

Food for Thought

Let's look at our pets' diets. They say you are what you eat, and the same concept holds true for our pets. A healthy diet is the foundation for overall health. But what constitutes a healthy diet for animals?

Take a critical look at your pet's food. Does it look appetizing to you? How did we ever get brainwashed into thinking that dry kibble or pre-digested canned foods are good for our pets. You might ask, "Well what's the matter with it. It's pet food for goodness sake." There are a number of concerns I have about commercial pet foods.

First of all, what exactly are the ingredients? Look at the label. It says there is meat of some sort, usually beef, chicken or lamb. But what is the quality of this meat? Did you know that there is no federal inspection of pet food processing? In many states it is considered OK to use meats that are unfit for human consumption. They call them the 4 D's - Animals that arrive at the packing plant already dead, dying, diseased or disabled. So basically, they can cut diseased tissues and tumors off a carcass and throw it in the bin for pet foods. It's only pet food, right? I'm not saying that all pet foods contain these ingredients, but there is no way of knowing.

Another common ingredient in commercial diets is grain such as corn, wheat or rice. Many times this is the most abundant ingredient in the food. So, what's the matter with grain? It's good for you right? Don't pets need carbohydrates? To answer these questions, look at the natural situation. What do our pet's counterparts in the wild eat? Wild members of the dog and cat families eat other animals. You don't see them grazing in the rice paddies for food. Now it is true that they eat some vegetation, but certainly carbohydrates are not the major part of their diets.

The fact is that carbohydrates are a cheap source of energy for foods. Unfortunately, I have seen evidence that the excessive amounts of carbohydrates in pet foods contribute to diabetes. I recently had a case where I could not regulate the glucose in a diabetic cat. We were giving large doses of insulin with no results. I had the owner switch the cat to a carbohydrate free natural diet, and within days we had the glucose under control. I also believe that the high level of carbohydrates in pet foods leads to obesity. It is the best explanation I can find for why a 100-pound Labrador Retriever gains weight on one cup of food per day.

I also have a problem with some of the additives they use in pet foods. Many foods contain artificial flavors and colors. These are unnatural chemicals that have no place in our pets' diets. How about preservatives? The fact is that the average twenty-five pound dog eating a commercial pet food consumes between six and nine pounds of preservatives each year. And, did you know that the burger-type semi-moist foods are preserved with sugar? Imagine, there is so much sugar in them that bacteria can't survive. That doesn't sound very healthy.

One of the trickiest pet food ingredients to preserve is fat. Fat is an important nutrient for animals but it goes rancid quite easily when left out at room temperature. The most common fat preservative is ethoxyquin. Over the years, concerned pet owners have sought foods that are ethoxyquin free. This task is not as easy as it sounds. If a food company buys fat and adds ethoxyquin to preserve it, they must put ethoxyquin on

the label. However, if the food company buys fat that already has ethoxyquin in it they do not have to list the ingredient. So much for reading labels.

Of course we do have some pet food companies that are adding healthy supplements to their foods. For example, there are ads for foods containing glucosamine for healthy joints. The problem is that there is great disparity in the quality of glucosamine supplements and there is no way of assessing the quality from the label. Also, it is necessary to supply this supplement at an adequate dose to have the desired effect. I question whether pets really get enough from these foods.

There are also companies that tout that their pet foods contain essential fatty acids for a healthy coat. Unfortunately, essential fatty acids do not maintain their potency unless they are kept from exposure to open air and light. No dry pet food can keep this nutrient active. The food may have contained essential fatty acids when it left the factory but little if any of it makes it to your pet.

Both glucosamine and essential fatty acids are very important for proper nutrition, but they are best supplied to your pet in the form of a high quality supplement. Or better yet, feed your pet a natural diet, which automatically contains all the needed nutrients, even those we have yet to discover. We will look more closely at these topics shortly.

Commercial diets also fall short when it comes to the very form in which they are delivered to our pets. Cayce stressed the importance of eating slowly and chewing food thoroughly. Digestion begins in the mouth. Animals chew their food not just to break it into pieces that can be swallowed, but also to mix the food with saliva. Saliva contains enzymes that begin the digestive process before the food even reaches the stomach. Canned food is so mushy that pets don't have to chew it, and dry food comes in small kibble that many pets swallow whole. Wild dogs and cats eat raw food containing bones that have to be chewed. Thus, even the form of our pet foods bypasses the natural process of eating.

Finally with respect to commercial diets, look at the processing. Do wolves cook their food before eating? Have you ever seen a tiger light up a Bunsen burner? I don't think so. Wild animals eat their food raw, the way nature intended. Our pets too have evolved for millions of years on raw food. In fact, processed food is a recent development and has been fed to pets for only the past 70 years or so. So what's so bad about cooking the ingredients, it still contains all the same proteins, right? Well, not exactly. Heat denatures the proteins and destroys some other nutrients. One major ingredient that cooking destroys is the food's natural enzymes.

Every cell in the body contains enzymes. When an animal dies, the cellular enzymes release and dissolve the tissues. In medical terms this is called autolysis. When an animal eats raw foods it benefits from these naturally occurring enzymes because the normal diet helps digest itself. Cooked food contains no enzymes and is not digested and assimilated properly. This is why adding digestive enzymes to commercial pet foods can greatly benefit the health of our pets.

So, if we compare commercial diets to the natural diet that carnivores are meant to eat, we see that commercial diets do not measure up. Pet food companies start with questionable raw materials, add potential toxins, then process the nutrition out. Finally the food manufacturers try ineffectively to add back nutrients. Let's face it, pet foods are made more for our convenience than for pet nutrition. In fact, another reason many of

our pets are overweight is that they are starved for nutrients and we are feeding them empty calories. The alternative is to feed our pets the natural diet they were meant to eat.

So what is a natural diet for pets? How can an average pet owner make his pet's food? Surely only food companies know the secret to formulating a proper diet. Think about it, pets have been around for a long time before pet food manufacturers existed. Why do we not have the same concerns about feeding the human members of our families?

Before talking about what a natural diet is, let me explain what it is not. Feeding animals human food is not the same as feeding table scraps. The scraps from our tables usually include fat, cooked bones and processed foods, all of which can cause serious health problems for our pets.

A natural diet for pets also does not mean feeding them only meat. Although dogs and cats are carnivores, their normal diet also includes raw bones, organ meat such as liver, and shredded vegetables. The biggest problem with feeding only meat is that meat is high in phosphorus. It is extremely important to balance this phosphorus with the proper amount of calcium, which the animals normally get by eating raw bones.

Now, there are two basic philosophies on making homemade pet diets. Dr. Richard Pitcairn was a pioneer in holistic pet health and wrote one of the first books on the subject entitled, "Natural Health for Dogs and Cats." This book is a must for all pet owners. In this book, Dr. Pitcairn gives information on pet diets and gives several recipes. Dr. Pitcairn meticulously researched these diets for proper balance. The problem is that he based his research on conventional concepts of pet nutrition. The biggest flaw is that these recipes are high in carbohydrates. The other drawback is the complexity of preparation with many supplements added. But, these diets can be cooked, so if you cannot bring yourself to feed raw meat, these recipes are for you.

Another approach to pet nutrition is to mimic nature and base the pet diet on what similar wild animals eat. This dietary philosophy is abbreviated BARF which stands for Bones And Raw Foods. A proponent of this diet is Dr. Ian Billinghurst from Australia. "Give Your Dog a Bone" is his book outlining the BARF diet. "Natural Nutrition for Dogs and Cats" by Kymythy R. Schultze is another good book on this subject.

The BARF diet is based on the concept that our pets are made to eat what their wild counterparts eat. Wild dogs such as wolves and wild cats such as bobcats eat raw meat and raw bones with some organ meat and shredded veggies that they get from the abdominal contents of their prey. As mentioned above, raw meat is much different than cooked meat. Raw is more nutritious than cooked for our pets.

Feeding raw meat always brings up the concern over bacteria and parasites. All I can say is that they do not seem to cause a problem for wild animals and they do not seem to bother pets either. Their digestive systems handle it just fine. For the past five years I have been feeding my own two dogs and four cats raw meat, mostly chicken and turkey, and have had no problems with bacterial infections. In fact, Louie, my Newfoundland mix has been known to bury a chicken back, then dig it up the next day and eat it, with no deleterious effects.

Yes, I feed my dogs bones. It is true that cooked bones are very dangerous. They are brittle and break into sharp pieces, which can rip through a pet's intestines. The right raw bones, however, are a bird of a different feather. They can be easily digested by pets, and have been for millions of years.

When including vegetables in a pet's diet they need to be shredded, just like the kind found in the herbivore's stomach. The carnivore's digestive tract is shorter than that of an herbivore and therefore cannot handle whole vegetables. Shredded vegetables are very nutritious as part of a pet's diet.

Although vegetables are part of a pet's diet, it is not natural for dogs and cats to be vegetarians. Having said this, it is possible for dogs to thrive on a vegetarian diet if it is combined carefully. Cats on the other hand are obligate carnivores. There are certain nutrients found only in meat that cats must have to live.

The beauty of the BARF diet is that very few supplements are needed. That's the way it should be when you feed the pet what it is meant to eat. I recommend simply adding a natural multivitamin/mineral to the diet for good measure. Be sure to read a good book on the subject before starting your pet on the BARF diet.