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There has been more information in the media in the past week regarding popular grain-free diets and canine heart disease and we have received multiple phone calls and questions from clients regarding this issue. We want to keep you up-to-date with the most recent information regarding grain-free diets and heart disease. For years grain free diets have been wildly popular in the pet food industry. People have been drawn to these diets for a variety of reasons including avoiding allergens, minimizing excess calories and feeding ingredients like diets dogs eat in the wild.

While many of the reasons these diets have gained popularity do not necessarily hold true for every patient, there have not been many reasons to avoid grain free diets. Recently there has been some research that raises new questions about risks associated with grain free diets. There are several scientific studies looking into a possible correlation between dogs on grain free diets and an increased incidence of a common heart condition in dogs called dilated cardiomyopathy.

The initial conclusions to these studies found some correlation between dogs on grain free diets and an increased risk of heart disease. The theory behind this correlation involves a deficiency in an essential amino acid called taurine. Many grain free diets tend to contain lower levels of this amino acid and the long-term deficiency may contribute to the development of this type of heart disease. Taurine is an essential amino acid necessary for heart muscle (myocardial) function and retinal health (ocular). Taurine deficiency results in heart dysfunction, ultimately resulting in congestive heart failure. They have found that taurine deficiency happens sporadically in Cocker Spaniels, no matter their diet.

Recently it has been identified that the deficiency has not been associated with all grain-free diets and it is seen most commonly with diets high in peas, lentils, chickpeas, and potatoes. There is some debate as to why, but it is thought these starches promote gastrointestinal excretion of Taurine. Manufacturers specifically implicated include: ACANA, Taste of the Wild, 4health, Zignature, Nutrisource, Instinct, Fromm, Kirkland and Orijin. This does not exclude other brands.

It is important to remember that while these findings are certainly noteworthy, definitive conclusions have not been reached. While there is no evidence to suggest that every dog who eats a grain free diet will develop heart disease, we cannot say with certainty that there not some risks associated with feeding grain

free diets.

If you decide to change your dog's diet, please do so under the guidance of your veterinarian. The most common question or concern we receive when people consider switching off a grain free diet is the potential for worsening allergies. It is important to note that while food allergies, and particularly grain allergies do exist, they are not common. Less than 10% of dogs with allergies have food allergies, and most of those food allergies are to the protein source in the diet and not the carbohydrate. If your pet needs to remain on a grain free diet for medical reasons, there is a taurine blood test that can be performed to monitor taurine levels and providing a taurine supplementation if the taurine is low. This test is an expensive test. However, it is important to note that even after supplementation of Taurine, not all dogs are able to recover to healthy heart function.

Unfortunately, there will never be a one-size-fits-all dog food. Our pet's nutrition requires us to think about their individual needs and health risks. The good news is there are several reputable food companies and veterinary researchers who are working tirelessly to continue advancing animal health and nutrition and who provide safe and healthy options for our beloved pets.

Please contact your veterinarian at Gehrman Animal Hospital if you have any additional questions or concerns. (952)-545-9161.