

# HEART DISEASE AND YOUR PET

## PET DIETS AND DILATED CARDIOMYOPATHY

Veterinary cardiologists have noticed an increase in a certain type of heart disease in dogs known as dilated cardiomyopathy or DCM. This increase in DCM cases seems to have an association with dogs fed diets that are considered boutique, exotic or grain-free.

In cats, a diet deficient of taurine, an amino acid important in the metabolism of fats, has been associated with this same type of heart disease. **Research linking taurine to heart disease in cats has been well-documented since the late 1980s, therefore it is now a required component of all cat foods and cat diets.**

Dogs can typically synthesize or make their own taurine. However, ingredient factors like fiber type, carbohydrate and protein sources, cooking methods and individual dog characteristics can affect how well their bodies make and use taurine.

Some of the newly diagnosed dog DCM cases were tested and had low levels of taurine. With taurine supplementation, their heart function returned close to normal. More commonly, DCM dog cases did not test low for taurine, but still responded to taurine supplementation and diet change. Some cases even responded with diet change alone.

**The FDA, veterinary nutritionists, and veterinary cardiologists are working to tease out what specific components of these diets might be contributing to DCM.**

In the meantime, veterinary nutritionists and cardiologists recommend switching your dog off a grain-free diet. Contact the Veterinary Clinical Nutrition service for appropriate diet alternatives.



## HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

**Dilated Cardiomyopathy (DCM):** A type of heart disease in which the heart becomes enlarged and does not beat or contract as effectively as it should. Symptoms can include increased sluggishness or sleepiness, coughing, decreased appetite, pale gums, and fainting.

**Boutique:** Small pet food producer without the resources or size to run their own research studies, employ a veterinary nutritionist, or manufacture their own food.

**Exotic Ingredient Diets:** Protein and plant sources in diets that are considered unstudied, unconventional and rare in the pet food market. Examples include kangaroo, lentils, peas, fava beans, buffalo, tapioca, barley, bison, venison and chickpeas.

**Grain-Free:** A diet that does not use grain-based products like wheat, oatmeal, corn or rice. Usually these diets substitute grains with other carbohydrate choices like potatoes, taro root, tapioca, peas or lentils.

**Taurine:** An amino acid that helps build certain proteins in the body and is important to fat metabolism. Taurine is considered an essential amino acid in cats—one that needs to be supplied by the diet. Until recently, dogs fed a commercial diet rarely have taurine deficiencies.

## WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH GRAIN?

Whole grains are NOT fillers in pet food! They add important proteins, vitamins, minerals, essential fatty acids and fiber to pet diets.

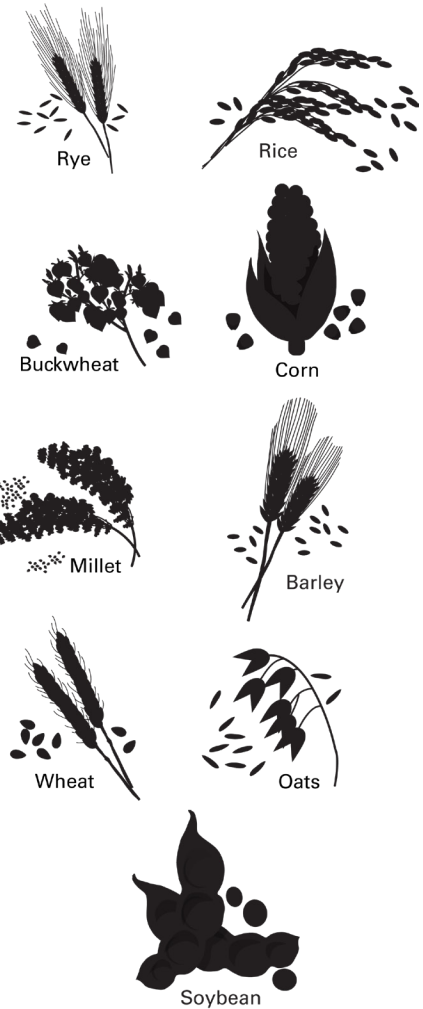
**Allergies to grain are exceptionally rare in dogs and there is no proof or reliable evidence that grain-free diets are better for our pets.** In fact, grain-free diets have NOT been studied long-term and may be a contributing factor to heart disease in dogs and cats.

Gluten intolerance in pets is even rarer than grain allergies. Gluten- or grain-free diets can be considered marketing concepts to address pet owner demands.

### WHEN IS GRAIN-FREE OKAY?

Pet nutrition is not one-size fits all. Certain dogs and cats may need very specific diets. Work with your veterinarian when considering a boutique, exotic or grain-free food to discuss the pros and cons of the diet for your pet.

For example, your veterinarian may need to prescribe a food trial with an exotic protein or carbohydrate source dog food to help rule out food allergies or canine atopic dermatitis.



## TRANSITIONING YOUR PET FROM A BOUTIQUE, EXOTIC OR GRAIN-FREE DIET

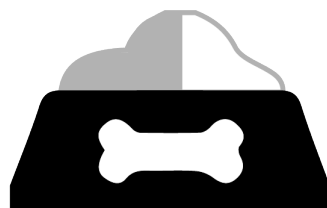
While this increase in DCM cases is being researched, many veterinarians are asking their clients to consider switching their pet's diet from a grain-free to a grain-inclusive diet.

**Choose diets that contain grains and that are made by established companies who regularly conduct well-designed research studies. Monitor for early signs of heart disease, which include weakness, coughing, slowing down and fainting. Contact your veterinarian immediately if your pet experiences these symptoms.**

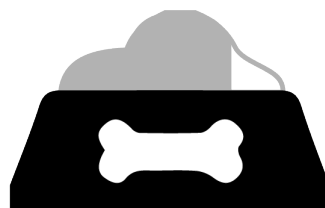
When switching pets to a new food, always do so gradually to avoid causing gastrointestinal upset. Changing diets can upset your pet's stomach, so take the time to gradually switch your pet to their new diet over the course of a week. Every three days, mix 25 percent more of the new pet food into your pet's old pet food.



**Day 1-3**  
25% new food



**Day 4-6**  
50% new food



**Day 7-9**  
75% new food



**Day 10**  
100% new food