

SWITCHING YOUR DOG TO A RAW DIET

How To Get Started

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{This is a follow-up article to "Canine Paradigm Shift: Dogs on a Raw Diet", November/December 2003, Volume 1 Issue 5 of Kennel Up which covered aspects of why dog guardians feed raw as well as addressing some of the 'concerns' brought forward by those who may be unfamiliar or sceptical.}

One of the most reassuring aspects of switching your dog to a raw diet is that you have control of the quality of what your dog eats. For generations, human mothers have taken control over what they feed their children and families; now, dog guardians are doing the same thing for their pets. Family doctors and nutritionists are jumping on the bandwagon encouraging us to eat fewer (or no) processed foods and to include more natural foods. In turn, dog guardians are also looking to nature, at what canines would eat if in the wild.

Sure, commercial kibble is convenient but it lacks the natural enzymes, nourishment, and variety required to ensure a strong immune system, efficient energy fuels, and the quality of life that natural food provides.

BEFORE YOU START

Before getting started, I highly recommend to research by reading at least one (if not more) of the books available by qualified individuals on the topic of feeding a raw diet. The book I recommend the most, because it is easy to follow and understand and provides detailed information for the newcomer to feeding raw, is "Natural Nutrition for Dogs and Cats - The Ultimate Diet" by Kymthy Schultz. This book, and others like it, is available online, through raw food distributors, and from some breeders.

This article, builds upon the previous one and is intended to provide guidance for making the switch to raw plus some of the guiding principles -- it does not provide the detailed instruction necessary to demonstrate how you may adapt it to different dogs with different needs. I suggest each dog guardian educate yourself (such as the recommended reading) and make your own decision based on your findings.

WORKING WITH A VETERINARIAN

It's probably a good idea to have blood work done on your dog before you start feeding a raw diet and then again around six months to a year after being on the diet. Consider it one way to demonstrate to yourself and your vet that the diet is working well for your dog by assessing your dog's internal well being, including organ function and any vitamin or mineral imbalances.

If your vet is completely against raw feeding, perhaps you should get a second opinion. Your dog's vet may have excellent surgical and other skills, but you both need to work together when switching to a raw diet. Don't be afraid to work with more than one vet.

There definitely are vets who approve of and promote feeding raw diets and can be a valuable resource to help you make the transition. Some of these vets are listed as Homeopathic Veterinarians or perhaps you can ask other pet owners if they use a vet who works with dog guardians who feed raw. You want and need a professional to work *with* you, not against you.

Note: A partial list of veterinarians who work with raw feeders can be viewed at the website of Mountain Dog Food or do a Google search on the Internet using the keywords: homeopathic veterinarian {plus the province or city you live in}.

GUIDELINES

There is no one technique that is 'correct' for our dogs, but there are certain principles or guidelines that assist owners in designing a feeding program.

Always feed human grade meat and fish.

Never feed a meat-only diet. Such a diet is highly unnatural and unbalanced. A meat-only diet provides too much phosphorus and protein and will cause severe problems over time. Always include bones.

Never feed cooked bones of any sort -- feed raw bones only.

When beginning the raw diet, some veterinarians suggest feeding one food at a time (such as ground chicken meat, bone & organ) for one-week increments. This is meant to monitor what meats work best for your dog. Once your dog has gone through this initial 'break in' period, then you should begin feeding the variety of meats and raw meaty bones to achieve a balance of nutrients.

In the beginning, weigh the amount of food you feed your dog until you see how much (or how little) your dog needs and until you become accustomed to the amount to feed according to your 'eye'. It's very easy to overfeed in the beginning.

Feed as wide a variety of meats and other foods as possible, after the initial 'break in' period.

Avoid synthetic mineral and vitamin additives -- they create an imbalance.

COMPLETE and BALANCED?

A key point to adopt is to forget about exact percentages of what you feed. We don't feed our families or ourselves this way, nor worry about it when we eat out. There's no reason to feed our dogs this way either.

After World War II humans who had been living on war rations suffered from malnutrition and other ails because they lacked sufficient fresh fruit, vegetables, milk, and meat. This led to a preoccupation with meals being complete and balanced, which in turn has been adopted and effectively marketed by dog food manufacturers. We need to be careful not to anthropomorphize our dog's needs with our own.

It's true that we should be aware of the average proportions of food fed to our dogs. Just as we feed ourselves, we need to be aware of what's required for healthy eating, but it's not necessary to make every meal complete and balanced. Veterinarians and animal nutritionists who promote feeding raw diets state, your dog's diet can achieve a 'balance' over a period of time rather than daily or at each meal. An easy way to keep ingredients and ratios in balance is to always look to how wild canines live in nature, what they would prey on and what they would consume. Some days they may get an entire animal to themselves and other days they may only get leftovers. The small amount of vegetable matter (usually consisting of greens: grasses and/or berries) would be obtained mostly from the partially digested stomach contents of their prey. We need only try to mimic this and make any adjustments necessary for an individual dog's needs.

DETOXIFICATION

Some dogs may go through a brief period of detoxification that lasts only a few days. This is a good sign that the body is ridding itself of the accumulated toxins from the previous diet of kibble. It manifests in one or more of these ways: loose or mucous-like stools, runny eyes, or their coats may deteriorate before they then improve. After the detox period, the dog will begin to appear and feel much better than before.

THE BASIC FOODS TO FEED

A. RAW MEAT

Remember that the digestive system of dogs, unlike humans, is both short and acidic, designed to handle bacteria by not allowing it to 'blossom' within the digestive system (see previous article for more details).

The meat proteins you can feed would include poultry, lamb, fish (no raw salmon, however), beef and bison, rabbit, etc. Muscle and organ meat of these animals should also be included. The fat attached to meat contains the best source of essential fatty acids. It's important to know that cancer cells grow and reproduce using the energy from carbohydrates (kibble is loaded with carbohydrates) but cancer cells are not able to utilize the energy from fats.

Organ meat, because it is so nutrient rich, should be fed in smaller amounts and in smaller proportion to other meats. Many people suggest and find that feeding organ meats once a week is a good starting point to begin and gauge how each dog 'handles' it. If it causes loose stool, just feed a smaller portion next time and perhaps less often.

Raw eggs can be added to the meat, from once to a few times each week. Eggs are very economical and contain several vitamins & minerals, B vitamins, sulphur containing amino acids, zinc, and more. There is some controversy about feeding whole raw eggs to dogs. Many sources state that repeatedly adding whole raw eggs to a dog's diet can cause a deficiency of the vitamin biotin. Raw egg whites contain avidin, an enzyme that ties up biotin (makes it unavailable for absorption into the body). Because of the nutritional benefits of raw yolks, many dog owners get around this by feeding the *yolk only* and then partially cooking the white that can be added to the meal, or served as a treat.

B. RAW MEATY BONES

When you think of it, a prey animal is made up of a lot of bone. Not only is there benefit to the ripping and tearing of the meat off the bones, but there is also an abundance of nutrients by chewing and eating the bones that contain calcium and nutrient rich marrow.

Raw meaty bones are things such as chicken (any poultry) wings, backs & necks, turkey necks, carcasses; beef, bison and lamb neck; oxtail; etc.

An ideal 'starter' raw meaty bone for dogs is chicken or turkey neck because of the smaller bones and abundance of good cartilage. Then you can graduate your dog to wings, backs, etc.

C. GREEN LEAFY VEGETABLES

In the wild dogs don't consume vegetables, except to scavenge. Dogs do eat grasses, however, and so do the ungulates, small mammals, and birds that wild dogs would prey upon. The vegetable matter would be obtained from the partially digested stomach contents of prey. Dogs cannot digest cellulose so whole vegetables will just come out the same way they went in, unless you pulverize them first in a blender or food processor.

Examples of green leafy vegetables include: varieties of lettuce (not iceberg lettuce) such as green or red leafy lettuce, romaine; greens from carrots, beets,

chard; limited amounts of spinach; dandelion greens (no pesticides), etc. You may also safely serve raw veggies or fruits to your dog as treats, which will not pack on the pounds that kibble-based treats do.

D. EVERYTHING ELSE

Some of the items in this portion of the diet are intended to help supply nutrients found in a 'wild' diet or to compensate for an individual dog's digestive system.

Essential fatty acids (EFA's) are important for healthy skin, brain, joints, eyes, nails, liver, and the immune system. EFA's are found in fish (frozen or canned sardines or mackerel, for instance), fish oil, poultry, eggs, dark green vegetables, vegetable oil, and nuts and seeds. EFA's from animal sources are assimilated better than those from vegetable sources, which is important to know if your dog is hypothyroid.

Natural kelp and alfalfa are two potent green foods that contain an exceptionally high amount of vitamins and a multitude of other important nutrients. Most meat sources we and our dogs consume are not fed on lush pastures but instead are fed a forced diet of grains, on depleted and fertilized pastures, and processed food so kelp and alfalfa also help to make up for the lower nutrients.

Raw or cooked leftovers (no cooked bones) from human meals can also be added (consider it like a condiment) to the actual meal.

E. RECREATION BONES

Recreational raw (not cooked) bones are intended for your dog to gnaw on, which also provides mental stimulation and keeps the teeth and gums clean and healthy, while giving the jaws and shoulders a bit of a workout. Rec bones are usually large beef or bison knuckle bones or ribs with little or no meat. They are NOT intended to replace a meal -- they are strictly for recreation and an economical way of providing extra bone to fulfill your dog's calcium requirements (especially on days when fed red meat meals (which do not usually contain bone). Many people feed recreation bones two or three times a week.

PROPORTIONS/RATIOS TO FEED

Meat and Raw Meaty Bones:

Most books on the subject suggest feeding an average of approximately 75-80% muscle meat and raw meaty bones, (including about 10% organ meats and bit of extra bone to make up for the loss of calcium rich blood).

Green Leafy Vegetables:

Although some people feed less, most sources recommend that green leafy vegetables (pulverized) may constitute about 20-25% of the dog's diet. Some

sources do consider this percentage high, however, and feel that only 10% of the dog's diet should include green leafy vegetables.

Everything Else:

The combined items that fall in this category comprise the smallest portion of the diet -- the cherry on the sundae.

Kelp and Alfalfa: feed human quality according to directions or instructions by a homeopathic veterinarian.

Essential Fatty Acids: these are incorporated as part of the meat and raw meaty bones (including fish) as well as in the form of fish oils by bottle or capsule. Feed according to directions or instructions from your Vet.

HOW MUCH TO FEED

The Whole Package:

To give a specific formula or broad statement about the exact amount of food to feed is not possible. Like us, the amount of food your dog needs depends not just on its age or size, but is also dependent upon the individual's metabolism, exercise levels, the climate, and other aspects.

That said there is a formula to use to get you started, but use it as a guideline and be sure to weigh the food in the beginning.

For active, working dogs begin feeding 3% of the dog's ideal body weight.

For sedentary dogs, begin feeding 2% of the dog's body weight.

Puppies should be fed 4-5% of their current body weight and pups should be re-weighed every two weeks so you can adjust the food intake.

SHOPPING FOR RAW FOOD

With shrewd shopping, the cost of feeding raw is not expensive. Take advantage of sales, discounted past due date meats, buying food that is not well liked by humans (such as the organs, tripe, etc.), and possibly buying a chest freezer so you can take advantage of these advance purchases.

To locate meat and raw meaty bones (remember: chicken necks & backs, turkey necks, carcasses, organ meats, etc.) you may find some of these at inexpensive prices in your own grocery store. Also check out butchers, slaughterhouses, poultry processors, ethnic markets, fishmongers, local farmers and at farmer's markets.

Next time you're grocery shopping, talk to the meat manager or butcher and ask what they do with their off-cuts. Get to know your local butcher as well -- they're especially busy during and after the fall hunting season.

Those ethnic markets often have a variety of frozen fish at economical prices.

There are now businesses that sell human-grade raw food for dogs, with several locations across Canada. Check your phone book or do an Internet search through Google using the keywords: "raw dog food supplier Canada".

For the greens, since such a small amount is needed, you can simply toss in the food processor whatever you have on hand since most of us usually have greens in the house.

The natural oils and any other natural supplements can be purchased either at a health food store or one of the raw food distributors.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

To get close to Mother Nature, keep it simple when feeding raw. Use the 75% raw meat/bones and 25% leafy greens plus other nutrients as your guide to feeding your dog the natural way. Both you and your dog will be happier, your dog will be healthier, and you may even be inspired to begin choosing and eating more naturally as well.

Recommended Reading

Schultze, Kymythy R., CCN, AHT, *Natural Nutrition for Dogs and Cats: The Ultimate Diet*. Hay House (October 1999).

Pitcairn, Dr. Richard, D.V.M. and Pitcairn, Susan Hubble, *Dr. Pitcairn's Complete Guide to Natural Health for Dogs and Cats*. Rodale Press (July 1995).

Ricard, Dean and Tracey. *Raw Help*
<http://www.mountaindogfood.com/>

Billinghurst, Dr. Ian, B.V.Sc. Agr., Dep. Ed. (Australia) *Give Your Dog A Bone*. 1993.