

News & Reports

Is 'complete' vegan pet food really vegan?

By Josh Loeb and Emma Boxer

PET food companies marketing vegan dog food in the UK may be misleading customers or breaching legislation.

Five different companies serving the UK pet food market appear to be advertising 'complete vegan' pet food that cannot be vegan, criminology lecturer Jessica Ritchie told delegates at an animal nutrition conference last week.

By law, pet food marketed as providing a 'complete' diet for the species for which it is advertised must meet all that animal's nutritional requirements. For dogs, that includes providing vitamin D.

Ritchie researched what goes into vegan pet foods as part of a joint project with her colleague Wanda McCormick, an animal physiologist at the University of Northampton.

The pair found that the only form of vitamin D currently legally approved in the EU and UK as an additive for pet food is D3 (cholecalciferol), which is derived from the lanolin in sheep fleeces and is therefore not vegan.

Vitamin D2, which is plant based, was removed from the approved list around two years ago for reasons that are understood to have been related to the cost of the approval process rather than any safety issues.

There then followed a 'run-out period', during which premixes and stock containing D2 could still be sold. This ended in July last year, meaning that there should now no longer be any 'complete vegan' dog food available in the UK.

'There are five companies that currently could be considered problematic in the sense that they're advertising pet food as vegan when it can't be,' Ritchie told the Companion Animal Nutrition conference delegates.

Either feed is being mislabelled as vegan when it is not or an

unapproved supplement is being used, she said. Alternatively, the feed is not providing vitamin D and therefore cannot be considered as providing a 'complete diet'.

'We're left with this ethical issue, this quandary,' she added. 'The companies may be engaging, potentially, in false advertising.'

'The other thing is that people who are vegan are very passionate about that, and if they knew that they were not able to provide this vegan diet for their animals, they might get a little bit upset.'

In addition, there are 'animal welfare issues attached to this', she said.

Commercial animal feed in the UK falls under the control of the European Food Safety Authority and can only include approved ingredients.

McCormick explained: 'Because dogs can't produce vitamin D naturally, it has to be in their food. If they're eating meat, that's not a problem because there's tonnes of vitamin D in there, but if you go for a vegan diet then you have to supplement that.'

She added: 'There shouldn't be any complete vegan dog food available in the UK currently, because if it's complete, it's got to have vitamin D and there is no [legally available] vegan source of vitamin D.'

Vet Mike Davies, an RCVS specialist in small animal clinical nutrition, said Ritchie and McCormick's findings accorded with his own understanding of the situation within the vegan pet food market.

Another concern was the



availability online of products being described as vegan cat food, he said, because of the requirement cats have for ingredients such as taurine and arachidonic acid – both of which 'can't be synthesised' and need therefore to be sourced from animal products.

'Whenever a

company in America launches a "complete vegan cat food" I write to them giving them a list of essential nutrients that cats specifically require and I ask them where these supplements are coming from, and I never get a reply,' Davies said. 'Even with vegetarian diets for cats, I'm yet to find anyone who's making one who can tell me where the supplements are coming from.'

Cats are obligate carnivores and the Animal Welfare Act states that an owner must ensure their pet is fed a 'suitable diet', meaning there is a prima facie case that anyone feeding their cat a fully vegan diet is committing a criminal offence.

Interest among pet owners in feeding their dog or cat a vegan diet appears to be growing. Last year an online survey revealed that around one in three owners may be willing to consider switching to a vegan diet for their dog or cat in the future (VR, 30 March 2019, vol 184, p 399).

Neither Ritchie nor McCormick would name the five companies they had identified. None of the five are understood to be members of the Pet Food Manufacturers' Association.

Vet Record has independently identified several providers of vegan dog food that are sold in the UK and has approached them for comment. At the time of going to press, all were yet to respond. ●

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