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The following article is meant only to be an introduction to the theories and components of a raw diet prepared for pets. Specifics about quantities and ratios were intentionally omitted. Always consult a raw-supportive veterinarian, and do a complete blood panel on your pet before embarking on a new diet. Companion animals can become ill from eating improperly-prepared food, or diets that are unsuitable for their age, health status, activity level or breed.

I've got to admit - I love convenience foods!

When I'm hungry, it's tempting to pour a quick bowl of cereal or toss a frozen pizza into the oven, but I try to limit my intake of processed foods, opting for home-prepared, fresh meals whenever possible. Sure, it takes a little longer, but I feel better knowing that I'm giving my body real nutrients for fuel.

I guess I feel the same way about my dogs and cats. I know it's easier to pour kibble into a bowl and walk away, but I just can't bring myself to do it any more.

I fed my pets a popular dry diet for eight years. My cat Simba was addicted to the carbohydrates, overweight, and slept all the time. His brother Milo was skinny, underweight and always hungry. My dog Sparky often had smelly gas, and the other dog Muñoz had intermittent seizures. I thought I was doing the right thing by feeding them the same food day after day, year after year, but I was terribly wrong.

When Milo died of heart disease, my vet suspected it was due to a lack of the essential amino acid taurine in his diet. Because taurine is found only in the proteins of animal origin, I began to question how else I might be harming my beloved pets by feeding only dry commercial foods. My vet then advised me to switch the diet for my pets to fresh, natural foods.

Researching the history and ingredients of most commercial pet foods was a true eye opener; most contain extremely high quantities of fillers such as rice, corn, wheat and soy, often comprising 50% or more of the ingredients. Commercial pet foods are cooked at extremely high temperatures, and are said to lose important enzymes and nutrients in the process. Even brands labeled as natural, super premium or vet recommended may still contain substandard or condemned meats, artificial preservatives, colorings, sugars, salt and by-products.

The more I read, the more questions I had. If dogs and cats require a carnivorous diet, why are there so many carbohydrate-rich dry kibbles? If dogs and cats need fresh meat to thrive, but they only eat kibble, aren't they merely just surviving? Are these processed foods really causing pet allergies, irritable bowel syndrome, dry skin and coats, diabetes, obesity, kidney disease, seizures, cancers and a myriad of other disorders?

In trying to answer these questions and others, I spent years researching species-appropriate diets, gradually incorporating changes as I felt comfortable with them; starting first with a better kibble, then changing to canned foods, and finally switching completely to raw. I joined online newsgroups for people who prepare their own pets' meals, read dozens of pet nutrition books, and a few human nutrition books as well. The common theme among all resources is that fresh, raw (uncooked) whole foods provide the optimal nutrition that nature designed.

A raw diet for cats and dogs which includes fresh, natural foods is also known as the BARF diet; an acronym for biologically appropriate raw foods. The goal of feeding a raw diet is to duplicate, as closely as possible, the evolutionary diet of the carnivore in the wild.

While dogs can get away with being more omnivorous than cats, the bottom line is that our dogs and cats are designed to eat other mammals. If you live on a farm or in the country, most likely you've already seen your dogs outside helping themselves to the bounty of the land in the form of rabbits, squirrels and birds. Cats might be out in the barn chasing mice, small birds and insects. Each of these prey animals is comprised of raw muscle meat and bones, some internal organs, and a very small amount of predigested vegetable matter. There are no grains in the raw diet intended by nature.

So how does one go about feeding a raw diet at home? First, it depends on where you live and what you have access to. There is no single, correct recipe for a raw diet for every person or every dog or cat. Feeding raw is simply a method of feeding our pets the types and quantities of foods they might naturally eat in the wild - while avoiding any cooked, processed, and preservative-laden foods. The key to successfully feeding your pets a raw diet is variety and balance over time.

If you are in the city like me, you have to get a little more creative to "mimic" nature's diet in your own kitchen. I find it helpful to visit ethnic grocery stores, small butcher shops, and wholesalers who supply meats to the local restaurants. Meats may be purchased fresh or frozen, and I find it more affordable to buy quantity cases at a discount, and stock them in the freezer, pulling out individual portions to thaw in the refrigerator before feeding. All meats I purchase are labeled USDA Grade A, and meet the standards for human consumption. Organic, pasture-raised meats are always best, but may not be available in all areas, or may be cost-prohibitive for some families.

Where I live, chicken leg quarters, chicken backs, and chicken necks sell very affordably for about 39¢-59¢ per pound, so in our house, chicken comprises about 50% of the pets' overall diet. Additional organ meat such as heart, kidney, or liver may be purchased in the same places meat and meaty bones are sold and fed in very small quantities.

As your pets become accustomed to the diet, an increasing variety of protein sources should be offered, and may include lamb meat or necks, whole dressed rabbit, whole fish, duck necks, wings or legs, goat meat, buffalo meat, grass-fed beef, pork necks, raw eggs, and fresh or frozen green tripe. Meats may be cut into bite-sized chunks for the larger dogs, and fed ground for smaller dogs and cats. You may find that some foods are more accessible where you live, and may tend to feed those more. While a little bit of fat and skin may be left on the meats to provide your pet with extra calories for energy, any excess can be trimmed. Meat should be of good quality. If it smells bad and you wouldn't eat it, throw it out.

Vegetables include mostly dark leafy greens and vegetables such as kale, collard greens, dandelion greens, bok choy, parsley, cilantro, chard and broccoli. These may be purchased in small quantities, and served occasionally in rotation. Greens should always be fresh, with organic greens providing the most nutrition. I select the tips from a variety of greens on hand, wash them, and puree them with some water in the blender or mini food processor to break down the cellulose walls and make them more easily digestible. Although some people who feed the raw diet leave out the vegetables, I find that my pets love them, and I think they benefit from the extra vitamins. If you really want to become healthier, start eating these yourself.

So now that you understand the principles and components of a raw diet, let's review a few of the most common myths and misconceptions.

Myth 1: I was told never to feed bones to my pets.

Cooked bones should NEVER be fed. When bones are cooked, they become sharp, brittle, and dangerous. Raw bones, such as chicken necks, are more pliable and can easily be digested by dogs and cats. If you decide to feed your pets a raw diet, you must include either whole or ground edible bone.

Myth 2: Pets can choke on bones.

People and pets can choke on any type of food, so mealtime should always be supervised. Commonly-used raw meaty bones such as chicken necks and backs are smaller, softer and wholly consumable. Small dogs and cats, and dogs that tend to gulp without chewing do best when the meat and bone is given already ground. Frozen raw commercial diets are often sold already ground, or you may decide to purchase a commercial strength meat grinder for your home and grind the food yourself. Large, weight-bearing bones like beef knuckles (soup bones) or marrow bones are not meant to be eaten as a part of the raw diet, but may be provided to pets for their chewing enjoyment and teeth cleaning under your supervision.

Experienced raw feeder Lauri Stromberg explains, "I've fed a raw diet to six dogs for over six years now. My dogs have consumed over 10,000 pounds of raw meat with bone - and there's only been one incident of choking, that I was able to resolve quickly because I always stand near my dogs while they eat. None of my dogs have perforated intestines,

bone impactions, or bacterial infections - and absolutely NO cases of salmonella or E. coli poisoning."

Myth 3: No vet will support raw feeding.

Visit the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association (www.ahvma.org) website to find a practitioner in your area. Many holistic vets promote a raw diet for optimal pet health, and more traditional vets are learning about the benefits of the raw diet every day.

Even Dr. Deborah Noble DVM, a traditionally-trained, licensed veterinarian with 31 years of experience, believes that certain of her client's pets have improved dramatically after switching them to a natural diet. She says, "the pets are happier, healthier and brighter. I became tired of pets being ill and seeing no improvement with conventional therapies, so began giving owners an alternative to how they can feed their carnivore pets a more natural diet of whole foods instead of commercially-based grain diets."

Myth 4: My family and pets will get sick from bacteria.

Make sure your family practices safe meat-handling techniques and good food hygiene. Dr. Noble DVM reminds people who feed raw meats to "be sure to sanitize surfaces to prevent contamination with your own foods." Some people wear plastic, disposable gloves, or simply wash all surfaces and their hands with hot soapy water to disinfect them after touching raw meat.

Our pets' digestive systems work four times faster than humans' and are very short and acidic, helping them to process the nutrients in raw meat quickly before harmful bacteria has a chance to multiply and cause problems. Of course, you should always be proactive about your pets' health noting any changes in routine or behavior and seeking medical advise when necessary.

Myth 5: There is a recipe I can follow for raw feeding.

There is no "one" right recipe for home-prepared pet diets. That's the beauty of it. You put in what your pet needs, and you omit what they don't. One example of this occurs with Dalmatians. As a breed, they are known for carrying the genetic predisposition for urate bladder stones when they consume certain kinds of animal and plant foods containing purines. A commercially-prepared kibble acts as a "one-size-fits-all" when clearly not all dogs are created equal. To help ensure my own Dalmatian's good health, I feed him more raw, pureed, leafy greens while omitting beef and organ meat from his home-prepared diet - taking complete control over his nutritional needs and unique health requirements.

My pets have been on a raw diet for nearly two years now. They love their food, and I'm very satisfied with the positive changes I've observed. Simba, formerly an overweight cat, is now slim and full of energy. All of the animals' coats have become much softer, and now they barely shed at all. Their teeth are clean from enjoyable hours gnawing on large, recreational bones.

While my experience researching, preparing, and feeding the raw diet has been quite positive, I acknowledge that not everybody wants to take the time or thought required to prepare their pets' meals at home. If you are interested in learning more about the raw method of feeding, please take the time to thoroughly research the current varied philosophies of feeding and supplementation, talk with others who successfully feed raw, and join online raw feeding groups. Even after switching your pets' diets, you should continue to expand your education, and routinely evaluate your pets' health. Who knows, you just might learn so much about your pets' nutrition that you decide to improve your own diet as well.

Tips

- Stainless steel feeding bowls inhibit bacterial growth and are easily sterilized in the dishwasher
- Make sure your pets have access to fresh water
- Introduce any new foods gradually and watch for any allergic reactions
- Offer large, recreational bones once a week for chewing pleasure and to clean teeth
- Avoid mixing raw and cooked/kibble foods which have different digestion times
- Always disinfect counters, surfaces, and hands where raw meat is prepared
- Include EFAs (essential fatty acids) such as salmon oil or flaxseed oil in your pets' diet along with Vitamin E
- Add vitamins and supplements only occasionally and in moderation

Online Resources

<http://groups.yahoo.com>

Enter "BARF" or "raw diet dogs" (or cats) to find local raw feeding groups

Dogwise.com

Search for books with the keyword "raw"

Rawdogranch.com

Click "raw diet info" for a hands-on guide to preparing raw for dogs

Whole-Dog-Journal.com

Subscribe to the monthly publication for natural dog care and training

ipindex.com

Search the International Purveyor Index for a meat and poultry supplier near you