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Expo Has Pet Owners Assessing Food Options

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Sixteen-week-old Oslo, a playful, furry, black-and-white Bernese Mountain Dog, may have saved his own life not long ago when he put on a finicky show as his owner tried to feed him **Nutro Natural Choice**.

"We only gave him one can," said **Virginia Lemieux**, 30, who lives in the Shenandoah Valley and was in Chantilly yesterday for the enormous Super Pet Expo. "He was getting diarrhea, so we stopped three weeks ago."

That **Nutro** label, it turns out, was included in a massive recall of dog and cat food announced last week after the death of several pets. Subsequent testing has shown that some products were tainted by a deadly rat poison. The recall affects more than 60 million "cuts and gravy"-style cans and pouches — not dry food — sold under 95 brand names of Ontario-based Menu Foods.

Oslo seemed fine yesterday, happily pawing at other dogs sauntering through the Dulles Expo Center. But Lemieux said she

Pet-Food Worries Still Strong, Expo Visitors Comparison-Shop

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plans to call her veterinarian this week to rule out poisoning. She was among hundreds of anxious dog and cat owners who were buzzing about the recall and flocked to natural-food purveyors to grill them about ingredients, safety and nutrition.

The three-day Super Pet Expo, which ends today, is expected to attract more than 30,000 visitors, organizers said. Yesterday, with dogs in tow — or lovingly cradled in arms — throngs of shoppers browsed hundreds of booths that offered such indulgent products as day-spa treatments, kitty coffins and T-shirts with the slogan "muttosexual."

But everywhere in the center's cavernous North Hall, the recall was on the minds of many shoppers and vendors. The sheer size of the event, not to mention the breadth and cost of items on display (\$250 for a cremation urn), underscored just how much people love their pets and how far the recall could reach.

"It's scary. It was really scary," said Pam Fell, 35, of Falls Church, who fed her two cats a pouch of Iams last week before she knew about the recall. "We had to throw the stuff out. And we still don't know what the whole story is."

John Bennje, a regional sales manager for **Natura Pet Products**, said dozens of shoppers have asked him whether the company's **Innova** line of dog and cat food — marketed as "the healthiest pet food in the world" — contains wheat gluten. He told them it did not. Federal investigators believe that wheat gluten is a possible

source of contamination in the tainted pet food.

Bennie said the company's canned foods are manufactured at one of the two Menu Foods plants under investigation.

"People just want to be reassured right now," he said as a "teacup" Chihuahua in a baby-pink sweater traipsed by. "They're asking me, 'Are you affected by it?' and 'Do you use those plants?'"

The Food and Drug Administration is continuing its investigation at those plants in New Jersey and Kansas. Officials have not ruled out sabotage. Nor have they ruled out the possibility that the toxin made its way into ingredients overseas.

The toxin, a chemical known as aminopterin, is used in China and elsewhere in the Far East but not permitted as a rodent killer in the United States. It can cause kidney damage in dogs and cats. The deaths of at least 16 pets have been blamed on the poison, and investigators expect the number to rise, possibly into the thousands. Menu Foods has said it will pay all veterinary bills related to poisoning from tainted food.

Pet owners, meanwhile, lavished their loved ones with affection and material comforts at the Pet Expo. They bought organic treats, relaxation music and even bottles of "Sauvignon Bark," a gravy packaged in a wine bottle that sells for as much as \$14.99.

The gravy has been doing particularly well in the wake of the recall, said **Bark Vineyards** owner **Kathleen Ramsey**, because it livens up dry food.

"There's a market for it," she said. "Our retailers said it was flying off the shelves."

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