



Michigan State University directing survey on pet food-related illnesses

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April 19, 2007, EAST LANSING, Mich. — In the midst of the furor that has surrounded the nation's pet food contamination situation, one question has arisen among veterinarians, pet owners and others: How do we know for sure that a pet has been sickened or died from eating contaminated food?

To answer this crucial question, Michigan State University is taking the lead on a project designed to survey pathologists, veterinarians and others to figure out just how many animals have become ill or died from eating bad food.

Working with the American Association of Veterinary Laboratory Diagnosticians and pathologists from the University of Guelph, MSU has designed and posted on the Internet a survey that will ask specific questions to get to the heart of the matter.

“The idea here is that when the survey is completed we will have some criteria as to what constitutes a case,” said Wilson Rumbeiha, an associate professor in MSU's Diagnostic Center for Population and Animal Health. “We look to confirm that these cases are indeed related to the contaminated pet food.

The survey will collect data for at least a month and ask questions about what kind of food the animal ate and for how long, what the symptoms were and whether it survived.

“In addition to getting a handle on how many animals have been affected by the contaminated pet food, there is also an analytical component to this,” Rumbeiha said. “We are developing a test that can tie the contaminants in the food to the animals that have gotten sick or died.”

The problem veterinarians are having when trying to determine if an animal has been sickened by contaminated food is that dogs and cats are subjected to many contaminants, toxins and other such things in the course of their daily lives.

“In the real world, things are always happening,” Rumbeiha said. “Some animals, for example, drink antifreeze. Those same animals could have eaten contaminated food.

“We stay busy here because animals eat things they shouldn't.”

Rumbeiha said the survey has been posted online for more than a week and valuable information already is being collected. He said follow-up interviews will be conducted with veterinarians, pathologists and others who respond to the survey.

Last month it was determined that wheat gluten, a filler used in certain pet foods, had been contaminated with melamine, a chemical used in the manufacturing of plastic utensils, fertilizer and other products.

Estimates on how many animals have died from the contaminated food vary widely – anywhere from fewer than 20 to more than 10,000.

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