

Reports of illness tied to pet jerky treats drop sharply, FDA says

After seven years of increases, the number of complaints about animal illnesses tied to pet jerky treats made in China has fallen, federal officials said.

Originally published February 19, 2015 at 8:47 am

For the first time in seven years, complaints that jerky pet treats made in China are sickening and killing America's animals, mostly dogs, have fallen sharply, federal officials said Thursday.

Between May 1 and Sept. 30 last year, 270 complaints of illnesses tied to the treats were received, down from about 1,800 complaints filed with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the previous reporting period, from October, 2013, to May last year.

That's the lowest tally since the FDA first began [warning consumers](#) in 2007 about possible ties between chicken jerky treats and pet illnesses, including digestive troubles, kidney failure and a serious condition known as Fanconi syndrome.

Overall, however, the agency has logged more than 5,000 complaints involving 5,800 dogs and 25 cats — including about 1,000 dogs that died after reportedly eating the popular treats. Three people also were sickened, including two toddlers and an adult who admitted snacking on the chicken, duck or sweet-potato treats.

And the FDA has still not identified a source or a cause.

"This is the lowest amount that we have gotten thus far," said Siobhan DeLancey, an agency spokeswoman. "We're not sure if this is because the products are off the market, because people are more aware of the problem, or because some of the products have been reformulated."

The decline has puzzled other experts who've been tracking the problem, including Kendal Harr, a veterinary clinical pathologist with a private practice in Mukilteo.

"I haven't had a single case report since spring," said Harr, who has been conducting tests in connection with the problem for years.

The drop in complaints follows reports that two of the nation's top retail pet-care chains, Petco and PetSmart, announced plans to pull jerky treats made in China from store shelves by this year. Petco said it stopped selling the treats in January.

And it comes after a \$6.5 million [class-action settlement](#) between Nestle Purina PetCare Co. and its subsidiary, Waggin' Train LLC and dozens of pet owners who claimed their animals were injured or killed by eating chicken jerky treats.

But it's small comfort for pet owners in Washington state, where at least 180 pet owners submitted complaints about the jerky treats to the FDA, records show.

Suzanne Dinning, 64, of Tumwater, Thurston County, said the death of her 7-year-old Chihuahua, Randi, in 2012 was tied to the consumption of jerky treats. The tiny dog developed kidney failure after eating Healthy Hide brand triple-flavor pork, beef and chicken chews, according to a complaint filed with the FDA.

"My vet said that is what caused her problems," said Dinning, an insurance agent. "Every time I see anybody going to reach for a treat I know is made in China, I tell them my story."

It's not clear whether the downward trend in complaints has continued since last September. DeLancey acknowledged the report is several months late, blaming administrative delays.

Because of the drop in complaints, the FDA will now issue complaint reports annually instead of every six months, the agency said. The agency will continue to devote significant resources to the problem, however, and will post non-routine updates if warranted.

Pet owners and animal advocates have criticized the agency for years for not identifying a source or cause of the animal illnesses and deaths. Agency officials have countered that they've tested treats for a wide range of possible contaminants and pathogens, asked the nation's veterinarians to share their case reports and, in several cases, conducted necropsies on animals that consumed the treats — all to no avail.

Jerky-treat makers have consistently said that there is no proven link between their products and the pet illnesses. FDA officials said they couldn't demand recalls of the treats because there was no proof of contamination.

The nation's top two jerky-treat suppliers, Nestle Purina and Del Monte Foods, which became Big Heart Pet Brands, issued a voluntary recall in January 2013 after New York state agriculture officials detected low levels of unapproved antibiotics in the treats.

Neither Nestle Purina nor Big Heart representatives immediately responded to requests for comment about the drop in complaint reports.

Last June and again in December, the FDA issued an import alert for chicken jerky-type pet treats made in China because of the presence of antibiotic residue after tests detected amantadine, an antiviral medication.

The substance is not believed to be responsible for the pet illnesses and deaths, but “it shouldn’t be in there at all,” DeLancey said.

Both Nestle Purina and Big Heart Pet Brands reintroduced pet treats last year. Nestle Purina officials said their products would be made from a single supplier in China, and they also introduced new products sourced entirely in the United States. Big Heart officials also said they were resuming sales of treats made with U.S.-sourced meat.

FDA officials continue to warn consumers about the potential link between jerky treats and animal illnesses. The treats are not essential for a healthy diet, the agency cautions.

If pet owners choose to give treats to their dogs, they should watch for signs of potentially serious illness including decreased appetite and activity, vomiting, diarrhea and increased thirst or increased urination.

Information in this article, originally published Feb. 22, 2015, was corrected Feb. 26, 2015. A previous version of this story gave the incorrect name of a pet illness possibly tied to jerky treats from China. The illness is Fanconi syndrome.

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