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Alternatively Speaking: When It Comes To Food, Fresh Is Best
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I have probably written more about nutrition than any other single topic, and with good reason. Food can be an essential part of treating illnesses, especially chronic conditions. But the most powerful way to use food is for prevention. A well-nourished body has the tools to protect itself from disease, and maintain its tissues to avoid wear and tear. I have long been a proponent of the value of fresh foods to provide the most useful, absorbable and vital nutrition for pets. I have had that passion rekindled this September at the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association conference where the topic of creating truly balanced homemade foods was given a lot of attention. No one debates the value of fresh feeding, however it is the seemingly overwhelming task of doing it right that drives most of us to the convenience of processed foods. It is my hope that we can make homemade food an attainable goal and part of our pet's meal plan.

Most of us would love to be able to cook fresh for our pets just like the rest of our family. But it's the uncertainty of what is OK versus harmful that makes us hesitant. Bodies have a lot to do every day. They generate energy, regulate normal organ function, maintain defenses from disease, and repair or turnover old tissues. All of this requires very specific nutrients for cells and enzymes to perform these fundamental tasks. It is not OK to just throw together a beautiful array of wholesome foods and assume they will provide all the nutrients in the correct amounts. What pet owners need is an informed recipe. When asked for guidance in this area, many veterinarians shy away from recommending fresh feeding because they equally don't want to cause harm. Unless you pursue board certification in nutrition, most veterinary education does not include how to formulate a balanced diet or evaluate the many frozen diets appearing on the market to tell if they are complete. It was assumed, back when I was in school, that pets would be eating bagged and canned foods which would be evaluated and cleared by authorities that regulate the pet food industry. Luckily, today there are increasing resources for vets and pet owners to help navigate a safe and complete diet formulation.

With all these valid cautions and concerns, one may ask, "Why would we bother to make fresh pet food and not just buy the bag off the shelf?" The reasons are many, but basically it comes down to control. When buying commercial food we can't see the ingredients used to judge their quality, we can't tailor the diet to our pet's individual needs, and we have to accept synthetic supplements for vitamins and minerals in amounts and quality that are arguably not ideal for many pets. We also have to accept a higher starch and glycemic index than what is ideal for a dog or cat to eat. If you look at the ancestral diet of a dog or cat and do a nutrient analysis of the contents, it is often a far cry from what we purchase at the store. In comparison, when we make fresh food, the nutrients are not degraded by processing and are more bioavailable. The diet can have ideal amounts of protein and fats from sources that better match the animal's natural diet, which means it is less likely to promote inflammation and obesity without all the starches. Organic or non-GMO ingredients can be used and we can include the range of vitamins and minerals that match their natural diet. After all, why would a dog need less of these nutrients as a domesticated pet than they would in nature? And if your pet has certain medical issues, your veterinarian can increase or decrease nutrients in the diet to assist their condition. In the end, even if home cooking is intermittent or a low percentage of your pet's overall diet, it is still really easy to see the health benefits.

So let's talk about some of the common advice I give when building a homemade diet plan. Remember, these are generalizations and all specific diet changes are best discussed with your holistic

veterinarian to make sure they are a good match for your individual pet. First, unless you have a really stubborn pet that won't eat commercial food once enjoying homemade, (and who can blame them really), you can mix homemade or raw diets with dry or canned foods. Feeding is not an 'all or none' proposition for most animals. It is fine to feed a small topping of homemade or a fresh meal once a week, as fits your budget and lifestyle. Rotating foods is considered ideal to provide a variety of different nutrients, but some individuals with allergies or digestive issues can't tolerate change. If this is the case, then respect their digestive needs and adjust to what works for them.

Second, you do need to follow a balanced recipe. In a pinch or when your pet is not feeling well it is ok to just use some meat and rice to get by, but more than a week or two of a diet deficient in nutrients is not ideal. Over time deficiencies will be occurring that are very slow to show outwardly unless you are young and growing. Then these effects can be devastating rapidly, especially in large breed puppies. There are many people that do not agree with 'balanced recipes' or using supplements for dog food. They argue that eating is effortless in the wild and there aren't nutritionists hovering over the wolf reminding him to eat more magnesium. They say that we should just be able to give a variety of meats and some organs and be good to go, right? But we have to remember that most prey is consumed whole in the wild, including the fur, glands, organs, muscles, and each part is rich in some vital nutrient. Very few of these parts will be found for sale on grocery shelves and will never make it into our home made rotation of ingredients. In addition, the prey in the wild feed themselves off whole foods and vegetation so their bodies are rich in all the nutrients the predator needed. In modern times, most meat products are raised on commercial farms on grains with synthetic nutrients instead of grass. Our soils are often depleted of minerals so the vegetables we grow and the meat from grazing animals may or may not contain the nutrients they did even 20 years ago. It can be difficult to eat enough whole foods to get what our bodies require without supplementing.

While I would love to include a recipe here as an example of home feeding, whole books are written on the subject due to amount of choices for certain ingredients, which would then affect the other parts of the recipe. I would rather direct interested pet owners to inexpensive paperbacks by Dr. Karen Becker or Steve Brown for a more complete instruction on 'do-it-yourself' pet foods. The Whole Dog Journal has also published several articles on evaluating commercial raw diets for complete nutrition. If the array of choices and math involved in making up your own recipe is too overwhelming, then you can consult with a holistic veterinarian or veterinary nutritionist to get started. Our clinic does offer holistic diet consultation, including tailoring an individual recipe to a patient's needs, advising how to assess labels on pet foods for appropriate ingredients and balance, and picking the food that may best match your pet's constitution and medical needs.

As with anything in life, things that are worthwhile do take a bit of effort. It is easier to throw up your hands in despair and just keep doing what you are doing even if you don't feel good about it. However, after a small learning curve, fresh feeding can be an easy addition to your pet's meals. Your efforts will be rewarded in the satisfaction of seeing your pet enjoy the yummy taste and aromas wafting from the real food in their dishes, made even better by the knowledge that they will be healthier for it. And for those of us out there that find boiling water a challenge, no worries. The raw food industry is getting better and better with balancing diets and most of the dehydrated varieties are sterilized for those with concerns about bacteria. So whether fresh from the crock pot or freezer, everyone can treat their pet to a wholesome fresh diet.

Dr. Anne Carroll is owner of the Chelsea Animal Hospital where she practices both conventional medicine and surgery as well as several alternative modalities including traditional Chinese acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine. Her associate Dr. Betty Jo Black brings classical homeopathy to the practice. For more information on alternative veterinary medicine visit their website at www.chelseaanimalhospital.com