

Holistic Pet Health Info

Limitations of “Natural” Medicine

Mother Nature has supplied us with much of what we need to get healthy and stay healthy. Given the side effects of conventional medicines, proper nutrition, herbs and natural therapies are often the safest way to go. But, even safe methods have limitations.

The first issue I would like to address is the use of the term “natural.” This is quite a buzzword these days as more and more people are becoming interested in holistic treatments. But what exactly does “natural” mean?

When most of us think of natural remedies we think of herbs and vitamins. However, I have been seeing more and more synthetic compounds being labeled as “natural” to cash in on the holistic market. In fact, many “natural” vitamins are manufactured by pharmaceutical companies. Let’s face it, ultimately everything comes from nature. The word “natural” has become almost meaningless.

Another matter to discuss is the proper use of truly natural remedies. No remedy, whether natural or synthetic is without possible side effects. The right remedy must be applied to the right condition, and it takes some knowledge to do this properly.

It is important to have any problem your pet may be facing properly diagnosed by a veterinarian. It is equally important to have any natural remedy administered by a practitioner who is trained in the use of such therapies in animals. Remember that anything that has the power to heal also has the power to harm, if misapplied.

I think that natural therapies are the treatment of choice for most conditions, but caution must be exercised, as appropriate application is important. Death too is a “natural” process but this is obviously not the goal of therapy.

Supplements

If your pet is eating a “balanced” commercial pet food, does it need vitamins and supplements? The answer is yes, for several reasons. The government determines the proper level of vitamins in food to be the amount necessary to prevent deficiency disease. In most cases, this is less than the amount needed for optimal health under normal conditions, much less during times of stress.

This minimal amount of vitamins is added to the food before processing. The heat of processing destroys vitamins. In the case of dry foods, the vitamins that remain are quickly lost if the product is not consumed soon after manufacture. Finally, minerals are often added in forms that are not absorbed by the body.

So why are our pets not dropping over dead? These vitamin deficiencies more commonly cause a state of chronic poor health. The animals are more prone to infectious disease and parasites. This condition eventually progresses to more serious problems such as skin disease, arthritis, kidney disease and cancer.

Yes, your pet needs vitamins! The best way for them to get these nutrients is from whole foods. This is because vitamins need the phytochemicals found in whole foods to be fully active. If your pet is not eating whole natural foods, then whole food supplements are available at our office.

Essential Fatty Acids

Many skin disorders and other health problems of pets are caused by a lack of proper fats in the diet. In order to supplement these nutrients correctly, we need a little background in this oily area of nutrition.

Fats and oils are composed of fatty acids. There are many types of fatty acids, but the important types are the Omega 3s and Omega 6s. These are considered the essential fatty acids (EFAs) because the body cannot produce them and must get them from food.

EFAs play a part in almost every function in the body. They govern growth, mental states and are even a key factor in the burning of food to produce energy.

EFA molecules are very fragile. That is why Mother Nature packages them in hard seeds such as flax, sesame and sunflower. The seed shells protect the EFAs from heat, light and oxygen, which destroy the nutrients.

Commercial oils from the grocery store are highly processed. This processing involves adding chemicals and bleaching the oils to improve the shelf life. The oils are then heated to frying temperature, all of which destroys the natural EFAs.

These are not only the oils we consume but are also the “nutrients” added to pet foods. Any EFAs that may be left in the pet foods are often rancid by the time the pet consumes them because they are not protected from the air. This is why most pets (and people) can benefit from EFA supplementation.

Another cause of EFA deficiency is the consumption of harmful fats. These are the hydrogenated and saturated fats found in margarine and processed foods. EFAs compete with these useless fats in the body, and if the EFAs do not win, the body loses.

Now that we have established the need for adding EFAs to the diet, we can open the debate over the proper ratio of Omega 3s and Omega 6s to be supplemented. Too much of one can lead to a deficiency of the other. Animals tend to be more deficient in Omega 3s because they are more easily destroyed. Supplementing Omega 3s and 6s at a 2:1 ratio seems to be widely accepted.

Sources high in Omega 3s include flax seed oil and fish oils. However, feeding these oils exclusively can lead to a deficiency in Omega 6s. The use of sunflower oil can help maintain the balance.

Again, it is important that these oils be cold processed and stored in light-resistant, brown bottles to keep their nutritional value. Your local health food store or veterinarian is likely to have what your pet needs.

Because the oils you added to your pet’s diet did not fulfill the above requirements, they may do more harm than good. Adding too much useless fat to the diet can lead to obesity and pancreatitis.

Lack of sufficient EFAs tend to manifest in the skin first because the vital internal organs take what they need first. The skin is the first to lose the oils and the last to get them. The deficiency can lead to dry, flaky, itchy skin.

Supplementing EFAs may also improve arthritis, obesity, immune function, gastrointestinal disorders, kidney disease and cardiovascular dysfunction. Older animals commonly show an increase in energy while young animals recover more quickly from fatigue and heal faster.

Research has shown that animals often have trouble absorbing the oils in their diet. Adding digestive enzymes to the diet can increase the absorption of EFAs by 200%.

As you can see, proper pet nutrition is not always as easy as reading the labels or spiking the commercial food with what you have around the house. The old saying, “You are what you eat,” applies to our pets as well as to us.

Glucosamine

Glucosamines are natural compounds that are a combination of glucose and the amino acid, glutamine. Glucosamines, in turn, are the building blocks for connective tissues, joint tissues and intestinal lining tissue.

Combinations of glucosamine molecules with various proteins form the matrix between the cells of the body, holding them together. These compounds are also responsible for the gelatinous nature of cartilage. They allow cartilage to hold water, which gives this tissue its slippery shock absorbing quality.

Research has shown that taking glucosamine supplements can help protect weakened joints. In fact, they can actually help deformed, arthritic joints rebuild healthy tissue.

One human study compared the use of ibuprofen with glucosamine in arthritic patients. At first, ibuprofen was more effective at reducing joint inflammation and pain. After a longer period, though, the glucosamine outperformed the ibuprofen by repairing the joint cartilage and decreasing inflammation.

Glucosamine supplements can be used to benefit many degenerative conditions such as osteoarthritis, hip dysplasia, spinal arthritis, and other joint problems. Because of glucosamine’s importance as a building block for the intestinal lining, it has also been proven to help with cases of inflammatory bowel disease, an intestinal disorder of animals similar to Crohn’s disease in people.

Glucosamines are very valuable to the health of our pets. However, not all glucosamine supplements are equal. The quality of this nutrient depends on how it is processed. Also, its beneficial effects are dose dependent. Just because there is some in the food does not mean it is of high quality or that there is enough to do any good. There is no way to know by reading the food label. I recommend getting a quality supplement from a trusted source and give the appropriate dose.

Raw Fruits and Veggies

Raw fruits and vegetables can be part of a balanced diet for our pets. It is best to grind fruits and veggies before feeding them to dogs and cats. To understand this, again we need to look at nature.

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Wolves are a representative wild relative of our pet dogs and lions, tigers and such are related to domestic cats. Over thousands of years animals, both wild and domestic, have adapted to natural food sources.

Lets look at the diet of the wild dogs and cats to determine what is best for our pets. The most obvious things they eat are meat and bones. They are carnivores after all.

By the way, it is important to note that the meat and bones are raw. Cooking and processing destroys nutrients, which is part of why commercial foods are not as healthy for our pets as a natural raw diet.

So where do the fruits and vegetables come in? Well anyone who has ever watched a nature movie where the lions take down an antelope can tell you that often the first place these beasts dig into the carcass is the abdomen.

What does the stomach of an herbivore contain? You guessed it, ground up fruits and veggies.

It is significant that the vegetables are ground, because carnivores have shorter digestive tracts than herbivores and therefore they have less time to digest big chunks of food.

Ground fruits and vegetables are only a small part of a natural diet for dogs and cats. It is very important to maintain balanced nutrition, so a recipe should be followed. I recommend the recipes found in the book, "Dr. Pitcairn's Complete Guide to Natural Health for Dogs and Cats" or "Give Your Dog a Bone" by Dr. Ian Billinghurst.

Natural Flea Control

By the end of the summer, fleas often become a nuisance for our pets. Sometimes, the situation can become life threatening. One important principle to understand is that the problem really begins in the spring, when the fleas first emerge.

Flea prevention is always easier than trying to cope with an infestation. Once you see fleas on your pet, the first battle is lost and the war is about to begin. In the spring, before the bugs are out, is the time to start flea control.

From a natural, holistic standpoint, flea prevention begins with a truly healthy pet. A strong pet with a vigorous constitution is less susceptible to any parasite. Of course the foundation for a healthy pet is a natural, nutritious diet. (I have already written about natural diets.)

Ultimately, our pets contact fleas from the out of doors, so this is an obvious place to begin flea control. Treating your yard for fleas does not mean you have to address the entire 50 acres that you own. Even if your pet roams far and wide, setting up a buffer zone right around the house will help stop a problem.

For the treatment of your yard, I recommend the use of friendly nematodes. This natural flea control is so safe, effective and unusual that I'll go into a little detail to explain it.

Nematodes are microscopic worms that feed on the larvae of fleas and other insect pests. They are totally harmless to people, animals and insects that are not harmful to the lawn and garden.

More than 230 pests are susceptible to these little critters including cabbage root maggots, gypsy moth larvae, Japanese beetles, strawberry weevils and white grubs, as well as fleas. Nematodes are the good guys of the parasite world.

The best part is that these nematodes cause no problems of their own. If there are no insects for them to eat, they die off. You don't have to worry about the toxic effects

that chemicals can have on animals, well water and the environment. Besides, isn't it great to kill a parasite with a parasite? Give them a taste of their own medicine.

Friendly nematodes may be difficult to find. I am familiar with a product called Scanmask. Look for it at garden stores or the office of your ecologically minded veterinarian.

Another means of keeping fleas off your pet is to use a natural, topical treatment that repels fleas. Aromatic oils such as citronella and pennyroyal give off a smell that repels insects.

The Halo Company makes an herbal dip that uses this principle. This versatile liquid can be diluted and applied directly to the pet, added to regular shampoo to make a natural flea shampoo, or made into a spray for daily application. As a bonus, this flea product actually smells nice, unlike many chemical dips and sprays.

A final natural flea tip is to get a flea comb and use it daily on your pet. A flea comb has finely spaced teeth that can pull the fleas and loose fur off your pet. This technique can serve as an early detection method allowing you to really jump on a flea infestation before it gets out of hand.

Remember that for every flea you find on your pet, there are 10 more in the immediate environment. These prolific creatures lay hundreds of eggs each day. Whatever method you choose to control fleas, do not procrastinate, and start flea prevention in the spring.

Make Your Own Natural Lemon Flea Dip

Here is a simple safe formula to make your own natural flea dip. Thinly slice one whole lemon, peel and all. Add it to one pint of near-boiling water and let steep over night. The next day, sponge the solution onto your pet's skin and let it dry. You can repeat the procedure daily for severe flea problems.

Lemons are a source of natural flea-killing substances such as d-limonene plus other healing ingredients. Be careful not to get the solution in your pet's eyes and do not apply to irritated skin.