

Busted: 55 Times Worse Than Giving Your Pet Water from Flint, Michigan

These companies will go to great lengths to keep you from knowing what contaminants are in their pet foods, including slamming the nonprofit Clean Label Project for their testing efforts. Steer clear of these popular food brands that contain dangerously high levels of heavy metals.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A small non-profit organization, Clean Label Project, has tested over 900 of the best-selling pet foods for over 130 contaminants and toxins
- Lead, arsenic, mercury and cadmium were found in a variety of tested pet foods; contaminants of one kind or another were measured in nearly every food
- Examples include high levels of lead in a Wellness grain-free cat food and an Orijen dog food; a Rachael Ray formula contained high levels of mercury

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published July 3, 2017.

"The FDA has received over 9,000 pet food complaints since 2010 ranging from diarrhea to death," according to KPIX 5 San Francisco.¹ Recalls of processed pet food have become a way of life, and a sizable portion of the complaints the FDA received involved those tainted treats, such as the jerky dog treats, from China.

In fact, from 2007 through 2015, the agency received over 5,000 complaints involving over 6,200 dogs, 26 cats, two toddlers and an adult. Tragically, over 1,100 of those dogs died after eating the tainted treats. One would think, with so many consumer complaints and pet food recalls, that the FDA could give the public some answers and reassurance.

However, the agency STILL hadn't nailed down a cause in the jerky treat catastrophe, and dogs were STILL being made ill by the treats (which reappeared on store shelves after a short absence).²

Contaminants Found in Almost 100% of Pet Food Tested

An organization called the Clean Label Project revealed "shocking" levels of contaminants in some commercially available pet foods, according to KPIX.

The Clean Label Project and Ellipse Analytics tested 900 of the most popular (best-selling) pet foods and treats for over 130 contaminants and toxins, and found lead, arsenic, mercury and cadmium, among others, in a variety of the products. In fact, they found contaminants in nearly every food tested.³ According to Dr. Jill Chase, a San Francisco-area veterinarian interviewed by KPIX for this story:

"You should always be concerned when you hear the food you are feeding your beloved pet is high in these values because lead, for example, is sort of a silent killer. You don't know about it until you start seeing symptoms."

However, marketing claims on pet food packages often don't hold water.

"Foods are branded, organic, they're this, they're that, but the reality is that most of the foods just have to comply with basic FDA standards and they haven't been researched," says Dr. Chase.

Tests Revealed Very High Levels of Lead and Mercury in Certain Pet Foods

Jackie Bowen of Clean Label Project told KPIX their testers measured lead levels in certain pet foods that were 55 TIMES the levels found in Flint, Michigan drinking water. The Flint water crisis resulted in guidance that pets shouldn't drink water containing lead levels above 150 ppb (parts per billion).

In one example, the testers measured lead at 5,000 ppb in Wellness grain-free cat food (other Wellness products had no lead at all). Heavy metal contaminants in pet food vary dramatically depending on the ingredients in the formula. Bowen points out that the FDA (which is in charge of regulating pet food safety) doesn't monitor the validity of marketing claims such as "biologically appropriate" or "human-grade." According to CBS:

"Orijen brand pet food states that it's biologically appropriate on the label and its website claims they use human grade ingredients. However, the lab says it found lead in at least one Orijen dog food product, at levels three times the FDA guidance for lead in certain human foods."

As a point of comparison, the FDA limits lead in dried fruit and candy for humans to 100 ppb — the Orijen food had lead contamination at 300 ppb.

Another example was a Rachael Ray product claiming to contain human-grade ingredients that tested positive for mercury at 30 ppb. That's 15 times the EPA's limit of 2 ppb for human drinking water. Since the FDA has established no limits for how much lead, arsenic, mercury or cadmium pets should ingest, the Clean Label Project used the EPA's **Safe Drinking Water Act** as their standard. The FDA weighed in with this reply:

"Relying on the acceptable levels of a substance in drinking water for humans is not a sound approach to determining acceptable levels of that substance in food for dogs and cats. There are multiple reasons this approach is problematic."

The agency went on to say that size differences, life spans and the physiology of pets must be considered, along with the fact that humans drink more water. Remarkably, while it has set no "acceptable" ingestion limits on heavy metals for pets, the FDA stated that any level of contaminants "must be safe for the animal." Exactly how is safety determined, if there are no set limits?

While there's no way to avoid all toxins and contaminants in food and the environment, it's certainly a good idea to aim for the lowest levels possible.

Big Pet Food Slams Clean Label Project for Earning a Commission

Apparently, the Clean Label Project earns a commission on pet food sales through Amazon.com. (They provide links on their website on tested products — those links lead to Amazon.) A pet food industry journal points this out with the following snarky headline:

"Clean Label Project earns from low-rated pet food sales. The non-profit organization earns a 4% commission on all sales referred from its site."⁴

To which Bowen of Clean Label Project replied:

"Pet food brands have made billions of dollars selling false comfort and security to pet owners, but the concern is somehow whether a small non-profit makes 4% off Amazon sales?"

Bravo, Ms. Bowen! For the record, the Clean Label Project depends on donations from consumers, grants, a certification program and Amazon affiliate links. Bowen also quite accurately makes the point that pet parents know a whole lot less than pet food producers about the contents of their pets' food, and her organization is attempting to bridge the gap.

"... We want consumers to have access to important information, this includes links to all products on our website, so they can do price comparisons, read more about their product choices, and make a fully informed choice," Bowen told PetfoodIndustry.com. "To us, it's all about transparency. We provide choices and information, and we let the consumer decide!"

Pet Food Industry Prefers Pet Parents Remain Uninformed

Another problem the pet food industry journal has with the Clean Label Project is that "... There is no way for consumers to know if a pet food actually contains a dangerous amount of a chemical, or if it simply has more than another product." They use the example of a pet food made from a predatory fish such as tuna versus one made from cattle. Their point seems to be that since fish "might" contain more mercury than beef, it's not fair to compare contamination levels in the two foods.

That would be a reasonable argument if there were any indication on the fish-based pet food label that it "might" or "likely" or "probably" contain mercury and/or other toxins that bioaccumulate in large oceanic fish. But of course the labels say no such thing, because pet food producers benefit when consumers lack specific knowledge about their formulas.

Unfortunately, pet food manufacturers don't have to test for or reveal such information to consumers, but they certainly can and do make marketing claims about those same foods that are intended to convince you the formulas are healthy for pets. To her credit, Bowen seems to be a spirited warrior in the battle to inform pet parents about the food they buy for their dogs and cats.

"Do you have proof that the levels that Clean Label Project has released are not dangerous to a pet over the long term?" she asks PetfoodIndustry.com.

She also asserts: "If you, or members of the pet food industry, wish to take the stance that chemicals like mercury, which has been linked to brain damage, are not something that should be minimized wherever possible, then that is your right. Clean Label Project takes the stance less environmental contaminants and toxins is better than more."

If you're interested, you can find ratings and rankings for each product tested at Clean Label Project, as well as the methodology they use and other information.

Sources and References

¹ [CBS News, May 24, 2017](#)

² [JAVMA News, July 1, 2016](#)

³ [Clean Label Project \(Archived\)](#)

⁴ [PetfoodIndustry.com, June 8, 2017](#)
