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Alternatively Speaking: Are Raw Foods Right For You? Dr. Anne Carroll, DVM, CVA

Our family loves food, who doesn't? Eating is a source of pleasure, and hopefully good health when we do it right. Our family includes our pets of course, so it is really no wonder that we want our furry friends to equally enjoy their food and our pursuit for the 'perfect' dog food is driven by that desire to have happy, healthy pets. As that search leads more people to fresh or raw foods, I thought it would be a good time to revisit the topic of raw feeding. We have addressed the pros and cons of processed food in previous articles, so we will not revisit that debate, but instead just take a look at how to evaluate whether raw feeding may be a good fit for your family pet. Before we start, remember that no matter how potentially valuable any one type of food may be, there is no one-size-fits all when it comes to nutrition. One dog's perfect meal is another's digestive upset, so always check with your veterinarian about how to safely evaluate diet choices and make diet changes.

Why do we consider raw feeding, when dry dog and cat food is so convenient, requiring no warming, thawing, prep work or planning – just scoop and serve? Deep down we know the sales pitch just can't be true, that mass production of a processed diet that doesn't spoil sitting in a bag can't equal the biological value of unadulterated fresh foods. The kibble diet model was born not to maximize pet health but provide convenience to pet owners, as industrialization changed the way dogs and people ate. In modern times we are recognizing what we have given up for convenience and are looking for fresh ingredients that match what dogs naturally would have eaten, like cartilage and ligament tissues, and organ meats. The appeal of mimicking a 'natural' eating experience is not a small trend. The raw food industry was doing \$65 million in sales in 2013, as of last year that number had risen to \$195 million. While still less than 5% of the overall pet food market, raw food sales are growing three times the rate of the rest of the pet food industry. Some have argued this is all a fad, or an unfounded theory, but years later too many dogs are healthier on raw foods and that makes fresh feeding likely to continue to be a major growth area in the pet food market.

A growing market means more choices, and more ways to add fresh food to our pet's diet, but that comes with the price of needing to be educated to know how to choose. Some elect to start slowly and simply add fresh ingredients on a small scale to the current diet, and this can be an easy way to try out fresh feeding. Appropriate foods that agree with your pet's digestion can be added to a balanced base meal plan, and it gives the flexibility to focus on certain nutrients that kibble tends to lack, or to address specific needs your pet may have. Options include complete meals of quality local meats to use with a supplement balancing mix, making small batch raw or cooked meals to add to dry food, or just supplement commercial food with choice items to augment health. At our practice we will often identify foods that bolster nutrients that we feel can help low grade health concerns in middle or older age, or use foods that assist our therapy for an animal's health issues. As long as the additions are mindfully chosen and make up less than a quarter of the diet, this approach can really brighten your dog's menu with nutritional benefits.

For those wanting a larger part of the diet to be fresh food, or even all of it, then making sure it is balanced is much more important. Simply providing a buffet of lovely fresh food does not mean it is magically complete. Humans use multivitamins, fortified foods like Iodine in salt and Vitamin D in milk, so why would we not expect to need some effort to complete our pet's food? Raw meat alone is not a

balanced meal, and too much meat without an appropriate balance of other nutrients can actually be detrimental over time. Balance is even more important for growing puppies and kittens, where too little or too much of certain nutrients, especially calcium, can have huge impact on their proper development. Another consideration is that it takes a lot of metabolic energy to break down raw food, and that can be too much for some animals, no matter their age. Younger animals may find this more of a challenge given everything their digestive systems and immune systems are facing – intestinal parasites passed on by their mothers, getting all those baby shots, diet change from mother's milk to solid foods and then new foods as they join a new household. Plus at this age there is a lot less room for replacing dry food and still keeping nutritional balance. At our practice we usually recommend sticking to commercial and cooked foods for most juveniles until they are older and on solid footing to handle raw foods, but if used homemade diets must meet AAFCO nutritional standards for your pet. Elderly animals may have similar needs for an 'easier' diet to digest given the decline of digestive capabilities as they age. Consulting with your vet is important for any diet plan, but even more so for the young and old.

Once you have talked to your vet, and tried out some fresh feeding to check that it agrees with your pet, you may be ready to take the plunge and make some larger diet changes. The first decision is whether you will make it yourself or buy commercial. Making it yourself gives you more control over ingredient quality and sources, and can allow you to meet any dietary restrictions your pet may have. It does require a legitimately balanced recipe, and do expect to have to use some supplements. It is virtually impossible to provide the variety of tissues, including organs, hair and glands that animals eat in their prey, not to mention the other nutrients dogs would look for from the stools of plant eating animals (yes, there is a reason they want to go out and eat poop!). But with a little education and practice, you can incorporate shopping and cooking for your pet into what you are already doing for your family so making their food can be economical and not too hard. At our practice we commonly assist clients analyze their recipe by ingredient weight and check that AAFCO requirements met. It helps to vary protein sources and use seasonally appropriate ingredients to help meet both nutritional and physiological needs. Dr Becker's book *Real Food For Dogs and Cats* is an in depth education on making balanced recipes, with supplement and meal plan suggestions. Like all things worthwhile, there is a learning curve and it is not a bad idea to have your veterinarian double check your recipes. If this gets too overwhelming, especially in multiple pet households, remember even a small amount of fresh feeding is helpful and you can just add a side dressing of fresh food, or a special meal once or twice a week to improve your pet's diet without throwing things out of balance.

For those that aren't up for making petfood themselves, commercial diets are abundant, both frozen and dried. However this still requires some education since there are many choices and not all raw diets are created equal. There are dried fresh foods that are served soaked to return them to a reconstituted state, and frozen raw foods. The same rules apply as for dry or canned foods, ignore the advertising on the front of the packaging and read the ingredient list. Many raw foods, and even canned or pouches, are meant for 'supplemental' feeding which is not a balanced meal and will not meet your pet's nutritional needs if fed exclusively. The package should be clearly labeled but also look at ingredient list – is not going to be balanced if it only has 3 or 4 ingredients and no supplementation. The other slightly tricky part in feeding complete commercial raw diets is the idea that raw vegetables are a good source of vitamins and minerals. Raw vegetables, unless diced super small or pureed, often have too much fibrous cellulose that dogs simply can't break down, and cats can't utilize. A quick look at your dog's stool will tell you if all that vitamin A in the carrot is feeding your dog or fertilizing your lawn! Dogs would eat pre-digested plant materials in the viscera of their prey, but it is questionable how much they can extract from raw materials. Some raw feeding proponents advise feeding the vegetable portion as a cooked mix. I think it depends on the individual. My own dog does not process raw veggies well, so I rotate between cooked, raw and either some commercial dry foods or a multivitamin. If her weight is good and her coat is glossy and healthy, and I know she is getting a rotation that covers her nutritional needs, then I am happy.

Nutritional health is important but to be complete, any conversation about raw food should include the controversy over safety. Food recalls and food borne illnesses are sadly becoming a matter of routine, but far more in our human foods than raw dog foods. A look on the FDA's website will show you everything from Romaine lettuce to frozen eclairs being recalled for bacterial issues. Food supply contamination is a reality of large scale food industry, and the raw meats used to make pet foods are no exception. Bacterial contamination of any raw meat is a concern, and handling raw meat whether for your family's consumption or your pet should be done with care and good hygiene. Families with health issues or crawling infants may not want to risk having more bacteria in pet dishes and the sponges used to wash those dishes. On the flip side, most households do not take proper measures to disinfect food surfaces, and yet still illness is very rare, despite studies showing that even dishwashers do not eliminate bacteria contamination on our cutting boards, dishes and utensils used to handle raw meat. With the huge volume of pets eating raw foods, if the risk of pets transmitting bacteria to our families from their tongues or bodies was significant, I would think we'd see illnesses being reported at least as much as we see E. coli on lettuce poisoning people. The reality is that petfood related illness in people is rare, but when it does occur more people have gotten bacterial illness like Salmonella from dry dog food or treats, not raw dog foods. But if this is a concern, bacterial issues can be avoided by using dehydrated raw foods, or cooked foods for your pet. This may even be a requirement if your dog has a job as a service animal at schools, nursing homes or other private institutions.

So to recap, in our practice we do believe that fresh feeding provides nutritional benefit over an all processed diet. That doesn't mean fresh foods are the best choice for everyone, individual genetics dictate what foods and in what form are best for any single animal. Just as some people are healthier when they avoid processed foods, sugars, or gluten, some animals equally thrive on raw foods. Others simply benefit from eating whole foods, whether cooked or raw. The more fresh feeding you do, be educated. But don't be intimidated by needing a little information, talk to your veterinarian about the endless options for fresh feeding because even small amounts can go a long way in providing a benefit. Who knows, your whole family may benefit from a little experimentation in home cooking, and keep everyone excited for their next healthy meal.

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.chelseanimalhospital.com

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