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been for veterinarians, no one has felt its impact more than the owners of affected dogs and cats. While the pet media and bloggers continued to push the story, the most powerful force driving it was the grief of pet owners, many of them fueled by anger because they felt that their pet's death or illness wasn't being counted.

Many of them were also being driven by a feeling of guilt. At Pet Connection, we received a flood of stories from owners whose pets became ill with kidney failure, and who took them to the vet. The dogs or cats were hospitalized and treated, often at great expense -- sometimes into the thousands of dollars -- and then, when they were finally well enough, sent home.

For some, the story ended there. But for others, there was one more horrifying chapter. Because kidney failure causes nausea, it's often hard to get recovering pets to eat. So a lot of these owners got down on their hands and knees and coaxed and begged and eventually handed their pets the very same food that had made them sick. Those animals ended up right back in the hospital and died, because their loving owners didn't know that the food was tainted.

To many pet owners, the pet food recall story is a personal tragedy about the potentially avoidable loss of a beloved dog or cat. Others have a hard time seeing the story as anything more than that -- with implications beyond the feelings of those grieving pet owners. Which brings us to the bigger picture, and questions -- not about what happened but about the system.

How did this problem, now involving almost every large pet food company in the United States, including some of the most trusted -- and expensive -- brands, get so out of hand? How come pet owners weren't informed more rapidly about the contaminated pet food? Why is it so hard to get accurate numbers of affected animals? Why didn't veterinarians get any notification? Where did the system break down?

The issue may not be that the system broke down, but that there isn't really a system.

There is, as the FDA pointed out, no veterinary version of the CDC. This meant the FDA kept confirming a number it had to have known was only the tip of the iceberg. It prevented veterinarians from having the information they needed to treat their patients and advise pet owners. It allowed the media to repeat a misleadingly low number, creating a false sense of security in pet owners -- and preventing a lot of people from really grasping the scope and implication of the problem.

And it was why Rosie O'Donnell felt free to comment last week on "The View": "Fifteen cats and one dog have died, and it's been all over the news. And you know, since that date, 29 soldiers have died, and we haven't heard much about them. No. I think that we have the wrong focus in the country. That when pets are killed in America from some horrific poisoning accident, 16 of them, it's all over the news and people are like, 'The kitty! It's so sad.' Twenty-nine sons and daughters killed since that day, it's not newsworthy. I don't understand."

In fact, Rosie didn't understand. She didn't understand that the same government she blames for sending America's sons and daughters to die in Iraq is the government that told her only 15 animals had died, and that the story was about a pet "poisoning accident" and not a systemic failure of FEMA-esque proportions.

Think that's going too far? Maybe not. On Sunday night, April 1, Pet Connection got a report from one of its blog readers, Joy Drawdy, who said that she had found an import alert buried on the FDA Web site. That alert, issued on Friday, the same day that the FDA held its last press conference about the recall, identified the Chinese company that is the source of the contaminated gluten -- gluten that is now known to be sold not only for use in animal feed, but in human food products, too. (The Chinese company is now denying that they are responsible, although they are investigating it.)

Although the FDA said on Friday it has no reason to think the contaminated gluten found its way into the human food

supply, Sundlof told reporters that it couldn't be ruled out. He also assured us that they would notify the public as soon as they had any more information -- except, of course, that they did have more information and didn't give it to us, publishing it instead as an obscure import alert, found by chance by a concerned pet owner, which was then spread to the larger media.

All of which begs the question: If a system to report and track had been in place for animal illness, would this issue have emerged sooner? Even lacking a reporting and tracking system, if the initial news reports had included, as so many human stories do, suspected or estimated cases from credible sources, it's likely this story would have been taken more seriously and not just by Rosie O'Donnell. It may turn out that our dogs and cats were the canaries in the coal mine of an enormous system failure -- one that could have profound impacts on American food manufacturing and safety in the years to come.





# Healthwise

## ANIMAL POISON CONTROL CENTER Ten Most Common Poisonous Plants



### **Marijuana**

Ingestion of Cannabis sativa by companion animals can result in depression of the central nervous system and incoordination, as well as vomiting, diarrhea, drooling, increased heart rate, and even seizures and coma.

### **Sago Palm**

All parts of Cycas Revoluta are poisonous, but the seeds or "nuts" contain the largest amount of toxin. The ingestion of just one or two seeds can result in very serious effects, which include vomiting, diarrhea, depression, seizures and liver failure.

### **Lilies**

Members of the Lilium spp. are considered to be highly toxic to cats. While the poisonous component has not yet been identified, it is clear that with even ingestions of very small amounts of the plant, severe kidney damage could result.

### **Tulip/Narcissus bulbs**

The bulb portions of Tulipa/Narcissus spp. contain toxins that can cause intense gastrointestinal irritation, drooling, loss of appetite, depression of the central nervous system, convulsions and cardiac abnormalities.

### **Azalea/Rhododendron**

Members of the Rhododendron spp. contain substances known as grayantoxins, which can produce vomiting, drooling, diarrhea, weakness and depression of the central nervous system in animals. Severe azalea poisoning could ultimately lead to coma and death from cardiovascular collapse.

### **Oleander**

All parts of Nerium oleander are considered to be toxic, as they contain cardiac glycosides that have the potential to cause serious effects-including gastrointestinal tract irritation, abnormal heart function, hypothermia and even death.

### **Castor Bean**

The poisonous principle in Ricinus communis is ricin, a highly toxic protein that can produce severe abdominal pain, drooling, vomiting, diarrhea, excessive thirst, weakness and loss of appetite. Severe cases of poisoning can result in dehydration, muscle twitching, tremors, seizures, coma and death.

### **Cyclamen**

Cyclamen species contain cyclamine, but the highest concentration of this toxic component is typically located in the root portion of the plant. If consumed, Cyclamen can produce significant gastrointestinal irritation, including intense vomiting. Fatalities have also been reported in some cases.

### **Kalanchoe**

This plant contains components that can produce gastrointestinal irritation, as well as those that are toxic to the heart, and can seriously affect cardiac rhythm and rate.

### **Yew**

Taxus spp. contains a toxic component known as taxine, which causes central nervous system effects such as trembling, incoordination, and difficulty breathing. It can also cause significant gastrointestinal irritation and cardiac failure, which can result in death.

### **Responding to a Dog Bite**

Despite the chaos, most dog owners know the basics when it comes to dog bites: Confine your dog as soon as possible, provide medical attention (call 911 if the bite is serious), pass along your contact info, and notify the authorities. In addition:

1. Show compassion. And remember, even a slight scratch or abrasion is considered a dog bite.
2. Avoid arguing, no matter who is at fault.
3. Offer to pay any medical bills.
4. Get the names and phone numbers of any witnesses. You may need statements from bystanders if you file a claim with your insurance company or you are involved in a lawsuit.
5. Let the victim know your dog's vaccinations are current, and offer to a copy of the records.

**Hollow  
Creek's  
Roemer's  
Bear**

