

Environmental regulators warn flea treatments may be toxic to pets

May 12 2009, By Diane C. Lade

Federal environmental regulators are warning pet owners and veterinarians to closely follow instructions if they use several popular flea and tick treatments, and monitor their pets, as they investigate thousands of reports about the products, some involving animals becoming sick or dying.

The [Environmental Protection Agency](#) last year received 44,000 complaints about "spot-on" pest prevention products -- liquid pesticides, usually packaged in small tubes, that are squeezed onto a dog or cat's fur and rubbed into their skin. The reactions ranged from mild skin irritation, to seizures or death, the EPA said.

Among the well-known brands on the review list: Hartz Mountain, Sergeant's and Frontline. Others include Farnam Companies, Zodiac, ProMeris and Tradewinds.

ProMeris for Dogs is one of 24 products of the 44 on EPA's list registered in Florida, said Charlie Clark, state environmental administrator for pesticide registrations. The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Affairs officials, who by law must examine even EPA-approved pesticides before they can be sold in the state, last year flagged ProMeris when they discovered it contained the chemical amitraz.

Last week, EPA posted the list online, but the agency has since removed it from its Web site. In its place, the agency posted a note saying it is

"reviewing the completeness of the list" and will re-post it when finished.

While none of the items have been pulled or labeled hazardous, all still are being reviewed, EPA spokesman Dale Kemery said.

"We are advising consumers to take precautions, to make sure they use the products correctly," he said.

Kemery did not know how many cases were from Florida or how many were fatal. Canadian authorities also are looking at spot-on [pest control](#) products being sold in their country.

Regulators required manufacturer Fort Dodge Animal Health to draft an advisory for veterinarians to give their clients. It warns that amitraz can cause neurological damage, especially to children. In a written statement, Fort Dodge said consumers might be confused about how to use ProMeris because it is a new product, and that the company is cooperating with the EPA.

The EPA said in late April that it was concentrating on those products that had comprised about 80 percent of the complaints. The majority were lower-cost treatments available in [pet](#) and discount stores, not products that must be purchased through veterinarians.

Dr. Melinda Fernyhough of Hartz, the top brand in retail stores, said its five cat products on the EPA list accounted for only 2 percent, or 956, of the reports -- and among those, 75 percent were considered "minor" or "asymptomatic." A total of 3 million doses were sold in the U.S. alone last year.

"I think it is important to stress all topical drops are regulated in the same manner ... and are held to the same standards of efficacy and

safety, whether sold through vets or at retail," said Fernyhough, the company's manager of scientific affairs.

But Dr. Marcia Martin, a holistic veterinarian at Calusa Veterinary Center in Boca Raton, Fla., said she advises against over-the-counter flea control methods. With most products purchased through vets, "you could put the whole package on and not get a toxic reaction," she said.

Clark said federal regulators were trying to determine whether the recent complaints were due to pet owners misapplying the product or a chemical formulation issue. He said the state would take no action until the EPA finished its review.

Spot-on products have become the most popular way to control fleas, preferred by 74 percent of cat owners, according to a survey last year by the American Pet Products Association.

The American Veterinary Medical Association, the nation's leading organization for animal health professionals, first notified its 75,000 members about the EPA review about two weeks ago. The association does not have enough information to suggest vets stop using the product, "but it is something we want them to be aware of," said spokesman Michael San Filippo.

PROTECT YOUR PETS

Consult your veterinarian before using any flea and tick treatment.

Do not use products meant for dogs on cats, and vice versa.

Avoid products with these names in the active ingredients: chlorpyrifos,

dichlorvos, phosmet, naled, tetrachlorvinphos, diazinon, malathion, carbaryl and propoxur.

Carefully follow application instructions, and note weight or age guidelines.

If your pet has a negative reaction following a product application, give it a bath immediately and call your vet.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To report a reaction to a flea and tick product: Go to: www.pesticides.custhelp.com . Or call 800-858-7378. You also may tell your vet, who will report it.

For information on flea control without pesticides, go to: www.greenpaws.org.

For updates on the Environmental Protection Agency's review of spot-on flea and tick products, go to: [pesticides/health/flea-tick-control.html](http://www.epa.gov/pesticides/health/flea-tick-control.html) .

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