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Peanuts, Aspergillus and Food for Thought

Category: Companion Parrot Feeding

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In 1960 over 100,000 turkeys died on poultry farms in England. Turkey X disease was named and Aflatoxin was discovered and traced back to the peanut-meal feed. The peanuts contained a toxin-producing fungus called Aspergillus flavus. Aflatoxins are also found in many other foods, including corn, milk, eggs, meat, nuts, almonds, figs and spices. In fact, corn may be the crop with the greatest risk worldwide, because it's grown year-round in climates ideal for fungal growth. Aflatoxins have been detected in milk, cheese, eggs and meat when animals ingest contaminated feed. Industrial farming, with worldwide standards of farming and long transport journeys all come into play when considering Aflatoxins.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration allows low levels of aflatoxins in foods because it considers them as unavoidable contaminants. In developing countries, Aflatoxins pose a more serious risk, but in the United States, peanuts, peanut butter and other human grade foods undergo rigorous testing. FDA guidelines allow no more than 20 parts per billion, of aflatoxin in human grade foods. Aflatoxins are produced by at least three Aspergillus species. These are A. flavus, A. parasiticus and A. nomius. Their growth is strongly influenced by climate and, although they are found all over the world, they are more common in tropical regions with extreme variations in temperature, rainfall and humidity. A. flavus contamination of peanut crops in the field is known to be favoured during drought stress and corn crops are vulnerable when damaged by insects. Mould growth and Aflatoxin production during storage plays a large role in production particularly if drying is inadequate, or storage conditions allow access for insects, moisture or rodents.

Aflatoxins are stable and can survive relatively high temperatures with little degradation. Their heat stability is greatly influenced by key variables including moisture level and pH. Cooking processes cannot be relied upon soley to destroy aflatoxins.

There is little documented proofs about the necessary level of dietary exposure to Aflotoxins to negatively affect health in humans. Diagnosis of chronic toxicity if difficult. To date, the best approach is minimising dietary exposure. Counter food choices to promote healthy liver function is also recommended. Aflatoxins are associated with Liver disease and cancers in humans and animals over long term exposures.

These are the knowns.

Here's the not knowns we all have to deal with on a daily basis when purchasing foods for ourselves and our parrots; we do not and can not know the full growing, handling, transport and processing cycles of foods to ensure a known result in consumption. The FDA and USDA doesn't have the money, manpower or political interest to truly monitor our foods in the US. Only 3% of imported fish and seafood is actually hands on tested, for example. I really do not recommend ever buying frozen seafood from the Pacific Rim. But that's another story that runs parallel to our conversation here.

Peanuts are susceptible to the issue of Aflatoxins. How much we can't know, but there are levels and grades for both us and our parrots. Corn, too is susceptible. Corn based non human grade mixes (dogs, cats, parrots, guinnea pigs...name the companion) will stand the same chance of delivering Aflatoxins. I would suspect equally so, if not more so. If Aflatoxins take foot hold in ground crops in duress during drought, flooding, or infestations, then what does this say about the last 4 years of crops coming out of the major drought regions out west (in the US)? If we are relying on world productions to "make up the difference" and we know the climates are particularly tropical and prone for Aflatoxin issues, then what does this say about products relying on those imports?

Avoiding peanuts in the shell helps insure a partial defense. I do avoid them. I personally consume raw organic peanut butters from sources that tell me where they got their peanuts. I share these butters with our flock. That being said I'd like to offer a wide "food for thought" that spring boards off the peanut issue. Unless you grow foods yourself, from seeds purchased through heirloom seed providers, you will always face issues of this nature. It is the the very nature of modern society and where we have allowed our food productions to go. It is somewhat our own fault, we wanted Walmart prices for an apple out of season, if you will. Not to mention the birth and growth of fast food conglomerates creating their own necessary chain of ingredient productions.

There is a very specific step that we can do for ourselves and our companions that will actually make a real difference. It's not necessarily fun, cheap or easy. Eat healthier, local and forget processed anything at the store. Countering the small but most likely incessant burrage of health risks we take in with foods now mass grown, produced and transported is the one real palpable step we can take for our health. Feeding our parrots in season and local or known sourced does the same.

We talk about our parrot's health, but we need also talk about our own. Our companions rely on us totally. We need to remember that our health is literally the beginning of theirs. Be good to yourself, you are so very important to your flock and family. And remember we can only balance that which we know.

Together we can give every parrot everywhere, a happy home!