

Popular Pet Food Maker Sued for High Lead Levels – Is Your Pet at Risk?

You don't expect a reputable pet food maker to sell food with very high lead levels, but tragically that's the case with this company and a 4-year-old Cockapoo who suffered kidney failure after eating it for a time. Make sure your pet isn't being poisoned too - here's what to watch for.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A pet parent in California has filed a class action lawsuit against Blue Buffalo for the alleged presence of lead in some of their dog foods
- The dog, a 4-year-old Cockapoo, ultimately suffered kidney failure after a long-term diet of primarily Blue Buffalo products
- There are many ways pets can be exposed to lead; lead that is ingested and absorbed into the body presents the greatest danger
- Symptoms of lead poisoning in dogs involve the GI tract and central nervous system
- Treatment depends on the amount of lead ingested and the dog's symptoms

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Some of you may be aware that Blue Buffalo may be headed back to court again, this time to defend itself against a class action lawsuit for the alleged presence of lead, a carcinogen that can cause serious health problems, in some of the company's dog food formulas. (You can read the complete legal filing [here](#).)

Four-Year Old Cockapoo Suffers Kidney Failure

The plaintiff, California resident Vladi Zakinov, claims his dog became ill after eating Blue Buffalo dog food. Coco, a 4-year-old Cocker Spaniel-Poodle mix, suffered kidney disease and ultimately kidney failure after eating primarily Blue Buffalo formulas. Zakinov alleges lead in Blue Buffalo's dog food may have contributed to his dog's kidney disease since the heavy metal was discovered to have bioaccumulated in the animal's tissues. According to the lawsuit:

"Exposure to lead in food builds up over time. Buildup can and has been scientifically demonstrated to lead to the development of chronic poisoning, cancer, developmental, and reproductive disorders, as well as serious injuries to the nervous system, and other organs and body systems."¹

At Least Three Blue Buffalo Formulas Contained Very High Levels of Lead

An unnamed independent laboratory tested several of the company's dog foods and found lead in the following formulas:

- Blue Wilderness Chicken Recipe for Small Breed Adult Dogs — 200 parts per billion (ppb) of lead
- Blue Freedom Grain-Free Chicken Recipe for Small Breed Adult Dogs — 140 ppb of lead
- Blue Basics Grain-Free Turkey and Potato Recipe for Adult Dogs — 840 ppb of lead

As a point of reference, the FDA has set standards that regulate the maximum parts per billion of lead permissible in bottled water at no more than 5 ppb.

The lawsuit asserts that Blue Buffalo failed to warn consumers of the presence of lead in their products, or that lead could cause health problems. On the contrary, the company advertises their products as healthy and holistic and with "a precise blend of antioxidants, vitamins and minerals selected by holistic veterinarians and animal nutritionists."

The lawsuit further asserts that given this set of circumstances, pet owners would not reasonably expect the products to contain dangerous amounts of lead. Zakinov claims he would not have purchased or fed Blue Buffalo products to his dog had he known or suspected they contained lead. He is seeking compensation from Blue Buffalo for his purchases of their products, veterinary bills and suffering.

Other Ways Your Dog Can Be Exposed to Lead

Dogs living in certain locations (e.g., Flint, Michigan) can be exposed to lead via contaminated water. Dogs living in urban areas or in houses built prior to 1978, especially homes under renovation, are at significant risk due to the potential presence of lead-based paint.

Dogs may (intentionally or accidentally) consume flakes of lead-based paint or pick up contaminated dust on their paws. Cats are less likely than dogs to eat paint flakes, but they can consume lead-contaminated dust while grooming. Additional sources of lead exposure include:

- Linoleum
- Lead weights
- Lead shot
- Contaminated foliage
- Lead foil
- Car batteries
- Plumbing and roofing materials
- Lead-poisoned animal carcasses
- Food or water dishes containing lead
- Toys
- Contaminated treats
- Golf Balls

Symptoms of Lead Poisoning in Dogs

Lead is known to be toxic to people, animals and the environment. If enough lead is consumed, it can be fatal, but even chronic exposure to low levels can cause serious health damage, especially to the gastrointestinal (GI) system and central nervous system (CNS). Common signs of lead poisoning in dogs include:

- Loss of appetite
- Colic
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Constipation
- Anxiety
- Hysterical barking
- Jaw champing
- Excessive salivation
- Blindness
- Incoordination
- Muscle spasms
- Convulsions
- Abnormal posture
- Head pressing

While some dogs display hyperactive behavior due to CNS excitation following lead exposure, others may show signs of CNS depression, such as staggering, lethargy or slowed reflexes and breathing.

If you're concerned your dog may have lead exposure, contact your veterinarian. Lead concentrations in your dog's blood and possibly in certain tissues will need to be measured for an accurate diagnosis, as well as to rule out other diseases, such as rabies, distemper and hepatitis, which can cause similar symptoms. Generally, a blood lead level above 0.25 ppm (or 25 mcg/dl) confirms a diagnosis of lead poisoning.

Treating Lead Poisoning

If your dog has ingested a large amount of lead, seek emergency medical care. **Vomiting may be induced** or surgery may be required to remove the source of the lead. In cases of chronic exposure, chelation therapy is often necessary, using a chelating agent such as Calcium EDTA, which binds to heavy metals in the blood so they can be excreted in the urine.

If your dog shows elevated levels of lead on test results but isn't having symptoms, most integrative veterinarians will use intravenous (IV) vitamin C therapy to help expel the excess lead from the body.

Detoxification Recommendations

Lead that is ingested and absorbed into the body (which happens very efficiently in the GI tract) is riskiest for your pet. I recommend filtering your home water supply to protect your entire family, including pets, from toxins, including heavy metals.

A fresh, nutritionally balanced, species-appropriate diet will also help support your dog's overall health as well as his ability to detoxify. I include fresh cilantro, moringa and chlorella in the diets of pets exposed to heavy metals. The following natural detoxifying agents can also be helpful in cases of lead poisoning. Talk with a **holistic or integrative veterinarian** to develop the best treatment plan for your pet.

- **Bentonite clay** is used by many native cultures and wild animals as a means of detoxification when a poison has been ingested. Clay (which is negatively charged) binds to positively charged molecules (lead and other heavy metals) and efficiently removes them from the gut.
- **Oral vitamin C** can be supplemented to facilitate the excretion of lead from the body. Supplemental C may loosen your pet's bowels, so buffered C (sodium ascorbate) may be preferable for long-term use.
- **Schisandra fruit** is included in many Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) formulas because it helps protect the liver against various toxins. The hepatoprotective nature of this fruit assists in keeping healthy cells resilient against the effects of environmental toxins.
- **Curcumin** gives turmeric its yellow color and is a potent antioxidant that supports both **phase 1 and phase 2 liver detoxification**. It's also known for its ability to inhibit pro-inflammatory enzymes, and recent studies indicate curcumin may have a protective effect against mercury and other heavy metals.
- **Phosphatidylcholine** is critical for a detoxification process known as methylation. Pets' bodies are wired with potent hormones needed for emergencies, but these hormones are very damaging to body tissues with chronic exposure. The faster the body can get rid of these hormones once they are no longer needed, the less damage is done.
- **Resveratrol** is the active ingredient in the plant known as Japanese knotweed. Resveratrol reduces liver enzyme elevations by reducing lipid peroxidation in the liver. It helps the liver clean house by flushing accumulations of fat so the organ can function optimally.
- **Catechins in green tea** dramatically reduce or modify cancer-causing molecules that damage cellular DNA. Inactivation and excretion of carcinogens are also a big part of keeping your pet's body healthy.
- **Superoxide dismutase (SOD)** is a potent enzyme responsible for the removal of free radicals from your pet's body, which helps the lymphatic system work optimally.
- **N-acetylcysteine (NAC)** is a cellular antioxidant that boosts your pet's tissue glutathione levels. NAC protects against oxidative stress and is a potent free radical scavenger.

It's a good idea to offer your pet intermittent detoxes to help remove accumulated toxins (from food, water and environmental pollutants) from his body. In the case of a serious issue like lead poisoning, however, a more intense protocol supervised by your veterinarian will be necessary.

Sources and References

[PetfoodIndustry.com July 20, 2017](#)

[Top Class Actions June 28, 2017](#)

¹ [Zakinov-v-Blue Buffalo, Case 3:17-cv-01301-AJB-WVG, 6/26/17](#)