

Dog & Cat Nutrition

I just shared an article from [Dogs Naturally Magazine](#) giving '[10 Simple Rules to Get You Started](#)' on raw feeding your dog. This prompted me to repost this article that I wrote a while ago on dog and cat nutrition:

The food we feed our pets has changed considerably over the years, as indeed has our own diet. Years ago, animals were fed on scraps and left-overs from the food that we cooked for ourselves, so essentially they were eating 'human' food, however as our lifestyles have become busier and we now eat more 'convenience food', so our pets are being given more branded pet food. But is this a positive step?



Pet foods have become a “multibillion dollar industry” according to Donald R Strombeck, author of *“Home-Prepared Dog and Cat Diets: The Healthful Alternative”* (quoted in an article in *The Bark* Issue 42: May/June 2007). The *Daily Mail*, in January 2010, stated that the “pet food industry is valued at £2 billion and growing.” Products are advertised as being “the best” and “complete” and in fact they say that human food should not be given to animals, but is this the case? Unfortunately advertising laws around pet foods are less strict than those for human food and no-one really monitors the truth of what is being said. Also, there is little redress if the claims turn out to be false.

Veterinary students have often had very little teaching on what constitutes a healthy diet for the animals they will be caring for. Much of the information they actually receive comes from the pet food industry itself and this is then what the vets tell their patients. Manufacturers sponsor food displays in vet surgeries. Hill Science Plan sponsored the British Veterinary Association’s Congress in 2009 and signed a partnership with the British Veterinary Dental Association to sponsor animal tooth care. Royal Canin has partnerships with leading veterinary schools and Universities and they run Pet Health Counsellor Courses. Many pet websites are affiliated in some way with pet food corporations, in fact the Pet Health Council, described as an independent website, is sponsored by the Petfood Manufacturers Association. They claim “that processed food is best”, warning: ‘It would not be possible to feed your pet an adequate home-prepared diet’ (“Is the pet food you’re serving up killing your 4-legged friend?”, *Daily Mail* online, 20 January 2010)

Most of the vets who specialise in nutrition are taught using information from the industry and end up working for them. Also, most research funding comes from pet food producers which is a conflict of interest. Even organisations such as the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) are made up of people from the industry.

Supermarkets now have large sections devoted to selling pet food, but often these are the cheaper brands. It can be very difficult to trace the source of the ingredients but in order to keep the price low, these must be coming from the cheaper end of the market. Many pet foods contain what are known as '4-D ingredients'. An article entitled "*Top Worst Dry Dog Food Brands*" on the Holistic and Organix Pet Shoppe website states that:

"4-D chicken is meat and *by-products* that have been derived from chickens that were rejected by food inspectors who classified the chickens as not fit for human consumption because they were "Dead, Dying, Disabled or Diseased" at the time of inspection. Any chemicals that existed within that animal, would still be in it when dead. Meat by-products are nothing more than slaughterhouse waste; waste that's been banned for use in human food and then sold to the pet food industry. It's what's left over after the slaughter and classified as inedible waste, unfit for human consumption."

Holistic and Organix Pet Shoppe © 2012-2013

If you study the labels on, for example, dog food, you will see that the main ingredient is usually 'cereal' which is used as a bulking and binding agent. Cereal has little nutritional value for dogs and in fact many can develop allergic reactions to it, however it can help to keep the price down and make the food look more appealing — to the human buyer. If the cereal is not fully cooked it can be indigestible. Sometimes there are problems with a particular batch of kibble because it isn't thoroughly cooked and animals eating it get diarrhoea, even though they might have eaten the same food before with no problems.



With dry foods, the ingredients are cooked twice. This results in the 'ash' often mentioned in the ingredients list. This is known to be carcinogenic. Other problems, too, are much more common than with canned or homemade foods. Altered proteins may contribute to food intolerances, food allergies, and inflammatory

bowel disease. Some brands of dry food, particularly puppy food, recommend that it should be moistened before being given to the animal to eat, however “bacteria multiply rapidly on moistened dry food” so if the animal only eats a little and the rest is left for them to come back to later “it is a good way for them to get diarrhea”(Donald R Strombeck, *ibid*).

As most pet guardians now spend less time preparing food for themselves and their children it is not surprising that they are less likely to give their animals a varied, unprocessed diet. Many people buy commercial pet food because they honestly believe it is best for their pet, and because it is convenient and affordable. However processing requires several steps and it only requires a small error at any one stage to result in problems. Buying processed food takes control further from the consumer. An article in the *Daily Mail* stated that “few people are aware of the little publicised concerns about processed pet foods” (“Is the pet food you’re serving up killing your 4-legged friend?”). Some processed foods have been linked to poor behaviour in dogs, and even cancer. However people are now becoming more aware thanks to social media. There are pet-dedicated chatrooms where “increasing numbers of people have been sharing concerns about processed pet food” (*ibid*).

Many cases of urinary and kidney problems have been linked to dry food. This is one of the main causes of death in cats and is often caused because they are chronically dehydrated by just eating dry food. Manufacturers say that cats eating this food should always have plenty of fresh water available, but “even if they drink it is often not enough to ensure optimum urinary health” (Lisa Pierson, pet nutritionist).

One third of household pets is now overweight. Also, chronic conditions, such as diabetes, kidney and liver disease, heart disease and dental problems (all diet related) are on the increase. In addition there has been a rise in the number of cases of allergies (particularly skin problems) and digestive issues, despite veterinary advice on specialist foods for these conditions. Richard Allport, a vet of over 36 years’ experience, based in Hertfordshire, says: “my advice ... is always this: switch your pet’s diet to fresh food and often it’s so successful that altering the diet is all that’s needed to ‘cure’ a pet’s health problem.”



Roger Meacock, a vet based in Swindon says: “What people need to understand is that while on the outside dogs and cats have been domesticated into cuddly pets,

inside a dog is 99% related to the wolf, while a pet cat's digestive system is no different from a wild lion's." He says that their diet "should revolve around raw meat, as it would do in the wild, which is good for their teeth and gums as well as the animal's general health."

Many pet foods contain chemical additives. TV vet Joe Inglis says: "Over the past few years, many additives have been banned from human food, but pet food is still pumped full of similar chemicals." (ibid) The way raw ingredients are processed into pet food that will sit in a bowl without going off, or that can be stored in a can or bag for years, means that many of the nutrients are destroyed. This is why additives such as preservatives and vitamins need to be added. Jackie Marriott of the UK Raw Meaty Bones Support and Action Group says: "Although our pets digest them, their digestive systems have to work flat out to derive the best benefit... Most importantly, processed food also sits like a sludge on their teeth."

An alternative to commercial pet foods is the BARF – Biologically Appropriate Raw Food – diet. (BARF is also translated as the 'Bones And Raw Food' Diet.) It was devised by Dr Ian Billinghurst, a veterinary surgeon, writer and lecturer from Australia. He wrote a book entitled "*Give Your Dog a Bone*" which changed many people's thinking around how they should feed their pets. He says:

"I realized that most of the disease problems I was seeing in cats and dogs were due to nothing other than poor nutrition. That most of those diseases did not have to be. They could be eliminated with correct nutrition. To me this was both a revolutionary thought and an incredible revelation. I wanted to tell everybody! The only problem as I saw it back then was that this philosophy of feeding may not be accepted by my fellow vets who rely heavily on ill health in their patients for their daily bread."

His website states:

"A biologically appropriate diet for a dog is one that consists of raw whole foods similar to those eaten by the dogs' wild ancestors. The food fed must contain the same balance and type of ingredients as consumed by those wild ancestors. This food will include such things as muscle meat, bone, fat, organ meat and vegetable materials and any other "foods" that will mimic what those wild ancestors ate."

Specially prepared packs of raw foods can now be purchased from several online outlets (such as Honey's, Raw2Paw, and Barf Pet Foods) making them more convenient, and the price is similar to feeding an animal on a good quality tinned food.



Some people voice concerns about these raw food diets. The Pet Food Manufacturers Association says:

“There are concerns that feeding raw meat to pets can present a human/animal risk, such as salmonella contamination. In the case where only raw meat and bones are fed, there is an additional concern among vets and animal nutritionists that this exclusive diet may not meet the pet’s needs.”

However if the food is bought from a reputable company they should be happy to provide information on their sources and these should be of very high quality. If appropriate care is taken with handling, presentation and storage of the food it should not pose significant risk.

Another option is to return to the ‘old fashioned’ method of cooking and preparing food from scratch at home and including enough to feed any animals in the household. This would also benefit the health of the human members of the family as they too would be eating fewer processed foods. Cooked meat and vegetables are easier for animals to digest which can support absorption of nutrients and help to avoid upset stomachs.



Whichever option is chosen, for anyone deciding to change their pet’s diet this should be done sensitively. A dog or cat who has eaten only processed foods up to this point needs time for their digestion and palate to adjust. Sometimes guardians are put off feeding ‘human’ food to the animals in their care because they become

so enthusiastic that they radically alter the diet overnight and then complain that it has made the animal ill when it is sick or has diarrhoea. This would actually be a 'normal' response to such a sudden change. Instead the new food should be introduced slowly, gradually reducing the amount of tinned food or kibble and replacing it with some meat and vegetables. Over time the processed foods can be removed entirely if desired.

Hopefully as we become more aware of our own health needs we will in turn be more sensitive to the needs of the animals in our care. Just as our wellbeing depends on our lifestyle, diet and exercise, so it is with our companion animals. Many people are becoming more health aware and diet conscious so hopefully this will have knock-on benefits for the animals too.

If you are interested in nutrition for your pet and would like to explore this further, contact me for a no-obligation chat where we can discuss your situation and see what simple changes you might be able to make to enhance their wellbeing. My contact details are:

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You can also read more about my work on my website:

www.equenergy.com/

References:

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