

PREPARING HOME- MADE DIETS FOR PETS

What should I know about feeding a home-prepared diet to my pet?



The first inclination of some people when feeding a home-prepared diet to their pet is to simply feed the animal leftovers of what they are eating. It should be realized, however, that the nutritional needs of dogs, cats and humans differ. Humans are omnivores, and can maintain excellent health on a meat-free diet with only minimal dietary supplementation. Cats are obligate carnivores and must consume meat. Veterinary nutritionists have determined that cats have no biological requirement for carbohydrates in their diet, suggesting that a high meat and low grain diet may be ideal for their well-being. Dogs are facultative carnivores, and therefore able to make better use of non-meat ingredients. To a significant extent, however, dogs are also well adapted to a very high meat diet.

Nutritional balance thus varies from species to species, with an optimally balanced diet providing over the course of a day the minimum caloric requirements for the animal's level of exercise; adequate levels of trace nutrients such as vitamins and minerals; and an ideal ratio of macronutrients such as proteins, fats, and carbohydrates. Creating a balanced diet for a pet thus seems a formidable task, but there is an easy way to do it. Simply follow diet recipes that have been formulated by animal nutritionists or that otherwise are shown to meet the basic nutritional requirements for the species. To avoid trace nutrient deficiencies or excesses, it is recommended to vary the source of each diet component (for example, using different protein, vegetable, and grain sources with each batch of food).

Because meats and some vegetables are deficient in calcium, it is absolutely necessary to provide supplemental calcium in all pet diets. For this reason, most diet recipes include vitamin and mineral supplements, although there are some vegetables high in bioavailable calcium such as broccoli, kale, and collard greens. Calcium can be added at any time during the cooking process. Calcium citrate may be a more bioavailable form of calcium than calcium carbonate, with the citrate molecule helping to solubilize calcium in the urine and prevent calcium oxalate stones. Spinach is not recommended as a calcium supplement since it is also high in oxalates. Vitamin supplements added before or during the cooking process may become denatured or inactivated, and should instead be added after food preparation is complete.



What are the benefits of home-prepared diets for my pet?

Supporters of feeding home-prepared diets to pets emphasize the importance of a variety of fresh whole foods for the maintenance of health. The benefits of home-made diets include confidence in the freshness and wholesomeness of the ingredients (especially if you use organic source foods), and the potential inclusion of non-essential or synergistic components in the diet, such as so-called nutraceuticals. Many dogs and cats have improved hair and skin condition and increased levels of energy on home-made diets. The exception to this is the pet with pre-existing allergies or intolerances to one or more components of the diet. When an ingredient is fed that an animal is intolerant of, or not well adapted to, home-cooking does not provide any advantage over commercial dry kibble or canned food.

What are the risks of home- prepared diets for my pet?

As mentioned above, it is not enough to just feed a diet of table scraps, or to toss some meat, grains, and vegetables into a bowl for your pet. If you do that, your pet could end up malnourished as opposed to undernourished. It is much better to follow a recipe in preparing a diet.



While a recipe for a home-cooked diet may appear to come from a knowledgeable source, ideas about what constitutes the ideal diet for dogs and cats is currently evolving. Rigid adherence to one recipe over a long time may thus cause severe nutritional imbalances if it later is found to be inadequate. Likewise, avoid using recipes that are complicated or time-consuming to prepare, since you will be more likely to take shortcuts in the preparation.

Problems may also occur if pet's diets are either under- or over-supplemented with certain vitamins and minerals. The most common imbalances in home-prepared diets involve calcium, phosphorus, zinc, magnesium, and iron. Animals with increased nutritional needs associated with growth or reproduction have different requirements for energy and nutrients, and require enhanced protein levels and optimal ratios of vitamins and minerals to support growth. The

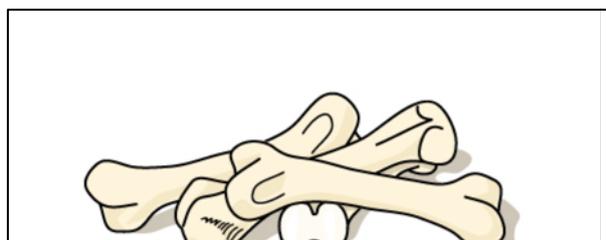
advice of a veterinarian with advanced nutritional knowledge is imperative to decrease these avoidable risks to the pet's well-being.

Some popular authors of pet diets recommend feeding grain-free (or carbohydrate-free) diets, raw meat diets, or bones and raw food diets. Clinical improvements in animals fed these diets are often impressive and perhaps not surprising given that dogs and cats are largely carnivorous. Critics of raw meat diets speculate that bacterial pathogens common in intensively reared poultry and livestock could be transmitted to animals or their owners. The majority of research currently suggests, however, that dogs and cats are relatively resistant to bacterial pathogens found on commercially available raw meat sources, with shedding of consumed bacteria occurring briefly or not at all, and raw bones are much more digestible than cooked bones.

It should be remembered, however, that animals or their owners with compromised health or immature immune systems may be more susceptible to illness caused by bacteria. Likewise, raw bones are not without some risk; several cases of fecal impaction and intestinal accidents such as bowel perforation have been reported. Cooked bones must NEVER be fed, since they are brittle and prone to splintering, that can cause both obstructions and perforations of the intestinal tract.

How can I minimize these risks?

Discuss your pet's diet honestly with your veterinarian, including any treats or



supplements that you provide. Have your pet examined regularly so that any early indicators of problems may be detected. Since animals age more rapidly than humans, a good rule of thumb is to have a complete physical examination every six months. In addition to a physical examination, it is prudent to have a biochemical analysis and complete blood count conducted on the pet's blood at these intervals. Periodic radiographs to assess bone density and structure as well as tissue density will assist in detecting overt mineral imbalances such as calcium deficiency. Consult reputable references for healthy recipes for home-cooked meals.

What symptoms or conditions are most often treated with home-prepared diets?

Symptoms such as excessive shedding, itching, skin lesions, and digestive disturbances have been correlated with allergies or intolerances to components of commercial diets, or to the nutritional inappropriateness of the diet for a specific individual or breed. Animals with specific dietary needs or health problems are often put onto special home-prepared diets that are nutritionally formulated to meet these needs. Pets that are inappetent, anorectic, or 'fussy' will often eat a home-prepared diet more willingly than commercial food.

How successful is treatment with home-prepared diets?

Animals with specific dietary needs or health problems show dramatic improvement in their state of health when fed a home-prepared diet that has been nutritionally formulated to meet these needs.

How do I know if the diet is properly balanced?

A sample batch of the diet can be analysed at a commercial food laboratory to determine its contents. The patient can be assessed by means of blood and urine analysis and radiographs to determine whether the pet is showing any sub-clinical abnormalities that could be related to dietary deficiencies or excesses.

What is the cost of home-prepared diets?

Home-prepared diets are often comparable in price to premium commercial diets. If the diet is prepared with organic source ingredients, its cost will increase.

How can I find out more information about home-prepared diets?

The most efficient way to find current reference materials, links, and referral lists is to consult the Alternative Veterinary Medicine website at www.altvetmed.com.

Some popular books containing recipes that are based on nutritional formulations include *Natural Health for Dogs and Cats* by Dr. Richard Pitcairn (1995) and *Home-Prepared Dog and Cat Diets* by D. Strombeck (1998). Another excellent source for a basic home-cooked diet is the reference text, *Manual of Natural Veterinary Medicine* by Dr. Susan Wynn and Dr. Steve Marsden or *The Natural Health Bible for Dogs & Cats*, by Dr. Shawn Messonnier. Your veterinarian will likely have other nutritional textbooks that contain recipes for home-prepared diets. Some of the large veterinary pet food manufacturers provide veterinarians with recipes for nutritionally balanced home-cooked meals useful in treating special disease conditions.

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