

The Grain-Free Controversy:

What We Know So Far, and My Humble Opinion

First, Let's Talk About Cats

Cats are unique creatures—they are obligate carnivores, meaning they require meat in their diets to thrive. Unlike dogs, cats cannot synthesize taurine from other amino acids, so it must be supplied through their diet. Years ago, a deficiency of taurine was linked to a heart condition called dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM) in cats. Since then, commercial cat foods have included taurine supplements, significantly reducing the risk of nutrition-related DCM in cats.

If you feed a fresh diet, please be sure it is balanced by a veterinary nutritionist to avoid possibly causing a disease that could be easily prevented with the right nutrition.

Now, Let's Talk About Dogs

Certain breeds are predisposed to developing cardiomyopathy (e.g., American Cocker Spaniel, Golden Retriever, Newfoundland, and Dalmatian), which is not entirely diet-related, although likely a component. A few years ago, reports began to surface linking grain-free diets to an increased incidence of DCM in dogs. Fast-forward a few years, and while there is some correlation between grain-free diets—specifically those that use peas, lentils, or other legumes as base ingredients—and DCM, the cause is not yet fully understood. It appears that genetics, diet formulation, and other factors may play a role. Unfortunately, the inconsistent reporting and data collection on diet-related heart issues make it challenging to draw definitive conclusions, although data collection efforts are improving.



The Veterinary Wellness Center

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Should you switch if your pet eats a “Grain Free Diet?”

- If your grain-free diet does not rely heavily on chickpeas, lentils, or peas, and your pet is thriving, there may be no need for immediate concern.
- Does your pet need to stay on this diet for medical reasons? If so, routine veterinary check-ups are critical. Your vet may recommend tests such as proBNP, taurine levels, or a cardiac ultrasound to monitor heart health.
- In my opinion, if your dog does not have a specific medical need for a grain-free diet, it may be best to avoid diets that rely heavily on peas, lentils, or chickpeas.

Take-Home Points

- Cats need taurine in their diets, and a meat-based diet is best for their cardiac health.
- Grain-free diets, particularly those high in peas and legumes, seem to be linked to an increased risk of DCM in dogs, but more research is needed as this is not the only factor.
- If your pet does not specifically need a grain-free diet, a balanced diet that is well-sourced and minimally processed is generally the best choice.
- Routine veterinary exams are essential for early detection of any cardiac issues, helping to improve your pet's overall health and longevity.

