

Contaminated food killing our pets!

REPORTER: Helen Wellings DATE: April 17, 2006

A Today Tonight investigation has revealed some contaminated pet food could be harming and, in some cases, even killing our animals. Adam Shelly's eight-year-old golden retriever, Annie, became seriously ill and very close to being put down as a result of the preservatives present in the dog's food. "When I tell people what happened they're in disbelief," Adam said. "It went from vomiting to rapid weight loss and the muscles in her back legs deteriorated to almost being non-existent, She lost the ability to walk, and was literally on death's door." A raft of blood tests, a spinal tap and MRI scans sent the vet's bill soaring to \$12,000, before they realised the cause. It was, without doubt, her diet.

Adam thought he had been doing the right thing - giving Annie fresh lean meat, kangaroo and beef mince, from his local pet shop everyday. But veterinarian Dr. Rita Singh, who treated Annie, found the meat was loaded with dangerous preservatives - namely sulphur dioxide.

"We were able to prove in Annie absolutely, without a doubt, that her disease was caused by thiamine deficiency due to the food that she was being fed which had the sulphur dioxide in it," Dr Singh said.

Sulphur Dioxide is added to fresh pet meats and fish to preserve it, mask the smell and prevent discolouration. It is not allowed in meat meant for human consumption. But for pets, it can be a deadly diet, because it destroys vitamins essential to survival. "If treatment is not instituted right away the dog or cat could be dead in four days,"

Dr Singh said. "Sulphur dioxide destroys vitamin B very rapidly - the brain requires vitamin B for energy production so without it the brain gets damaged."

Animals affected by sulphur dioxide appear to be disorientated, their heads tilt to one side and they walk weakly around in circles. The effects are more noticeable in cats, but hard to diagnose in dogs and many vets do not treat the problem.

"I think the disease is much more widespread than we realise," Dr Singh said. Dr Richard Malik, from Sydney University's Post Graduate Foundation in Veterinary Science, said pets affected by sulphur dioxide were wobbly on their legs, they might have a head tilt and then it progresses to being paralysed. "They can't get up and they start to seizure, so they have fits as well and when that's happening you've got a very short period of time until they're going to be dead," Dr Malik said. "It's not the tinned food or dried food, it's the packaged food in fridges in supermarkets often called pet meat or mince."

Dr Malik said he was staggered no-one was doing anything to stop more animals from becoming ill. "It's allowed in only a certain types of human food that make up only a small fraction of the diet," Dr Malik said. "The danger from a veterinary perspective is when it's the whole diet of an animal, when the entire diet is deficient in thiamine because the SO₂ has destroyed all of it... that's when it becomes life threatening." Dr Malik's investigation revealed that:

* Just 400mg of sulphur dioxide per kilogram of meat destroys over half the thiamine in the food. * 1000mg destroys virtually all thiamine.

Tests on 13 supermarket varieties from six different brands, containing beef, lamb, pilchards, or minced kangaroo showed around half have a high content of sulphur dioxide, some so high that all the vitamin B in the meat would be destroyed. "It's been

established beyond doubt," Dr Malik said. "The abnormalities in animals that die of thiamine deficiency are very characteristic, so when a post mortem is done it can be ascertained that this is the cause." Labels on food for humans must state if they have sulphur dioxide, and it is usually in code as 220, 221 up to 228. But the problem for pets is that labels on fresh packaged pet food do not have to declare preservatives, although some of them do, so usually you have no idea whether the product contains sulphur dioxide – and, if so, how much. The experts said that:

Fresh meat for human consumption from supermarkets and butchers was safer.

- * Pet owners should avoid feeding their animal any of the pet meats or minces that were labelled as fresh in supermarkets or pet food stores,

- * When feeding a pet fresh meat, buy the kind that is fit for human consumption, because that is less likely have the sulphur dioxide preservatives in it.

- * Buy fresh meat for humans from the butchers shops or supermarkets.

- * Do not forget to feed pets raw meaty bones. The type of raw meaty bones you can buy for pets from the butchers have a whole lot of health benefits that make them an ideal source of food.

Pet food containing sulphur dioxide:

Today Tonight found that 400 milligrams of sulphur dioxide destroyed 55 per cent of the thiamine in the food, while 1000 milligrams destroyed 95 per cent. Brands of pet food which were found to contain sulphur dioxide include:

Variety of pet food - Level of sulphur dioxide (mg) per kg

Home Brand Chunky Pilchards Cat Food - Less than 10

Pro-Peak 100 per cent Natural - 14

Petz Food Company First Choice - 18

VIP Petz Food Beef and Lamb with Vegetables - 29

Petz Food Company Puffy Roll - 33

Ark Seafood Platter - 45

But what about these containing kangaroo meat?

VIP Petz Food Catz Chicken Alfresco - 119

Paringa Pet Dinners Minced Roo - 356

Paringa Pet Dinners Cats Delight - 453

VIP Pet Foods Bulk Pet Mince - 640

Ark Cat Mince Adult - 714

VIP Pet Foods Gourmet Catz - 738

Paringa Pet Dinners Diced Lamb - 1056