

# Jerky Pet Treat Poisoning

**NOTE: This article was written back in 2013 following my investigation into what the UK was doing about the now infamous Chinese imported Jerky Dog Treat scandal.**

**An update for 2021 appears at the end of this article.**



Source: Image courtesy of photostock at FreeDigitalPhotos.net and Tony Booth

**The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has recently confirmed in its official report (22 October 2013) that 580 pet dogs have died out of 3,600 that so far have been reported becoming ill due to the consumption of Jerky style dog food and treats imported from China. These alarming statistics are probably just the tip of an iceberg because the FDA is still collecting and analyzing data. While the U.S. has taken action to recall the pet foods identified as a problem, the UK is still playing catch-up - which means thousands of our pet dogs on this side of the pond remain at risk.**

The FDA's Centre for Veterinary Medicine (CVM) has been working hard to try and find the cause of these pet fatalities and so far it has conducted more than 1200 tests without successfully identifying the problem. It has even sent representatives to

China to work with politicians, scientists, and academics to find a solution. But, as yet, the causative factor involved remains a mystery.

Their technicians investigated suspect products for a variety of germs, poisonous substances, drugs, and other contaminants and screened samples for Salmonella, yeast, mould, and fungus. They have also tested for additives and preservatives including nitrites and sulphites, and nineteen different food dyes. Included in their testing they looked for lead, zinc, titanium, and almost two dozen other metals. They have even used a gas chromatography-mass spectrometer in their search for toxic chemicals.

The FDA found a species of Penicillium in one sample and some antibiotics in several others, but not in quantities large enough to cause illness or death. They also found glycerine in some products that were mislabelled as containing none. Despite this mass of tests – the cause of such severe and in some cases fatal reactions in dogs remains unidentified.

"This is one of the most elusive and mysterious outbreaks we've encountered," says CVM Director Bernadette Dunham, DVM, Ph.D. "Our beloved four-legged companions deserve our best effort, and we are giving it."

The FDA first started receiving reports of dogs becoming ill after eating jerky style products way back in 2007. After repeatedly issuing advisory notes over the years and after several jerky treats were removed from general sale in January 2013 (due to six different drugs being found contaminating them), they noticed that in February this year the volume of incidents seemed to have slowed down – but it has confirmed that new reports of dogs becoming ill are still being received, which indicates the problem has neither gone away nor been solved.

The American report identified that some dogs exhibited decreased appetite, decreased activity, vomiting, diarrhoea (sometimes with blood or mucus), increased water consumption, and/or increased urination within hours of eating jerky pet products. The products included treats sold as jerky tenders or strips made of chicken, duck, sweet potatoes, and/or dried fruit. In the worst cases, dogs suffered severe kidney disorders and gastrointestinal bleeding. Others experienced a collapse, convulsions, or skin problems.

In what is thought to be the first mass investigation of its kind, the FDA is trying to contact all licensed veterinarians and dog owners in the U.S. inviting them to supply information about any pet dog that presents with symptoms of illness after eating the style of dog treat under suspicion. In pertinent cases, vets will be asked to provide blood, urine, and tissue samples from their patients for further analysis.

Procter & Gamble, Nestlé, Mars, and Colgate-Palmolive are thought to control 80% of the world's pet-food market. It is perhaps no surprise that one of the big four, pet food supplier, Nestlé Purina, was amongst the first to announce the voluntary withdrawal of Waggin' Train and Canyon Creek Ranch brand dog and cat food/treats earlier this year after trace amounts of antibiotics were found in their products. Dogswell withdrew their Happy Hips Chicken Breast and Duck Jerky from the market for the same reason - as did Milo's Kitchen, which is owned by the Del Monte

Corporation of San Francisco, who voluntarily withdrew their Chicken Jerky and Chicken Grillers home-style dog treats. IMS Trading Corp also announced it was voluntarily withdrawing its Cadet Brand Chicken Jerky Treat products from the market until safety could be confirmed. The FDA has since stated it is 'highly unlikely' the antibiotic residue is the cause of the reported fatalities and dogs becoming ill because this element has been used in the farming of poultry intended for pet food and treats for many years without concern. It has to be said, some believe the FDA has been over-zealous in denying any potential link, without having sufficient scientific data to back up the claim.

Jerky is best described as lean meat that has been trimmed of fat, cut into strips, and then dried to prevent spoilage. Normally, this drying includes the addition of salt, to prevent bacteria from developing on the meat before sufficient moisture has been removed. However, products described as jerky in the pet food market are not always so simply produced. Many products are being sold as jerky which consists of highly processed, chopped, and formed meat, plus some that have no meat content but are nevertheless still under suspicion, rather than the more traditional sliced, whole-muscle meat. These products include chemical preservatives to prevent oxidative spoilage. Many jerky products are very high in sugar and are therefore very sweet and enticing for dogs.

**The situation in the United Kingdom is much more complicated – and therefore, much riskier for pet owners and their best friends.**

While the supply and manufacturing of products intended for human consumption are highly regulated, scrutinized, and controlled by various government departments, the quality and nature of foods and treats intended for pet dogs are not so positively controlled. Most supermarkets I have contacted seem to be under the misunderstanding that as long as the product states it is from the UK (or not from China), then it is being considered safe. This is not true. Jerky style dog treats particularly can be brought in from China by UK suppliers and packaged inside or outside the UK before a sale, so while the supplier may be a UK dog food manufacturer or supplier, the product itself or the ingredients that go into making up the product could quite easily have come from China – and from the same source that has killed so many dogs in the U.S.

### **RESPONSE FROM ALDI**

Aldi was one of the first supermarkets to respond to my questions and their consequent investigation has perhaps proved amongst the most reassuring. Like many supermarkets, Aldi has a core range of pet food products that they sell – all of these are manufactured entirely in the UK under the brand 'Earls'. Aldi has confirmed their 'Earls' range *'are indeed manufactured in the UK, which in this case definitely means made in the UK as opposed to imported and repackaged.'* When I asked about anything originating from China, Aldi confirmed: *'The only other country we use in dog food for manufacturing (as in made, not repackaged) is in France, and as stated can definitely confirm the ingredients are made there with no importing. Also just to confirm to yourself all our products are labelled in our head office in Atherstone, after they have been made by our UK and French suppliers; there are no Chinese suppliers.'*

It concerned me that Aldi, like many other large high street and out-of-town suppliers, occasionally sell products outside their core range, usually as special-buy or sale items, and these may not come under the same kind of control as the core range. Aldi informed me that *'products outside of the core range would be the 'special buys' that sometimes come in at certain times of the year, with the example from our previous correspondence of the chicken fillet jerky products that were released some time ago which were manufactured in China then repackaged in our warehouse in Atherstone, however, please note it would have been some time ago, and before the evidence was released in the FDA report. We cannot confirm what future special buys may be in the pet range but in light of the FDA investigation it is highly unlikely the products will originate from China.'*

Had Aldi stated pet products available on their supermarket shelves will not originate from China until the FDA or UK equivalent has given the green light on their safety, rather than it is highly unlikely they will stock such items, I would have been much more reassured. While I do not doubt that Aldi has the best interests of our pets in mind when they stock products, it seems either a lack of understanding or/and market pressure is forcing them to invite an element of risk into what our pets are being served for snacks.

### **RESPONSE FROM SAINSBURY'S**

Sainsbury's Customer Manager, Ashley Ford, informed me that the company does not sell any jerky-style pet products manufactured in China. Ashley went on to say, *'we always want to source all of our products with integrity. We share the concerns of many of our customers and stakeholders that some operations have poor animal welfare standards. Animal welfare is important first and foremost for the animal, but better management and care for livestock can improve productivity and food quality.'* However, my concern about the ingredients of such products and where they might have come from and about other manufacturers and pet food suppliers that merely repackage products brought in from China, remained an unanswered issue. They explained that with 50,000 different items on their supermarket shelves, they cannot answer a generic question about pet treats they might sell at any particular time without being told the name(s) of the specific product(s) under suspicion.

I pressed Sainsbury's further, and on 1<sup>st</sup> November Customer Manager David Smith replied with some good news:

***'Having investigated this with our pet product buyers, I'm happy to confirm we no longer stock any jerky style dog products in any of our stores.'***

### **RESPONSE FROM TESCO**

Tesco has been perhaps the most pro-active in dealing with this issue, either by design or by happy coincidence. They informed me they do not sell any jerky-style dog products originating from or sourced from China. Moreover, they say their associated dog food and treats are entirely processed, manufactured, and packaged in either Germany or Austria and have no association or link with China in any way. This fact probably makes Tesco products amongst the safest for our pets at this time concerning the poisonous jerky outbreak.

## **RESPONSE FROM WILKINSONS/WILKO**

Wilkinsons is a popular high-street discount store that normally has several aisles devoted to pet food, treats, and toys. They told me: *'Once we heard of concerns – particularly relating to the glycerine content - we carried out a rigorous re-assessment of our dog chew products including raw materials and manufacturing standards. Our chews are made from human food-grade meat which is subjected to continuous batch testing to ensure it is free from contamination and entirely safe.'*

## **RESPONSE FROM ASDA**

Asda explored the FDA report findings and investigated any potential impact on their buying team. Nisha Keaton of their Customer Service Team told me: *'I'm pleased to confirm no products from our own brand pet range, including their ingredients, are from China.'* Concerning their Webbox range, they say: *'Our products are made by a BRC certified factory whose products have never been involved in the voluntary recall of chicken jerky that took place about a year ago in the USA. The factory we work with is mainly oriented in producing for European customers and uses food-grade ingredients. Independent testing is carried out of every production Batch to SGS before any of these batches are shipped to the EU. In addition, random tests are made in the Netherlands after the container has arrived in our Dutch consolidation warehouse center and before being shipped to our Blackburn warehouse.'*

My concern about Asda's response is much the same as some other supermarkets in the UK. While they may be able to defend the quality of their own branded pet foods and treats, they are unable to confirm the Chinese jerky-free status or quality of other suppliers' dog food and treats placed on their shelves for sale to pet owners.

## **RESPONSE FROM WAITROSE**

Waitrose took a long time and several email nudges before they replied properly, but eventually, they told me: *'I have received a response from the Food Technologist that looks after dog food. They have advised that no Waitrose branded dog food or dog treats - or the raw materials used to produce them - is sourced directly or indirectly from China. All Waitrose own brand dog food/treat products are sourced direct from factories in Europe. For wet dog food this is from Ireland, for dry dog food this is England and Ireland and for dog treats they are from England and Austria. Please be assured that Waitrose has a policy of visiting sites of manufacture - so we know exactly where and how our products are produced and we have full traceability of raw materials.'* Once again, the same problem ... their brand products are quality assured, but what about other products they are selling?

The German global discount store, Lidl, operates 10,000 supermarkets across Europe. When questioned about the FDA report on Chinese jerky and dog foods, Lidl replied only to explain they were looking into the matter. That was at the beginning of November 2013 – and I am still awaiting their response.

Jollyes Pet Superstores were given the same opportunity to reply when questioned on this subject, but they have thus far not taken up the offer. I might be being

somewhat ingenuous (perhaps they are still investigating), but I often believe silence speaks volumes.

### **RESPONSE FROM THE BRITISH VETERINARY ASSOCIATION**

The British Veterinary Association (BVA) was also contacted for a response. Sally Burnell of the BVA explained: *'The situation has been flagged up to us by PFMA who have been looking into it to see what the UK situation is. We have alerted our members to the information and have been in touch with the Veterinary Poisons Information Service (VPIS) to ensure they were also aware.'* I explained this is not a new threat, but one the FDA in the U.S. announced in the media there in January 2013. I also added that it was me that questioned the PFMA at the end of October, which made the fact they had only now contacted the BVA somewhat coincidentally – or was it that no one was quite up-to-speed on the jerky scare here in the UK? Sally replied saying: *'I can understand that you must have been getting frustrated and worried at the responses (or lack of). At this stage there's not a huge amount we can do other than make sure our members are informed and ensure that any suspected cases are reported in the correct ways – that is why we are in touch with the VPIS. Hopefully, it is not a problem that we will see here in the UK but we must remain vigilant.'*

Having contacted government ministers, MPs, and health and hygiene agencies, mostly attempting to find out which department or agency is responsible for ensuring foods intended for dogs in the UK are safe, I have been surprised to discover how difficult it is to acquire any official information whatsoever. It strikes me the UK has been caught napping on this problem, while the U.S. seems to have been 'on the case' for years.

### **RESPONSE FROM THE FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY**

The Food Standards Agency is an independent government department responsible for food safety and hygiene across the UK. One would perhaps think this agency would be the one that knew more about the problem and the FDA's on-going investigation more than anyone else, yet when questioned about the Chinese jerky scare, Joseph Nicholas, Policy Adviser of the Animal Feed and Animal By-Products Branch for the Food Standards Agency at first seemed completely unaware there was any problem at all.

In his first reply to me of 31 October, he said: *'I believe that you may be referring to the melamine contamination incident of a few years ago ...'* and then continued to give more information about that episode. The melamine contamination of Chinese imported dog food came to light in 2007 and was dealt with that year, but it has little if anything to do with the more recent 'jerky' linked poisoning of dogs except for the fact that it is again Chinese dog food processing and/or manufacturing that seems to be involved.

When pressed for a more appropriate response, The Food Standards Agency replied stating: *'We have sought advice on the possible importation of jerky treats from the Pet Food Manufacturers Association -- <http://www.pfma.org.uk/> -- the trade association for the UK pet food industry, which covers 90% of the UK market. It has*

*confirmed that to the best of its current knowledge, its members do not import this product from China.'*

When pressed for a third time, The Food Standards Agency informed me: *'I am not sure that I can provide the absolute certainty for which you may be seeking. We do not ourselves collect information on imports from third countries (that is the responsibility of HM Revenue & Customs) nor require feed businesses to notify us of any such imports; nor is there a licensing system for animal feed products (save for a requirement for feed additives to be specifically authorized for their intended use, and controls on prohibited ingredients and the potential presence of undesirable substances). There are controls on the import of certain high-risk products from certain third countries -- see [http://www.food.gov.uk/business-industry/imports/banned\\_restricted/](http://www.food.gov.uk/business-industry/imports/banned_restricted/) -- but beef jerky products from China do not currently appear on this list. I have previously mentioned the EU's Rapid Alert System for Feed and Food under which Member States notify the Commission of problems on their territory, for appropriate action by other Member States in cases of common concern; however, there have been no notifications under this of problems with beef jerky products from China.'*

**There is a phrase that I keep reading while researching this subject ... to the best of our knowledge ... which I would tend to interpret as we aren't entirely sure, but we think this is how it is.**

I also find it disconcerting to receive a reply from a government agency that seems to offload its responsibility for dog welfare in the UK to a trade association, whose main interests are likely to be the pursuit of financial gain for its members by increasing the volume and type of products on the market as well as striving to improve the quality and safety of products offered for sale. The Association says they have various objectives, one of which is *'stimulate the growth and reputation of the industry by encouraging understanding and good working relationships amongst those associated with pet food.'* Of course, as they only represent a chunk (albeit a large chunk) of the market, this leaves a window of opportunity for rogue suppliers to put poor quality dog food on the shelves of our pet stores in the UK. And that's before we even consider what might be coming in from EU countries, and those outside the EU – including China.

### **RESPONSE FROM MORRISONS**

Morrisons replied following their investigation and Customer Services Manager, James Thompson, told me: *'I can confirm that none of our own brand pet food is manufactured using meat derivatives from China. I can also confirm that we do not stock products which featured prominently in the FDA report, including Vitalife, Dogswell, Waggin Train, Beefeaters, Cadet, Kingdom Pets, Canyon Creek. We have also contacted the UK Pet Food Manufacturers Association. The PFMA have responded stating they have not received reports of similar problems in the UK. They have also had contact with the Food Standards Agency on the issue who confirm they too have not received any reports of similar problems in the UK. As a responsible retailer we will continue to liaise with such organisations.'*

I explained to Morrisons the main problem seems to be that neither the PFMA nor the Food Standards Agency is collecting data because they are not asking for it from vets and pet owners in the UK, so how would they know. Until the UK follows the U.S. approach, which means asking the right questions, the link between dogs becoming ill and/or dying through eating Chinese imported jerky will not be disclosed. The question is ... there maybe 1,000 dogs that have become ill or that have died today known to vet practices up and down the country, and how many of those 1,000 dogs recently ate jerky from China?

### **LATEST NEWS FROM THE FDA**

The most up-to-date news on this subject is that the FDA is closely examining the glycerine level used in the production of jerky for dog and cat foods and treats. Jatropha is a hearty shrub that can be grown in semi-tropical and tropical areas throughout the world and is a rich source of glycerine. Unfortunately, jatropha may contain unwelcome toxic by-products like phorbol esters and these may be finding their way into Chinese produced jerky, particularly as the Chinese treats in question pretty much all have glycerine mentioned in their ingredient list. These compounds exhibit acute and chronic toxicity to humans and animals alike. What's worse, the actual toxic substances can be found in the glycerine and protein by-products. According to an FDA manufacturer notification, this appears to be a reasonable possibility and it is certainly following this line of inquiry with vigour.

While the UK seems to be adopting a self-regulatory approach to the safety of dog food made available through supermarkets, pet shops, and other high-street stores, the U.S. has gone down what I believe to be a more regulated – and therefore indisputably a more safety-conscious – route. My argument is that self-regulation is unlikely to provide sufficient incentive for pet food manufacturers to behave responsibly ... and the proof of the pudding is in the eating, to coin the somewhat ironic phrase. We only need to consider where self-regulation has taken us with other service providers in the UK in recent years to understand the implications of relying on this approach.

Without any recognized single body taking the helm to fight on behalf of our pet dogs and for responsible dog owners in the UK, the potential for our best friends to become ill and possibly die in increasing numbers as a direct result of eating a jerky-style treat originating from China is and will continue to be ever more likely. Responsible owners might want to do what I have already done ... examine their 'doggy cupboard' and safely dispose of any jerky-style foods or treats, because even if the packaging does not mention China as the source, the ingredients or the jerky itself might have been bought in from China and repackaged somewhere outside of China. I would also stop buying any jerky-style foods or treats until either the FDA in the U.S. or the UK government announces the problem has been identified and the manufacturing process and source of contamination has been thoroughly and effectively dealt with.

Dogs cannot help themselves and instead must rely on us to care for their well-being, which means as owners we must be even more diligent on their behalf.

## **2021 UPDATE**

### **The FDA in the U.S. stated in 2018:**

‘As of December 31, 2015, FDA has received approximately 5,200 complaints of illnesses associated with consumption of chicken, duck, or sweet potato jerky treats, many of which involve products imported from China, which produces much of the jerky pet treats on the market. The reports involve more than 6,200 dogs, 26 cats, three people, and include more than 1,140 canine deaths.’

‘Jerky pet treats are not required as part of a complete and balanced diet for your pet. If you choose to feed jerky pet treats, watch your pet closely. Signs that have been reported in association with JPT may occur within hours to days of feeding the jerky treat products are decreased appetite, decreased activity, vomiting, diarrhoea (sometimes with blood or mucus), increased water consumption, and/or increased urination. Severe cases may be diagnosed with pancreatitis, gastrointestinal bleeding, and/or kidney failure or the resemblance of Fanconi syndrome.’

### **The Blue Cross in the UK stated in 2019:**

‘There have been a small number of cases in the UK of illness in dogs being linked to the consumption of dry jerky-type treats. In most cases, the treats have originated from China and the pets that have fallen ill have suffered Fanconi syndrome, a type of kidney condition.’

‘The cause, however, remains unknown and the Veterinary Poisons Information Service is currently monitoring the situation and collecting information relating to the various brands involved. There have been far more reported cases in the US, Canada and Australia over the past two years, where there have also been a small number of reports of cats falling ill after consuming jerky-style feline treats. The illnesses have been linked to many different brands of jerky treats, but the majority involve chicken products. Others include duck, sweet potato, and other treats where chicken or duck jerky is wrapped around dried fruits or sweet potatoes.’

### **Reuters news agency stated in 2020:**

‘The FDA confirmed there have been no recalls of jerky pet treats since 2016. There have been no recent reports of dog deaths from jerky treats on Fox News. The FDA did say it believed there had been an association between pet illness and the consumption of jerky pet treats.’

### **The Times stated in 2017:**

‘Dog owners have been warned of the risk of jerky treats after more than 20 pets were poisoned by the snacks. The Veterinary Poisons Information Service highlighted the rise of Fanconi syndrome, which causes kidney damage and until recently had only been reported outside the UK. The exact cause is not known but it has been linked to jerky treats, made from chewy dried strips of meat, particularly those from China.’

### **The Veterinary Poisons Information Service (UK) stated in 2019:**

'Fanconi syndrome associated with the consumption of jerky treats has been reported in pets in the US, Canada, and Australia, with a few cases reported in the UK. Numerous products have been implicated and in most cases, the products have originated from China. The cause remains unknown.'

'The VPIS is the point of reference for collection of cases of jerky treat-related illness to monitor the situation in the UK.;

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