



Proper Use of Raw Diets

After you have looked at the *Choosing the Right Food* handout and decided to use whole fresh raw foods we need to get clear about handling and safety. Whether you have chosen to make your food from scratch (see *Homemade Guidelines* handout) or if you have chosen one of the many convenience products now available such as a frozen food, dehydrated or freeze dried mixes you will need to know the facts about feeding raw meat to your animals. Most of this is common sense.

Handling and safety

There are 2 categories of pathogens that can be found in raw meat: bacteria; and parasites. The most important bacterial pathogens associated with food born illness are Salmonella, E. coli, and Campylobacter. These pathogens are present in raw meat, and they can make you (the human) sick. This is why we have cautions about cooking our own meat properly, and washing our hands after handling raw meat. The same applies for your pet's food. I have a specific location in my refrigerator set aside for the raw food so that other foods don't get contaminated. Dogs and cats are less susceptible to food borne illness than humans. The reason for this is their very short digestive track and more acidic stomach juices (which kill bacteria). In fact 40% of normal healthy dogs fed kibble diets will shed salmonella in their stool. However, if your pet's immune system is compromised they may be susceptible to bacterial infections. The parasites that might be found in raw meat include Toxoplasma, and Cryptosporidium. Toxoplasma is a common public health concern for cat owners. It is estimated that over 60 million humans are infected with this parasite and are not sick but, dangerous infection can occur in pregnant women or immune compromised people. Toxoplasma can be contracted by ingesting eggs from contaminated raw meat, infected cat feces or soil. Cryptosporidium is a water borne parasite that causes diarrhea. A recent study found 3 out of 288 samples of commercial raw food to contain Cryptosporidium (1%). There was no Toxoplasma found in this study. You can kill Toxoplasma eggs in meat cooking or by freezing the meat for at least 72 hours at -4 degrees C (24 degrees F). Meat that comes in by refrigerator trucks or railcars is hard-frozen and very likely safe.

Tips to be safe are as follows:

1. Wash hands and utensils with hot soapy water after handling raw meat.
2. Defrost overnight in refrigerator.
3. Keep all raw meat away from other foods that will not be cooked prior to eating (ie double bag, plate, etc).
4. Keep out of reach of children and immune compromised humans (HIV/AIDS, Cancer patients, and pregnant women).
5. Wash pet food dishes with hot soapy water after feeding.
6. Raw meat is ok to use for approximately 3-5 days if kept refrigerated.
7. If it looks or smells funny throw it out!
8. Partially defrosted meat (ice crystals present) can be re-portioned and refrozen.
9. Deep freeze or cook all fresh meat before use.

Bones

Calcium is essential to a dog or cat's diet. The high proportion of protein from the meat contains a lot of phosphorus. Without calcium to balance this high quantity of phosphorus you will get poor bone growth and damage to internal organs. There are several sources of calcium discussed in detail in the *Homemade Diets* handout. If you choose to use raw bones for calcium you need to be aware of the risks associated with this. Most dogs and cats can be fed raw bones safely. However, you need to know your pet to know if this is true for them. Some animals will swallow bones whole. Usually this isn't a problem and they can actually digest them that way. But, if the bone is too large and the pet is too small it can become lodged in the throat and cause suffocation. If your pet is aggressive with bone swallowing you will need to supervise them closely and be prepared to retrieve a stuck bone. Retrieving a stuck bone can cause injury to you and your pet. So, if you have a very aggressive bone eater I recommend you use a different source of calcium. Another consideration about bones is sharp edges. Bones that have been broken by chewing will shatter in a way that usually will not have sharp edges. Bones that have been cut with a saw can have sharp edges that can cause perforations along the digestive track. Large long bones that have been sawed into smaller bits and have a marrow hole in the center must be properly size matched to the dog's mouth. If your dog's lower jaw can fit into the hole in the center then the bone can become stuck behind the canine teeth which requires the bone to be cut off under anesthesia. Raw bones will digest normally in a healthy animal. If your pet has a poor digestion bones can cause impaction in the colon, or obstruction in the intestines. If your pet has strong healthy normal teeth chewing on a bone will not cause the teeth to break. However some bones can be extremely hard (sheep, goat, and cow bones) and can damage a small dog's teeth. Puppies and kittens still have their baby teeth and will need their bones crushed until their mouth and teeth are strong enough to do the job. You can place a chicken neck in a bag and use a hammer to crush it for example. Bones can also be pressure cooked until soft, but, hard cooked bones will be dangerous and indigestible.

In Summary know your dog or cats and:

1. Carefully supervise the aggressive bone eater or chose not to use bones.
2. Match the size of the bone to the size of the pet.
3. Match the hardness of the bone to the size and strength of the teeth.
4. Don't give hard cooked bones or bones with sharp edges.
5. Crushed bones or pressure cooked soft bones are good options.

Special Dietary Considerations

All the information in this handout is generally aimed at the healthy pet. There will be individual differences for all cats and dogs in terms of dietary choices. With regard to the proper use of raw diets special considerations are needed for animals that are not healthy. For example if your pet has kidney or liver failure, diabetes, frequent infections, urinary tract problems, allergies, heart disease, cancer, or any immune suppression then there will be special dietary considerations. Please refer to the specific handout for the condition, or discuss dietary choices with a Veterinarian.

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