

The Importance of Feeding a Natural Diet

What is a "Natural Diet," and why should you feed it to your pet(s)? These days the health craze has been extended to include our pets as well as ourselves and our families. More and more often you notice television ads promoting a "better" pet food. Why is it better? Because it is "natural." But what does "natural" mean, exactly?

The word "natural" means different things to different people. It joins the list of buzz words of the 90's, along with other favorites of the dog food world, such as "healthy" and "organic." "Natural" might mean simply that the product contains no dyes or artificial preservatives. However, the word "natural" as used by a certain group of pet nutritionists is accepted to mean a "species appropriate" diet. This means that we feel dogs are carnivores, and should be fed as carnivores, rather than as forced-omnivores. The pet food industry has managed to convince many of us, most vets included, that dogs can exist well eating as omnivores. Well yes, they can exist that way alright, but wouldn't it be much nicer to have them do more than exist? Don't we all strive for the healthiest, happiest pets we can possibly manage to have?

Manufacturers of pet food have a job to do: produce the cheapest possible product that will taste good enough for the Fidos and Fluffies of the world to gobble it up by the bag full. Despite their advertising claims, their main concern is not with the health of your pet, but with the sales of their product. How do they produce the cheapest possible product? By using "4D" meat (meat from diseased, down, dying, and dead animals) and then filling it up with a lot of grains, for which dogs and cats have no dietary requirement, and a limited ability to digest and utilize. Sounds unappetizing, but then why does your pet "love" his dog food so much? Easy: they add sugar, salt, cancer-causing chemicals and tasty preservatives to entice your pet to eat more. On top of all that, the whole mess is heat processed at extremely high temperatures, thereby destroying any remote nutritional goodness that may have been in there in the first place. The end result is a very artificial food that causes your dog to produce a lot of excess gas and other "output" that you must then clean up. Many dogs also suffer itchy/bumpy skin, dull hair coats, brittle nails, diarrhea, early-morning vomiting, and a host of other ailments. But there is a better way to feed your pet a truly healthy, wholesome, and "natural" diet that will bring out the true beauty and outer glow of inner good health.

To feed your pet a species-appropriate, natural diet, you need two things: a desire to see improvement in general health problems, and a willingness to make a commitment to bring about the desired changes. Making your pet's food yourself will never be as easy or convenient as opening the bag or can and filling the dish; however, you may be surprised at how easy it can be, and you certainly will be pleasantly surprised by the results it brings to the life of your pet. You are probably also thinking you can't afford to feed your pets "real" or "people" food. Surprise again! It is no more expensive, and in many cases is actually cheaper, to make your pet's food on your own than it is to purchase a premium brand pet food.

So exactly what am I talking about, when I say you should make your own pet food? Simple, basic stuff: meat and vegetables. There isn't even anything to cook, because dogs, cats, and ferrets (carnivores) are designed to eat, digest, and utilize raw foods. Their systems are built to handle raw meat and bones, and these foods contain the perfect balance of vitamins, minerals, and life-supporting enzymes necessary to sustain the glow of good health. Consider the wild wolf, direct ancestor of today's domesticated dog. These animals have for decades eaten prey, including hair, feathers, and bones. And they don't build camp fires to cook their kills! Even so, there are many myths associated with this method of feeding for our pets:

Myth 1: My dog will get sick from *e.coli* or *salmonella* poisoning if I feed him raw meat. No, he won't, because the dog's digestive tract is different from a human's in some important ways that prevent this occurrence. The dog's stomach contains very strong acid, equipped to digest meat and even bones. The acid is hydrochloric acid, or HCl, the same stuff that's in human stomachs, only a stronger concentration. This acid makes short work of any bacteria that might come its way. Also, the overall length of the gastrointestinal tract of a dog is much shorter in comparison to a human's. This means that food passes through the system much more quickly, in hours rather than days. Bugs don't have a chance to get a foothold. This is not to imply that no dog can ever possibly contract *e.coli* or *salmonella* poisoning. Such rare incidences are usually the result of a dog who was raised on a lifetime of commercial foods suddenly raiding the garbage can one day. I have never yet heard of a dog properly fed a good, fresh food diet becoming ill from meat parasites. For those who remain nervous and uncertain, there are precautionary measures you can take to minimize the risk of feeding raw meat to your dog.

Myth 2: It is not good to feed animals "people food" or "table scraps." Why not?! Of course you don't want to feed your pet only the leftover trims of fat, or nothing but bread crusts. That would not be a healthy diet, but occasional scraps of fat or bread crusts are perfectly fine. A species- appropriate diet for your dog or cat is much more than mere table scraps. Pet food as we know it today has only been around for about fifty years, and some countries still don't have access to dog food. What did dogs eat before dog food was invented? Ask your parents or grandparents what they remember and the answer will be: our dogs always ate whatever we ate. As long as your pet is eating a balanced diet to provide all the necessary nutrients s/he needs, occasional treats are no worse for your pet than they are for you.

Myth 3: Pet food contains all the vitamins and minerals my pet needs. It is "complete and balanced." I couldn't possibly duplicate this on my own. That is why there are jobs for people like myself, animal nutritionists. Yes, you can create a healthy and balanced home made diet for your pets. You just need a little instruction from those of us who have dedicated ourselves to studying and understanding the ins and outs of doing so. Your vet isn't likely to tell you so, because most vets are not provided a good background in nutrition during their vet school studies. In fact, their only training is a very brief two weeks (out of four years) and it is taught by, you guessed it, the big manufacturers of commercial pet foods. More than likely your vet will tell you,

and truly believes, that the "prescription" brands of food (available only through vets) are the very best thing you can feed your pet. S/he may get very nervous when you propose making your own pet food. Yet more and more people are discovering the benefits of feeding home prepared diets, not the least of which is lowered vet bills due to less incidence of illness.

Myth 4: Never feed a dog real bones, especially not chicken or poultry bones!

We've all heard this one before. The truth is, dogs really can eat and digest bones of many types, as long as the bones are raw, not cooked. Cooked bones are brittle and prone to splintering. The splinters are the potentially dangerous part of feeding bones to dogs. Raw bones are soft, flexible, and very edible. They are also Nature's powerhouse store of minerals in perfect proportion for the needs of a dog (carnivore). Remember that strong stomach acid? This is what it was made for! The best part of a chicken to feed is the neck, and/or the back. These parts provide the perfect ratio of meat to bone, and they are inexpensive to purchase. The bones they contain are small, flexible, and don't have sharp edges. They are also "padded" with meat to protect the throat on their way down. Wings are also used by many people with great success, but tend to be more expensive in some geographical areas. Other bones may also be used, with proper supervision at all times, to be safe. Beef knuckle or marrow (femur) bones make great chew toys that keep a dog occupied for hours on end and clean his teeth at the same time.

There are so many benefits from feeding a fresh food, species-appropriate diet to your pet. Here is a list of the top few things you should notice within a few weeks of switching over:

- no more itching, scratching, licking
- shinier, more lustrous coat, with no bumps or dandruff flakes
- sparkling, white teeth—no more tartar, and improved breath
- higher energy and more zest for life
- greatly reduced flatulence (gas), and smaller, firmer stools
- reduction or elimination of "allergies"
- boosted immune system, resulting in fewer illnesses with speedier recovery time

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