



Diet-Associated Dilated Cardiomyopathy

A Healthy Guide
to Diet & Nutrition

Heart disease is common in our companion animals, affecting 10-15% of all dogs and cats, with higher rates in particular breeds. Recent studies have shown a direct correlation between diet and some versions of heart disease.

Our goal is to shed light on the important role nutrition plays in the development of dilated cardiomyopathy and educate pet owners with the correct information to protect and care for their family pet.

Recommended Diets

- * Eukanuba
- * Hill's Science Diet
- * Iams
- * Purina Pro Plan
- * Royal Canin

What is dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM)?

DCM is a serious disease of the heart muscle which causes the heart to beat weakly and to enlarge. DCM can result in abnormal heart rhythms, congestive heart failure (a build-up of fluid in the lungs or abdomen), and even sudden death. In dogs, it typically occurs in large and giant breeds, such as Doberman Pinschers, Boxers, Irish Wolfhounds, and Great Danes. In these breeds, genetics play a role. Additional studies have shown DCM in dogs is more complicated than genetics; diet plays a role. The exact link between diet and DCM is currently a topic of vigorous research by the FDA and veterinary nutritionists.

Is diet the cause?

Cause is yet to be determined, but correlation between DCM and BEG diets has been shown. Cardiologists recognized a surge of DCM diagnoses in atypical breeds and learned affected pets were much more likely to be eating BEG diets. The term BEG diet refers to boutique, exotic ingredient, and grain-free diets. Such diets incorporate unusual ingredients like kangaroo, lentils, fava beans, tapioca, salmon, barley, bison, and venison to name a few. The exact link between BEG diets and DCM is currently being studied. One area of research is focusing on possible deficiencies in the non-traditional carbohydrate or protein sources used in BEG diets. Nutritional expertise and quality control of smaller pet food companies is another targeted area of investigation. Cardiac specific toxins are being considered.

Initially, the research was heavily focused on the possibility of taurine deficiency within BEG diets. This theory gained traction and word spread that taurine deficiency was the primary issue. While taurine still may prove to be a principal player, it is now known that many of the individuals diagnosed with DCM are coming back with normal taurine levels.

The truth about boutique, exotic ingredient & grain-free diets

It is certainly true not all BEG diet manufacturers are created equally. Many have high standards and use high quality ingredients. Many employ veterinary nutritionists and take great care to produce a balanced and nutritious diet. Many pets have benefited from eating a grain-free diet or perhaps a diet with a unique protein source. For example, pets with food allergies can often benefit from such feeding. Conversely, many manufacturers of BEG diets focus largely on effective marketing and less on the product. BEG diet marketing, by and large, has propagated the myth that grains and traditional proteins are unhealthy inclusions for pet food across the board. The vilification of the term "byproduct" has also been a goal of BEG diet marketing when, in fact, byproducts (non-muscle sources of protein such as liver, heart, kidney, etc) are completely nutritious and provide a proper balance of nutrients, vitamins, and minerals.



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I've been feeding my dog a BEG diet. What should I do now?

The FDA is currently investigating the association between diet and DCM, but in the meantime, there are some things you can proactively do until more information is available:

Reconsider your dog's diet. If you're feeding a BEG diet, assess with your veterinarian the possibility of a diet change to a more traditional diet. Be skeptical of information regarding pet nutrition available online. Much of the online information is heavily influenced by marketing myths and subjective anecdotal information. It is important to seek objective criteria such as peer reviewed research and nutritional expertise from veterinary professionals. Seek pet food manufacturers with excellent nutritional expertise and rigorous quality control standards.

Changing to a raw or homecooked diet will not necessarily protect your dog from DCM and may increase the risk for other nutritional deficiencies. If your dog requires a home-cooked diet, be sure to talk to a veterinarian or a veterinary nutritionist before making this change.

If your pet has benefited from a BEG diet, it may not be appropriate to change foods. Understanding the risk/reward of feeding BEG diets for a particular pet is an important assessment. Monitor your pet for early signs of heart disease such as coughing, slowing down, exercise intolerance, shortness of breath, or fainting. Your veterinarian will listen for a heart murmur or an abnormal heart rhythm and may recommend additional tests such as x-rays, blood tests, electrocardiogram, or ultrasound of the heart (echocardiogram). Your veterinarian may also refer you to a veterinary cardiologist if necessary.

My dog has been eating a BEG diet & has been diagnosed with DCM. What's next?

If your pet has been eating a BEG diet and was recently diagnosed with DCM, ask your veterinarian to test taurine levels and report the diagnosis to the FDA. This report can be done either online or by phone. Change your dog's diet to one made by a traditional, reputable company. Your veterinarian will likely start your pet on taurine supplementation. Thankfully, correcting the diet can lead to improvements in the condition of the heart. Such improvements may take 3-6 months. Your dog will need regular monitoring and will require medications to treat the disease.

We will continue to update our clients on this topic as we receive more information from the FDA and veterinary nutritionists. If you have additional questions involving diet, nutrition, or diet-associated dilated cardiomyopathy, please contact your veterinarian.