

Peppers Test Positive For Salmonella

Avian enthusiasts work to keep birds free of disease

By Erin O'Brien

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No bird foods have been recalled yet as a result of the recent pepper recall. Investigators from numerous organizations, including the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), determined that jalapeno and Serrano peppers tested as positive genetic matches with the Salmonella Saintpaul strain in late July. This strain is responsible for more than 1,000 cases of Salmonella in people in 43 states, the District of Columbia and Canada since April 2008.

Agricola Zaragoza Inc. of McAllen, Texas, is working with the FDA, the Indian Health Service and other health officials in several states to recall all peppers distributed since June 30, 2008. The FDA has warned the public to use caution, however, since stores and restaurants across the country might still carry the infected peppers.

Although the Salmonella Saintpaul news focuses on humans, avian veterinarians, bird owners and other avian enthusiasts may worry that pet birds could become infected with Salmonella as a result of the strain, as well. Since a lot of bird foods include dried hot peppers in their mixes and a lot of bird owners feed fresh peppers to their birds, purchasing these foods for birds might be just as unsafe as purchasing peppers for humans. Larry Nemetz, DVM, of the Bird Clinic Veterinary Corporation in Orange, Calif., reports that no bird foods have been recalled as of now.

"I own a bird-specialty store," Nemetz said, "so a manufacturer would have informed me. Dried foods are less risky [than fresh foods], as bacteria need moisture to stay viable."

To battle cases of Salmonella in humans, the FDA encourages consumers to follow its Food Protection Plan, which focuses on prevention (building in safety from the beginning), intervention (conducting risk-based inspections and tests) and response (reacting and communicating quickly and effectively). People can follow the same advice for their pet birds.

To prevent their birds from getting infected with Salmonella, people should avoid feeding their birds fresh jalapeno peppers and Serrano peppers for the time being. But in the future, they should always wash fresh peppers and other vegetables carefully and thoroughly to remove residue of bacteria and pesticides. Avian veterinarians also recommend that people serve peppers to their birds as an occasional treat rather than as a regular part of the diet.

To practice intervention, bird owners must pay attention to their bird's behavior.

"There are no specific signs [of a Salmonella infection] other than any other bacterial infection: lethargy, [loss of appetite] and weight loss," according to Nemetz.

If owners notice such behavioral and physical changes in their bird, they should take their bird to a qualified avian veterinarian. Nemetz said this is very important because "[avian veterinarians] can perform cultures of the stool, or droppings, as well as blood tests to quantify the level of infection, as well as the origin of the infection and whether it is Salmonella or another bacterial strain."