

Suffield Veterinary Hospital June 2022 Patient of the Month

Bayern is a sweet and very handsome 5-year-old German Shepherd who presented to Dr. Emma LaVigne at the end of March with a history of coughing that started in February, lasted for a week and then resolved on its own. His owners had noticed him coughing again about a week prior to bringing him to Suffield Vet and he had just gotten back from the kennel so Dr. LaVigne's first thought was that he had a Kennel Cough infection. The unusual part of the history was that he was mostly coughing at night, his appetite was decreased, and he had a fair bit of exercise intolerance to the point where he would only run after a ball once before stopping which was very unlike him. When seen for his annual wellness check-up about 2 months prior, his owners mentioned that they had been feeding him a grain-free diet since he was about 2 years old.

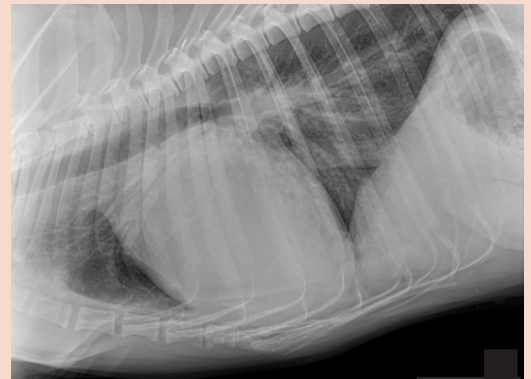
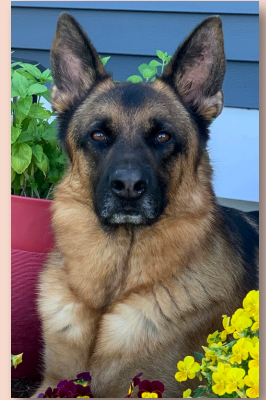
Grain-free diets have been increasingly popular over the last several years and marketing ploys have contributed greatly to this popularity. The average, well-meaning pet owner buys into the idea that grain-free food decreases food allergies and is overall healthier for their pets because the focus is on high-quality proteins and less "junk" in the pet foods. Owners are increasingly concerned over the long lists of ingredients that make up their beloved pets' diets so "limited ingredient", grain-free diets are now all the rage. Pet food companies have created this healthy halo surrounding the idea of grain-free, when in reality, dogs are omnivores that need grains and in fact we are doing our dogs significant harm by removing them from their diets. The most detrimental effect we have been seeing over the last 4-5 years is the development of Dilated Cardiomyopathy (or DCM).

DCM is a severe enlargement of the heart caused by weakened heart muscles that causes the heart's function to decrease significantly to the point where dogs can go into Congestive Heart Failure where fluid builds up in the lungs and leads to death if untreated, or it can lead to fatal arrhythmias (abnormal heart rhythm) where dogs can just essentially drop dead suddenly. We have included the X-ray image of Bayern's heart to provide an example of just how large they can get.

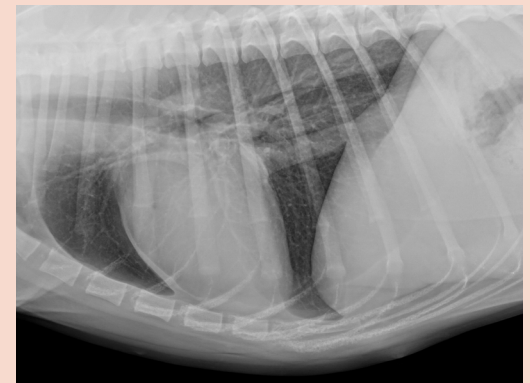
When Dr. LaVigne was listening to Bayern's chest, his heart rate was high, he had a new heart murmur, and his breathing rate and effort were significantly elevated. His chest X-rays were unfortunately classic for DCM and he had some fluid that was starting to build up in his lungs. The Dr. was worried that Bayern was already in congestive heart failure. He had been switched to a diet with grains after his annual 2 months prior, but unfortunately for Bayern, his heart had already been significantly damaged from years on a grain-free diet. His owners elected to take him to Central Hospital for Veterinary Medicine to see a Veterinary Cardiologist and hospitalize him to try to give him a chance at survival.

Bayern's heart failure has fortunately been resolved thanks to early intervention and medications prescribed by his cardiologist, however, his heart remains enlarged with decreased function and his long-term prognosis is uncertain at this time. We are hopeful over the next six months that his heart may return to normal size and function after being on a grain-full diet and taking his prescribed medications.

Bayern's owners were extremely well-meaning and only wanted to feed him the best diet possible, but thanks to misinformation from pet food companies, Bayern ended up with a potentially fatal illness at a very young age. We want to stress the importance of consulting with your veterinarian prior to making diet changes for your dog (or cat) and being very cautious about seemingly positive marketing words and phrases such as "grain-free", "all-natural", "raw", "limited ingredient", etc. Please understand that we make the food recommendations that we do based on many years of education and the brands we recommend are because those companies have full-time, board-certified Veterinary Nutritionists on staff to formulate diets that are both safe and completely well-balanced. We would not recommend foods for your pets that we wouldn't feed to our own pets. Bayern's owners have made it their goal to spread the word about the dangers of grain-free diets, so we have decided to make him our Patient of the Month to help further that goal and prevent grain-free dietary related DCM in other dogs. The FDA has published a list of the top 16 dog food brands named most frequently in reported DCM cases and this information and more can be found at FDA.gov <https://www.fda.gov/animal-veterinary/outbreaks-and-advisories/fda-investigation-potential-link-between-certain-diets-and-canine-dilated-cardiomyopathy>



Bayern's chest x-ray showing his enlarged heart due to DCM



A healthy dog's chest x-ray showing a normal-sized heart.

Suffield Veterinary Hospital

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View all of our Patients of the Month on our web site, www.suffieldvet.com