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Articles

Common Raw Diet Concerns

(a.k.a. BARF Myths)



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Real food is too expensive.



MYTH #1: Uncooked meat will infect a dog with deadly bacteria.

Not likely. Healthy dogs are quite capable of handling bacteria-laden foods. Their heritage as a hunter and scavenger provides them with a short, acidic digestive tract, which prevents bacteria from overpopulating. All animals, including humans, have a normal amount of bacteria such as salmonella in their digestive tract. Only under severe stress or illness might it get out of control and cause infections.

Dogs were designed to eat raw meat. Their digestive systems have changed none since their domestication tens of thousands of years ago. But if you are very worried about bacteria, you can cook the meat. It will still be better than commercial fare. Just know that you will be losing some nutrition in the process, and making it harder for the dog to digest. A better solution would be to disinfect the meat with Grapefruit Seed Extract, which will kill any worrisome bacteria without the degenerative effects of cooking.

Remember also, that dogs lick themselves, and many eat their own or other animals' stools! You can believe that they pick up far more bacteria from those sources than from fresh, raw, human-grade meat!

By the way, don't believe that commercial foods are safe from contamination. On many occasions, even high quality kibbles have been recalled due to the presence of harmful bacteria or molds. Animal source treats, such as pig ears, are another threat. A number of people have become ill from handling their dogs' goodies. Some packagings are now carrying warnings about the possibility of salmonella poisoning. Note that these warnings are for humans, as most dogs have not been adversely affected by the bacteria.

MYTH #2: Handling raw meat for the dog puts the human family at risk of E-coli or salmonella poisoning.

No more than preparing meat for the human family. Following the same safe handling practices you use with your own food will prevent any possible contamination.

MYTH #3: A dog who eats raw meat can spread bacteria to humans.

The risk is minimal. Bearded dogs or messy eaters may require some cleaning up, but generally you don't have to worry about a raw fed dog spreading bacteria, any more than you do about any

other dog. As I said, all dogs pick up germs from one source or another. There is no avoiding it. Bacteria is everywhere, and that is the plain truth.

Unless someone in the household has an immune deficiency problem, there really isn't much worth worrying about. Besides, everything (even dog beards) can be sterilized with GSE.

MYTH #4: Bones are dangerous.

Only cooked ones. When a bone is exposed to heat, it becomes hard and brittle. That is the reason people are told to never feed chicken bones - because the cooked ones can splinter. Raw poultry bones, on the other hand, are soft and safe to eat, provided the dog doesn't swallow them whole. Even then, a strong digestive system can often handle the whole bone with no consequence.

Another concern is that bones will wear down or break teeth. While both can occur when dogs frequently chew hard marrow bones, neither is likely with the soft bones which make up the raw diet.

Raw bones are the perfect source of many important minerals. In fact, many experts suggest that raw meaty bones provide nearly every nutrient required by the dog. Their value is unsurpassed, as no artificial supplement can replace their healthful qualities. Raw meaty bones are the perfect base for an ideal natural diet.

One major point to make is that, if you are the least bit uncomfortable feeding bones, they can be ground. Ground raw bones are just as healthful, perhaps even easier to digest, and they pose no threat whatsoever in regards to choking.

MYTH #5: Raw meat makes dogs aggressive.

Silly old wife's tale. A switch to a natural diet may result in an older dog regaining some youthful vigor, but in no way does it turn him vicious.

The only possible truth to this rumor may be that a resource guarder could find good food to be of higher value and thus guard it more vigilantly. This has nothing to do with the food (or treat, or toy, or chair) and everything to do with behavior. If you have a resource guarder, it is not fair to neglect him of high quality nutrition simply to avoid the behavior problem. Only training will control guarding. If you can't do it yourself, work with a qualified behaviorist.

Relax now. Dogs with no previous tendency towards resource guarding will not suddenly attack you if you hand him a bone. As I said, it's about existing behavior, nothing else.

MYTH #6: Feeding a dog raw meat will turn him into a killer.

Ridiculous! This myth has absolutely no truth behind it, and not a bit of common sense. Dogs do not, indeed cannot, connect the meat in their bowl to the living animal it came from. If such were possible, we'd be forced to turn our pets into vegetarians. But then, of course, that would make them incorrigible garden raiders.

The old saying of dogs "getting the taste of blood" goes along with this myth. I've actually heard of owners believing their dog would have to be put to sleep because it licked a bleeding wound on the person's body. I am constantly amazed at how so many humans apparently lack even a trace of logic! If dogs were such dangerous creatures, they would not have been domesticated in the first place.

Like aggression, hunting is all about behavior, and has nothing to do with what an animal is fed. Dogs are, by nature, predators, and this instinct remains in varying degrees in every breed. When your cute puppy runs after a tennis ball, it is displaying prey drive. Some dogs chase squirrels. It's basically the same thing. Now, if a dog catches a squirrel, the hunting behavior is reinforced, and the dog will be more likely to do it again. What rewards the behavior is not the taste of blood, but the simple fact that the dog's act was successful. Likewise, what the dog ate for supper has no bearing on why he chased the squirrel in the first place. Whether or not a dog is fed meat - raw or cooked - does not change his instinct or behaviors that have been reinforced.

Remember that commercial foods (which still contain meat) have only been around for a very short while. For thousands of years before that, dogs were fed fresh meat. And in that time, many of those dogs worked on farms, tending livestock. Interestingly enough, their diet did not cause them to turn on their charges.

Excuse me now, I ate a piece of toast for breakfast and I have a sudden urge to maraud a wheat field!

MYTH #7: "People food" is bad for dogs.

There is, actually, an understandable reason why vets tell their clients not to feed table scraps. For one thing, scraps are often unhealthy trimmings that really do belong in the trash. Dogs are not garbage disposals. But if it is healthy leftovers that you wish to share, many vets will say it is fine so long as the "people food" doesn't exceed 10% of the diet. This is because the "balance" of commercial foods is easily upset, and supposedly any larger quantities of real food, however nutritious, may cause a deficiency or overdose.

The problem with that is people begin to think that "people food" is altogether unhealthy for dogs. Look at that expression: "people food." Just those words are racist, in that they imply that the human race alone is worthy of consuming fresh real foods, while our lowly pets deserve only redundant meals of bagged kibble or canned mush! Most illogical!

Fresh whole foods such as meats, vegetables, fruits - pretty much anything that is healthy for humans - provide just as much nutrition to dogs as they do to us. Processed pet food can never duplicate every healthful quality of fresh foods. So much about nutrition, especially for our pets, is still unknown. What is known is that when food is overly processed or cooked, many important nutrients are altered, diminished, or lost. Only unprocessed foods can supply the variety of vitamins, minerals, enzymes, and yet to be discovered properties that are so crucial for true health.

MYTH #8: Home-prepared diets cannot meet a dog's nutritional requirements.

Well, apparently they did just that less than 80 years ago when commercial food did not prevail. For tens of thousands of years before, domestic dogs lived off human table scraps and meaty bones. This did not lead to their extinction, so obviously home-prepared meals CAN meet a dog's needs. Indeed, a well designed raw diet provides optimal nutrition that cannot be obtained from commercial foods.

MYTH #9: The average pet owner cannot begin to address a dog's nutritional needs without a university education. Only the pet food companies are qualified to prepare a proper diet.

What an insult to intelligence! Can we honestly believe that, while we somehow manage to feed ourselves and our children without obsessively calculating every element, the basic knowledge required to nourish our (very adaptable) dogs eludes us? Not to mention that wild dogs get along just fine rounding up their own food. Surely the more intelligent human can do just as good a job! The average pet owner is not so stupid that they are unable to throw together a couple of ingredients and add a multivitamin. This is another example of advertisements basically brainwashing pet owners into believing that their product is the only way to go.

Most people innately know which foods are good and which are bad. E.g. fresh whole fruits and veggies - good; greasy or sugary junk snacks - bad. They do not have to know the precise scientific reason why this is, just that it is so. That is all the knowledge needed to feed themselves and their dogs a healthy diet.

Besides, there are so many diet books out there, it is easy enough to pick one up and follow a recipe. Certainly one does not need a degree to buy bones!

MYTH #10: Numerous exotic supplements are necessary for optimum health.

The more a food is processed, the more nutrition it loses, and therefore, the more that will be required to be restored through supplementation. This is why commercial foods have such a long list of added vitamins. Likewise, the recipes for natural diets that call for meat without bones often include many different supplements to replace what bones by themselves would have provided. Another common reason excessive supplements are used is that the person believes more is better. This is definitely not the case. Using a variety of supplements by rotating them is excellent, but there is such a thing as overdoing it.

Fresh, whole, raw foods are bursting with nutrients. Little needs to be added to round out a diet consisting of such. Certain edibles, such as liver, kelp, and of course RMBs, contain a vast array of vitamins & minerals - nearly every nutrient deemed essential for dogs when combined. Simple whole foods such as these replace a multitude of artificial supplements.

Just keep in mind that feeding a diet rich in variety will surely achieve balance over time.

MYTH #11: Most raw diets contain too much protein.

On the contrary, kidney disease and other problems aggravated by an excess of protein are

common with commercial foods, but are highly irregular with properly made raw diets. A natural diet consists of high quality meat protein, in comparison to the low quality, overly processed protein contained in commercial foods, which is difficult to digest and utilize. In addition, the unnatural pet food is fed every day, giving the digestive system no time to rest, while raw diets often have at least one meatless day each week.

High levels of protein, from any source, do not cause kidney failure. They will however intensify the already existing disease. Therefore, prevention is the best medicine. Such problems are more likely to develop due to a lifetime on poor quality processed fare than being fed real food. A biologically appropriate diet is the optimum for any species. In the dog's case, that would be BARF.

If your dog already has health problems requiring a low protein diet, there are recipes for modified natural diets available. Certainly better than processed, chemical-laden prescription diets from the vet, there has been much success with these natural alternatives.

MYTH #12: Grain-free diets do not provide enough carbohydrates.

A common theory, even with some holistic nutritionists, is that the canine's natural prey consumed grain, and so when eating the stomach contents, the canine too would consume grain. However, domestic grain is structurally different from the wild grains that prey animals dine on along with other vegetation. Besides, the stomach contents of prey would make up a very small portion of a canine's natural diet, as such parts are not shared equally among pack members and even full-bellied prey is mostly meat and bones.

Canines evolved to derive complex carbohydrates from raw fat and protein. In their bodies, grains are converted to simple sugars. Not a big concern in small amounts, but when grains are fed as a large part of the diet this often causes weight problems and dental decay. Grains are also suspected to be at the root of many other health issues, such as allergies, skin problems, digestive disturbances, ad infinitum.

MYTH #13: Dogs require a complete and balanced diet every day.

What a foolish notion! Do you know of any creature in nature that consumes every essential nutrient at each meal? Do you feed yourself that way??

This is yet another myth instilled by the pet food industry, in order to sell their product. It may sound good on the surface, but like so many things, it is just too good to be true. For one thing, many nutrients are lost or altered in the cooking process. For another, certain vitamins and minerals actually block the absorption of one another when combined. This fact alone reveals the idea of "complete and balanced" as an impossibility. There is also the debated question of food combining which, for instance, says that meat and grains are best digested separately.

The bottom line is that the canine is a natural animal, requiring natural foods. His diet, like our own, is meant to be balanced over time. This is accomplished by offering an assortment of foods - something different at each meal. As the saying goes, variety is the spice of life.

MYTH #14: Veterinarians say that only commercial food can provide a good diet, and surely they know what is best. After all, they went to college for that sort of thing!

Unfortunately, veterinary college courses only superficially cover nutrition in their main curriculum. What little is taught happens to be entirely funded by large pet food corporations. So the information provided is rather biased. Students typically come away with a deeply ingrained belief that commercial food is the only safe way to feed pets, while still knowing little more about nutrition than they did before college.

MYTH #15: Pets today live longer, healthier lives because of revolutionary health care, such as commercial foods.

On the contrary, our pets continue to survive in spite of low quality commercial foods! Don't get me wrong, there have been many notable advances in veterinary medicine, but pet food is not one of them.

Sometime around the turn of the 20th century, certain companies made available a product intended to make feeding pets easier. The owners were originally expected to supplement the biscuits with meat and table scraps. Over time though, the recipes claimed to be "complete and balanced" - an all in one food that took no effort to use. Improving health was not of the manufacturers' concern, only convenience. They also realized that the by-products from the human food industry, which were costly to dispose of, could instead be used as pet food and turn the manufacturers a nice profit. That fact remains to this day.

In the beginning, most people could not afford packaged pet food, or didn't want to spend such money on the dog, or were "old fashioned" and preferred to feed a traditional natural diet. It wasn't until much later that the idea caught on, along with the use of other modern day concoctions. Pet owners all over found the commercial product to be a great convenience. By then, of course, there were widespread advertising campaigns to more or less brainwash people into believing in commercial pet foods.

Come the 21st century, there are a myriad of products to choose from: everything from special formulas for young or old, active or overweight, to allergies and health problems. The majority of pet owners have been converted to the new way of feeding - in their mind, the only way. The pet food industry has become a multi-billion dollar business. And it is treated as such. Convincing advertisements continue, and scandalous discoveries are covered up.

Since the popularity in pet foods has risen, there have also been more incidences of allergies and other chronic illnesses. The root of these problems is a mystery (not really). Meanwhile, manufacturers take the opportunity to develop new formulas for allergic or otherwise ill pets.

Prescription diets are very profitable.

Today, the average life span for a dog is approximately 12 years. A few decades ago, many would live upwards of 20. Now there are a number of mysterious new illnesses that plague our pets, and young animals are affected with these just as often as old. While poor breeding and overvaccination play a big part in this, commercial foods have certainly not helped. If anything, a

plethora of today's pets are living shorter, sicker lives! So much for revolutionary health care.

MYTH #16: Dogs must eat dry kibble to keep their teeth clean.

It is amazing how this myth perpetuates, despite it's obvious untruth. Most commercially-fed pets' mouths are absolutely filthy! Dry kibble will no more clean a dog's teeth as crisp salad croutons would a human's. In fact, a cooked, grain-laden diet is believed to contribute to tarter buildup and other dental problems in pets.

MYTH #17: Feeding "people food" will create a dog that begs.

Only if you let it happen. Begging (or stealing) is in the realm of behavior, not nutrition. If the owner allows the dog to perform such behaviors, obviously they will continue. But if the owner simply makes the dog lay down (or go away, or whatever) while the human eats, there is no problem. This is not a difficult concept.

Follow the basic rules of training to treat or prevent begging: ignore the bad and reward the good. I.e. pay no attention to begging, except perhaps to elicit an incompatible behavior (such as laying down), but never give food until the dog is acting desirably. Most well trained dogs can even be fed directly from the human's plate without becoming incorrigible. At the very least they can be allowed in the dining room during the eating hour without annoying anybody.

MYTH #18: Preparing a natural diet takes up an inordinate amount of time.

While some elaborate recipes do take a bit of work, basic BARF is very simple and the least time consuming of all raw diets. After becoming habituated, the "chef" often finds a few shortcuts, and everything becomes streamlined. On average, preparation equals approximately two minutes each day. Now, if you truly can't spare that tiny bit of time, I honestly don't see how you could manage owning a dog at all. After all, grooming and exercise take up much more time than that, even with the least active, smoothest coated hound.

On the other hand, if sheer laziness on your part is preventing you from trying a natural diet, I don't know what else to say. I'm not a motivational speaker. Just believe that many "BARFers" are as lazy, and they are always searching for time saving ideas. But they do continue, and their numbers steadily grow.

A homemade diet will never be as quick as pouring kibble from a bag, but your dogs' health sure is worth that small fragment of time.

MYTH #19: Real food is too expensive.

That depends on what you are comparing it with. True, it might be hard to find good food that's cheaper than the worst generic kibble, but hey, you get what you pay for. Most BARFers find they spend no more (usually less) on meat & bones than they did on mid- or high-quality kibble. It's

often helpful to keep in mind that what you spend in food bills, you save ten-fold in vet bills. In my opinion, if you can't afford high quality food, you should not own a dog. Or at least own a small one that eats less. It's not just because I feel all dogs are entitled to eating properly, but because if you can't afford a good diet, how on earth will you pay for even basic veterinary care, let alone treatments for health problems?

Ensuring a healthy life for your pet is not expensive - it's priceless.


By the way, all of this information applies to cats, as well as dogs!

TL, 2002

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