

Researchers Develop Pet Food Contamination Test

Whether or not food is tainted can be determined in minutes, instead of hours.

The new pet food testing method could save federal regulators time and money when testing food imports.

Researchers at University of the Pacific in Stockton, Calif., say they've developed a new way to rapidly identify melamine and other foreign substances in pet food.

The breakthrough enables scientists to, in a matter of minutes, find whether pet food has been contaminated, a process which currently takes a minimum of several hours.

Professor O. David Sparkman and graduate student Teresa Vail say they used a mass spectrometer machine and a Direct Analysis in Real Time (D.A.R.T.) device to determine that a can of dog food that was recently recalled contained the industrial plastic melamine, a chemical used in plastic furniture, cookware and fertilizers.

The chemical is at the heart of the ongoing, North America-wide recall of contaminated pet food that began in mid-March.

Sparkman said that by using mass spectrometry, which is used to weigh and identify molecules in substances, researchers were able to determine that a sample of dog food contained melamine because "it gave off a computer signal that is specific to the chemical."

The D.A.R.T. device, when connected to the spectrometer machine, allows the food's components to be read as signals on a computer screen, Sparkman said.

"It took less time [to obtain] the results than to open up the can," Sparkman said.

The new method, which could save federal regulators time and money when testing food imports, was developed after Vail learned that some of the pet food cans she'd recently bought for her dogs were recalled because of the possibility that they contained melamine.

Vail and Sparkman say they plan to present their method in June during an American Society of Mass Spectrometry conference in Indianapolis. Sparkman said he hopes the method will be applied widely as a "standardized tool" to help keep pets safe.