but find it very difficult. If anyone has a suggestion it would be greatly appreciated.

Posted by: Pom%26Poodle | August 3, 2018 3:44 PM

I've long followed WDJ's advice that there is no one perfect food. I feed multiple brands of raw food with different protein sources and dry treats/kibble for training and puzzles. Variety is key as long as your dog can tolerate. Thanks for your past excellent advice and this warning!

Posted by: MadSheltie | August 3, 2018 2:42 PM

check out [www.sportdogfood.com](http://www.sportdogfood.com) I found this after my yellow lab started having many allergies, even while on a "grain free" food. I believe the peas were the cause. I feed this kibble along with high quality freeze dried food mixed in.

Posted by: mistykos | August 3, 2018 2:26 PM

NOT Happy about what is not in the story. I stopped feeding dogs grain when I found out they end up with tumors over time, which is why so many die between 10 - 13 years old. 4 years ago, my Lhasa had a tumor removed (Hemangiosarcoma, deadliest, fastest spreading) that is common in dogs fed a high grain diet; apparently the high heat drying process of the cooked grains is the cause and canned food is just slightly better. Since going on a grain-free diet and taking Yunnan Baiyao Jiaonang and I'm Yunity pills 2X a day, her 6-18 month life span chance has been blown out of the window (PS: kemo is the ONLY drug that doctors & vets get a kickback for DO NOT EVER USE KEMO). Her and nephew has also not had a ear infection since the switch.

Posted by: johnmac | August 3, 2018 11:55 AM

As a person who's had dogs (& cats) over the past 40 years and who's also a veterinarian for 20 years, I've got to say that I believe that the 'grain-free' diet discussion has developed similar to the game "Telephone" where one person whispers a sentence to another person and then THAT person whispers what THEY heard to the next person, and so on, until the what the last person has heard is almost nothing like the original sentence. In other words, someone (Person #1) was told by their veterinarian (I'm guessing here--- it could've been from an article they read) that THEIR dog would benefit from a grain-free diet, for whatever reason. Person #1 told a friend that a grain-free diet had been recommended by her vet, so THAT person misunderstood that a grain-free diet would prevent the heart disease Person #1's dog was suffering from. You can see where this is going, I think...?

First of all, certain breeds of dogs (Golden Retrievers, Boxers) have a high predisposition to develop certain diseases/conditions no matter WHAT they're fed or how often they have their teeth cleaned or whether or not they get adequate exercise, etc. These breeds, in many cases, have been 'overbred' for generations by irresponsible breeders who will breed ANY dog without first checking whether or not they're a 'high standard example' of that breed and who SHOULD be bred in order to protect the breed's desirable traits. When over-in-breeding dogs without checking (for hip dysplasia in German Shepherds, for example) for potential health problems, the undesirable traits tend to get passed down to future generations along that lineage line...and more & more of the problem is seen in that breed until it's almost rare for a dog of that breed NOT to have the problem. Golden Retrievers are (now) predisposed to have heart disease (as well as some types of cancer). Blaming a diet is like blaming the letter carrier for delivering an unwelcome bill. Instead, blame the "backyard breeders" who decide, "I've got a male Boxer (fill in the breed of your choice), you've got a female Boxer---let's breed them and make some money selling their puppies!" Did you know that Boxers have an alarmingly high predisposition for a LOT of different cancers? They're also predisposed to heart disease. You can't prevent those problems with raw meat and they're not caused by peas.

One problem among our computer age is that people get the wrong information from 'sketchy' sources and then they spread them around. They don't even CHECK with their vets to ask if the information is true & the correct diet (or 'other') for your dog. Excuse me, but WHO posts this misinformation and did they spend 8 years earning their veterinary degree?

I recently walked into a (large) pet store and felt like I was in a 'canyon' of bags of dog foods of dozens (hundreds?) of brands & ingredients. It was overwhelming and difficult to even know where to start looking for an appropriate diet for the dog in question (hypoallergenic diet). I saw a diet for Dachshunds! For German Shepherds! Wha...? And what about asking the store employee(s) to help select a diet? Did THEY graduate from Vet School? WHO are YOU getting your information from? I'm discouraged that so many people go straight to the internet for their (important!) pet information. Ex: My dog is drinking a lot of water & urinating a lot. What's wrong with her? Dr. Google might tell you that your dog is diabetic, which IS one (ONE) possibility for those symptoms, but there are other tests that are required to make a definitive diagnosis of diabetes. The dog could also have kidney disease, or a different type of diabetes (did you know that there are TWO types in dogs?). I could go on & on (I already have!) about why you should or shouldn't feed your dog(s) a grain-free diet before you check with your veterinarian. The internet and your friends/family are no substitute for reliable scientific information. Your dog deserves the best food for HIM (or her). Expensive doesn't mean 'better'. Medical conditions have to be addressed sometimes. Ask your vet.

Posted by: VetToPet | August 3, 2018 11:54 AM

I believe panic may be in order. The U.C. Davis first drew attention to this matter and Morris Animal Foundation as well(I tried to add the links but it is easy to find the articles) and now the FDA is involved.

I know five Golden Retrievers, three from well respected breeders(that do ALL the proper health checks) and two rescues of unknown origin, that have developed DCM from a variety of grain-free products.

My guys loved their Lamb & Lentil and we feel horrible that we may have harmed them in an effort to feed them well.

We have just completed the process on switching both our Goldens from grain-free and our vet has listened to their hearts and checked their taurine levels. Fortunately, all is well but this nothing to be trifled with.

Posted by: sfitz | August 3, 2018 11:37 AM

I am a raw feeder as well but want to point out to other readers that it can be risky to feed raw meat from the grocery store (as mentioned above). A certain level of pathogens is acceptable in grocery store meat because the meat is meant to be cooked to proper temperature that would naturally kill pathogens (like salmonella) and not eaten raw. Raw pet food has a ZERO tolerance for pathogens and is deemed safe to be eaten raw. Just some food for thought!

Posted by: lisam | August 3, 2018 10:25 AM

Ms Kerns, my 2 y/o Golden Retriever had a plasma taurine level of 22 ml (normal is 60-120 ml) after one year on Taste of the Wild Pine Forrest, Venison and Legumes (loaded with peas split several ways, along with chickpeas and lentils) in the first several ingredients. She had an echo at 1 y/o that showed no DCM. The echo at 2 y/o showed mild to moderate DCM. The only symptoms were slowing down some in the field and a dry cough in the mornings. If it weren't for a friend with three sick dogs, two in CHF, and eating a similar food, I wouldn't have felt the need to test her and then change her food. You would do better to advise people to be patient and wait for the outcome of the research, but, in the meantime, test your dog if you have been feeding a food high in legumes, especially peas, for several months or more. Dr. Stern put her on a high daily dose of Taurine supplements (no other meds) and after a year, her DCM has normalized into the low-normal range. This is not folly!

Posted by: Kudos Goldens | August 3, 2018 9:52 AM

Wildman and Mickey -- do you have a kibble brand name that you can share? The kibble that I am using all contain the problematic foods listed in the top five ingredients. I would like to switch my boy over to something and I am looking for recommendations. I'm not having much luck finding one on my own.

Posted by: AnaisChanel | August 3, 2018 8:27 AM

My 2 Goldens have an enlarged heart with fluid around the heart and in the lungs. I am so glad they came out with this warning. I would not have known. The younger golden is doing much better changed food and give supplements. The older one we are still praying.

Posted by: Csnavey | August 3, 2018 8:19 AM

I just switched to Open Farm. I combine it with raw. It lists peas, legumes, potatoes all very high in the ingredient list. Hope WDJ will comment on which foods do not contain the potatoes, peas, etc.

Posted by: wrigley | August 3, 2018 7:55 AM

In my view the main problem with many "grain-free" dog foods (primarily kibbles) is that grains are replaced with high-carbohydrate, starchy substitutes, and thus often contain even MORE carbohydrates than kibbles containing grains. Dogs (nor people) should NOT be consuming high carbohydrate diets!!

Posted by: RGBird | August 3, 2018 12:19 AM

I've been feeding a top recommended grain free brand in its senior form to my two eight year olds; peas and lentils are high on the list of ingredients, and repeated several times in different forms throughout the list. It is disconcerting that the list contains no percentages for the specific ingredients of concern: "Fresh chicken meat (16%), chicken meal (15%), turkey meal (14%), red lentils, whole green peas, fresh chicken giblets (liver, heart, kidney) (4%), herring meal (4%), pea fiber, fresh whole eggs (4%), fresh whole flounder (4%), herring oil (2%), sun-cured alfalfa (2%), field beans (2%), green lentils, whole yellow peas, chicken fat (1%), chicken cartilage (1%), dried brown kelp, fresh whole pumpkin, fresh whole butternut squash...". (Copied and pasted from their website.) Considering that they are each listed as the 4th and 5th ingredients, immediately following the 14% turkey, could this mean that they could be up to 14% each, plus 4% pea fiber, 2% green lentils, and 2% yellow peas, for up to 36% legumes?

Posted by: Doxiemom | August 3, 2018 12:03 AM

There is a facebook group discussing DCM. The group name is Taurine-Deficient Dilated Cardiomyopathy.

Posted by: JamesH.Cohen | August 2, 2018 10:17 PM

I am curious as the dry kibble that is free of legumes.

Too bad I just checked my bag and its not cheap either.

3 different kinds of peas.

She eats mostly raw--but too save money I feed a cup a day.

Posted by: Barbara Lamar Schulties | August 2, 2018 10:02 PM

I have a 18 month Standard Poodle who has been diagnosed with DCM. No history in her lineage. She has been on a grain-free diet that I believe ever was beneficial to her Health. I am quite confident that her DCM is related to diet and urge everyone to be cautious about the FDA concerns.

Posted by: DCMconcern | August 2, 2018 9:00 PM

Wildman, you mentioned that you are feeding a kibble that does not contain the problem ingredients referred to. Please tell us what it is--brand and variety. I am concerned, as my elderly rescued dog's food does contain legumes high on the ingredient list. Rather than panicking, I am seeking healthy alternatives.

Posted by: Mickey G. | August 2, 2018 6:45 PM

My 13 Boxer died of this heart condition after being on Blue Buffalo most of his life (because he would get diarrhea or allergies with many other dog foods), with left over meats from the table frequently, and I was very picky about dog food back then, but have become even more so with my two younger boxers. Reading every label of numerous brands over the years has lead me to dislike ALL dog food so I use a lot of table meats, and mostly chicken with chopped bones/cartilage/skin into small pieces, a few veggies and add only a little of the Earthborn kibble to their bowl. Thank you for this excellent review!

Posted by: Reese | August 2, 2018 6:39 PM

Thanks for the informative article. It would be great if WDJ would include information on these iffy ingredients when it next develops its list of dry dog foods. Finding a food free of/or lower in these questionable ingredients is not so easy.

Posted by: mswesten | August 2, 2018 6:28 PM

I have been feeding my dogs raw for almost 20 years. They eat whatever is in the meat department at the grocery store. It's really simple...if a wolf eats it, my dogs eat it. If a wolf doesn't eat it, my dogs don't either. And since wolves don't have little hibachis out there in the wild, I don't cook it either. They are the healthiest dogs I know - never had a dental in their lives, gorgeous coats, great energy, no foul-smelling, soft stools, no "doggie" smell, no allergies or skin problems. It's kind of interesting, relative to this article, because I switched after I found out my dog was allergic to wheat. I had five dogs at the time and switched them all overnight. Never looked back. No worries about grain, one way or the other, or the frequent recalls of commercial dog foods.

Posted by: GiftofGalway | August 2, 2018 6:26 PM

We eliminated grain from our senior dogs' homemade diets to help reduce the inflammation that can be caused by grains. We felt this improved our dogs' health and comfort significantly. If your dog suffers from arthritis, WDJ has a very helpful article, "Natural Dog Arthritis Treatments," from March 2007, updated April 2018. which also discusses diet.

Posted by: BJG | August 2, 2018 5:08 PM

Thanks for this article, Nancy. I am going to switch my dog off of grain free because he doesn't need it. To ckinsler: What brand were you feeding and how was your dog diagnosed? I hope she makes a full recovery.

Posted by: bowwowmeowmeow | August 2, 2018 5:08 PM

I just checked the kibble we feed the Fur Babies, and none of the problem legumes were present! I made a list from your article. Thanks for the info!

Posted by: Wildmann | August 2, 2018 4:51 PM

That is why, when I fed my dogs kibble (we have converted to raw) I would have a different brand kibble every day. I had 7 different types one for each day of the week. My thought was 1) by feeding a variety, they would never have stomach issues, which they didn't. 2) if one of the brands I fed them turned out to be bad, contaminated or what every, they were only getting it one day of the week. Interesting enough, all three of my dogs could never stomach Aracdia. They would all get diarrhea on they day the ate that, so that brand was removed from the rotation and replaced with another brand.

Posted by: quinnsammi | August 2, 2018 3:59 PM

I have a seven year old Golden who has Nutritionally Mediated DCM and Congestive Heart Failure after eating a grain free food high in peas/legumes for years. A few things to note, some dogs who have NM DCM do not have low taurine levels, which the veterinary community considers 200, my girl had a taurine level of 259. Unfortunately DCM is a disease where a lot of damage is done before a dog shows any symptoms, so if you think your dog is at risk talk to your vet. For more information see the website I created that provides scientific information about Nutritionally Mediated DCM and high legume/pea diets [www.heartdoghealth.org](http://www.heartdoghealth.org)

Posted by: ckinsler | August 2, 2018 3:59 PM

Thank you so much for this article. Very much needed at this time as we have many customers coming in our stores in a panic.

Posted by: MsFeedTn | August 2, 2018 3:41 PM