



Raw Diet Controversy

For a majority of pet owners, a quick trip to the local grocery or even pet superstore is the easiest way to pick up their pets' food. People might debate favorite brands, but most will use some sort of commercial dry or canned diet for their four legged friends. For a few pet owners though, preparing a meal for the family dog involves a little more work and a lot of raw meat. Are homemade or raw diets a good idea?

Take a stroll down the pet food aisle of your favorite store and your eyes will take in every imaginable color, a few cartoon characters and a lot of claims stating the food is "improved", "natural" or even "organic". It's truly a marketing bonanza!

More than 3,000 brands of pet food fill the aisles and pet owners will spend about \$18 billion to feed their pets each and every year.

But, high profile recalls, sick pets and corporate mistrust has moved a small number of pet owners to consider making their pets' food at home, instead of buying it in a bag. An Internet search for "raw diets" brings up almost 3 million different results, many of which claim that this sort of food is nutritionally superior to the commercially prepared diets.

The raw food diet trend began in 1993 with the publication of "Give Your Dog A Bone" written by Australian veterinarian, Dr. Ian Billinghurst. Building on the close evolutionary relationship between our dogs and their wolf cousins, Dr. Billinghurst claims that in domesticating the dog we "changed the wolf's appearance and mind...but not the basic internal workings or physiology". Many pet owners agree with this theory and have flocked to a raw meat type of diet for their animals.

Proponents of raw diets claim the foods give their pets more energy, provide more nutrition and overall, their dogs and cats are healthier than animals fed a typical dry or commercial diet. During the massive pet food recall of 2007, the amount of people opting for homemade diets increased dramatically, and many have continued to prepare their pet's food at home.

Adding more fuel to the fire, advocates of homemade foods persist in claims that commercial diets, especially those with a high percentage of grain, are actually shortening the life span of our animals.

How many of these arguments are valid and which ones lack evidence?

First, it is important to understand that all of the reports of increased energy and healthier pets are simply observations by the owners. Actual scientific and verifiable evidence supporting these claims is non-existent. To be fair, there is no evidence to refute these

statements either.

Veterinarians, both in the clinic with clients and in the media, answer many of Dr. Billinghurst's basic arguments. For example, the claim that dogs must eat meat since they are related to wolves is discussed and usually dismissed. As a well-respected blog, Skeptvet.com, states dogs are omnivores and will often eat a wide variety, including some fruits and vegetables. Not to mention that there has been more than 100,000 years of divergence between dogs and wolves as well as intense selective breeding, especially in the last 3,000 years.

Another claim that is used by raw food advocates is that dogs and cats can't digest grains, especially the corn and wheat ingredients found in many commercial diets. This contention is also refuted by scientific studies showing dogs use these cooked grains as effectively as other carbohydrate sources.

But, perhaps the biggest reason many pet owners opt for preparing their pets' meals is a mistrust of the corporations formulating the dry foods. Recalls due to contamination, excessive or deficient nutrients and bacterial contamination seem all too commonplace. Although these recalls have happened occasionally and pets have become sick, the reality of the situation is that the vast majority of commercial diets are not only safe for our pets, they also provide an optimum level of nutrition, helping out pets live full and healthy lives.

So, is one type of diet actually better than another?

The answer to that question is complex and should always involve a discussion with your veterinarian. Raw diets, for all their purported benefits, do come with significant risks. Bacterial contamination is more prevalent with these diets and the potential for an imbalance of nutrients is very high. If you do choose to use a homemade or raw diet, talk with your veterinarian and use an approved veterinary nutritional site, like BalanceIt.com to insure that your pet does benefit from your extra work.

Also, remember that many pet food companies have decades of experience, research and testing proving the effectiveness and safety of their diets. It's true that occasional recalls have happened, but these unfortunate events have also helped determine how to effectively handle this sort of crisis. Lessons learned from past situations will help to prevent future issues.

Looking forward, science may give us an answer to this on-going and very passionate debate. But, for now, your best source of advice is not an online forum or manufacturer's website with products to sell, but rather you should put your trust in your veterinarian.

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