



Chelsea Animal Hospital Inc.

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Alternatively Speaking: A Modern Twist on Ancient Feeding Wisdom Dr. Anne Carroll, DVM, CVA

My husband is in kitchen cooking and our dog Pumpkin is planted on her bed eagerly waiting to be tossed any dropped bits or trimmings. She takes her job of clean up seriously and will not be disappointed; who could refuse that cute face? I imagine this is how many of our dogs get fresh additions to their meals, adding a welcome level of nutrient quality and bioavailability superior to processed dry kibble. But beyond helping with scrap clean up, fresh feeding as part or all of the main diet is becoming more popular for dogs and even cats. Pet owners are more conscious of the role food plays as part of their own health care, so it is natural to question whether feeding their 4-legged family members all dry dog food can meet their standards for what promotes true health.

Besides all the benefits of eating fresh food compared to processed food, home cooking allows you to customize food to your pet's needs. Just as individual humans have different body types and therefore need different diets to maintain health, our pets are not one-size-fits-all either. Local foods influenced dogs' development as they were domesticated and bred. This means that individual dogs, and sometimes breeds of dogs, have different needs and biological preferences for what to eat. From a different perspective, each individual also has their own inherent patterns of weakness or imbalance that may be in part related to their genetics but also their own experiences and exposures. Chinese medical practice assigned many attributes to foods: temperatures, effects on body function, and effects on different meridian systems. They used food as a tool to proactively address imbalances and reduce the chance of disease, or with medical therapies to assist in treatment. This is not completely unique to the Chinese. Body type or 'constitutions' have been identified in the medical philosophies of many cultures. Today, the growing field of Nutrigenomics has identified how our bodies actually express different genes based on what we eat in our food. Foods that promote healthy gene activity help us thrive while foods that turn off these genes create weaknesses and predisposition to disease. Once again, new science justifies old knowledge that the ideal foods for one are not the same for another, and eating the wrong foods wears the body down over time just like the wrong gas breaks down your car.

The concept that food can help the body work out issues and minimize or prevent problems is becoming widely accepted. But feeding is not all about body types, Chinese theory, and patterns of weakness. There are concrete nutritional requirements that our pets need to have in order for all their systems to work and maintain health. Making sure they get those nutrients in the correct amounts and ratios, and in a form they can digest and assimilate is essential for their long term health. Offering a tasty topping to a meal that is mainly commercial food should not require a strict recipe. However, the more fresh foods being fed, the more attention is needed to nutritional completeness. There is an assumption that simply rotating through a variety of healthy ingredients over time will provide all the nutrient requirements for our pets. After all, that is how we eat, right? But when you really think about it, even with all our multivitamins and fortified foods, our doctors are checking and finding more nutrient deficiencies. These deficiencies do not cause outright disease as with malnutrition in the past, but instead they slowly hamper our body's ability to keep us in optimum health. Left to our own random meal planning, we are often not getting everything we need over time.

I see these same issues in dogs, whether my clients are making dog food themselves or even buying raw meat, bone, and organs for supplemental feeding. Some recipes omit any bone or source of calcium, or the meats and organs used simply don't contain the vitamins and trace minerals needed. Vegetables or supplements used to fortify may not contain all the nutrients required or are fed in too small an amount to provide all that is needed.

Also, the cellulose rich vegetables are not cooked or minced small enough for a dog to extract the nutrients from them. I also see diets too rich in high fat calories (think cheap ground beef). Too many calories means you have to limit meal size to avoid obesity and this prevents your dog from being able to eat enough of the diet to get the required protein, vitamins, and minerals. If these basic premises are left unaddressed, no amount of rotation is going to make up for what ends up being a deficient diet.

In my practice we use holistic philosophies to tailor nutrition to the needs of the individual patient. We also recognize that addressing holistic ideals does not mean we can ignore the nutritional needs of our patients. Here is where I add the disclaimer that my associates and I are not board certified in nutrition. So to accomplish these goals, we marry Chinese philosophy with a modern computer program to analyze our diets and balance it to AAFCO, FEDIAF or ancestral standards as we wish. This allows us the freedom to pick certain ingredients to match what is ideal for an individual at different stages of life, during different seasons of the year, and during periods of illness or health while being confident that we are meeting the basic nutritional needs of our patient. We also have the flexibility of using all whole foods, some nutritional supplements, or even a mix of commercial food with homemade to balance the diet. The computer assisted component allows diets to be easily altered as the holistic assessment of the patient changes. My clients also love this fact because as seasonal ingredients become available, or as certain ingredients become more costly, or possibly as their pet's tastes change, diets are updated and verified to see that they remain in balance.

So now you want to start making some food for your pet, terrific! Maybe they are itchy, or greasy, or gassy, or their coat is not as beautiful as it should be, or they are young and healthy and you want to keep them thriving as they age. With just a little education and attention to detail it is easy to augment your dog's menu with some fresh food. Note, this is NOT true for puppies, whose nutritional needs during growth and development have little wiggle room for deficiency. But even for adults, when feeding anything more than a treat with their dog food, it would be best if the foods you add are not stressing the overall nutritional effect of their diet. That can be as simple as using commercial products that are added to fresh meat to make it a balanced addition to their meal. For those that feel that none of the many varieties of commercial pet foods meet your pet's individual needs you and want to make more of their food from scratch, you can consult your veterinarian. They may refer you to a board certified veterinary nutritionist directly, or indirectly via the BalanceIt.com website where you can select ingredients for a cooked recipe and then purchase supplement packs specific to that recipe to balance it. For those that want to use raw diets or organ meats not available from the more conventional nutritionists, there are good books that teach proper nutrient rotation and how to supplement diets to make them complete - Dr Becker's book *Real Food for Healthy Dogs and Cats* is one of these. If you want to go to the next level and use diet as a part of your pet's medical care, find a holistic veterinarian that offers that service.

In the end, remember that you should do what you feel is best for your pet, and consult your veterinarian when making diet changes to avoid problems in the short or long term. Keep it simple, go slow and remember that for an adult healthy dog it would take months if not years to cause nutritional issues, so feel free to test the waters with some small changes. Doing a little can go a long way, and can taste great too, just ask Pumpkin!

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