

Food For Thought: The Complete Guide to Your Dog's Diet

There's much more to canine nutrition than just kibble and canned food. We explore it all to give you a well-rounded perspective on your dog's dietary needs.

By Marcia King

Into the wild

Our dogs' undomesticated cousins, such as wolves and foxes, along with their ancient ancestors, lived off raw meat, bones, carrion, etc. They survived, but did they thrive?

"They were considered biologically successful if they lived for 18 months and reproduced themselves," Remillard says. "The dietary demands on those animals were quite minimal. They were probably dead before the age of 3 years; 5 years would be old in the wild."

Contrast that with today's expectations of our dogs living healthy lives for 10 or 15 years. "That difference raises the demand on the diet to meet the needs of all biological systems at all times," Remillard says. Although ancient dogs didn't eat what we feed our dogs today, it doesn't mean they are incapable of digesting their modern diets, she says. "Digestibility studies clearly demonstrate dogs can digest 85 to 95 percent of a commercial food."

Should you supplement?

Dog foods that meet AAFCO recommendations are deemed to contain adequate amounts of nutrients, including vitamins and minerals. For dogs in normal health, additional supplementation is unnecessary, Remillard says.

But for dogs with health issues, a nutritional supplement could be helpful. "We have learned that antioxidants and phytonutrients [nutrients from plants] are beneficial for aging dogs," Lauten says. "Omega-3 fatty acids are helpful for skin and joints, while glucosamine, chondroitin, and other compounds seem to ease the pain and stiffness of arthritis."

But more isn't necessarily better, as some vitamins and minerals can be toxic if given in excess. "For example, omega-3 fatty acids, if over-dosed, can contribute to blood-clotting problems," Lauten warns. "Supplementing with vitamins and minerals in large- and giant-breed puppies during the period of rapid growth (3 to 6 months of age) can put the puppy at increased risk for developing orthopedic disease."

Talk to your veterinarian or pharmacist before supplementing, Lauten advises. "Vitamins, herbals, and nutraceuticals can interact with other medications, potentially enhancing or reversing the action of other medications." If your veterinarian flatly denies the value of supplements, and you feel your dog might benefit from them, consider getting a second opinion from a holistic veterinarian.

The raw food diet

Does raw food, being closer to the natural diets of wild animals, offer better nutrition for dogs?

NO "There is no scientific evidence base that shows benefits for feeding raw food," Becvarova says. "Conversely, multiple studies document that raw meats may contain harmful bacteria and parasites that may cause illness of pets."

YES "Benefits include overall health improvements, including relief from allergies and anal sac problems, better oral hygiene, and improved skin and hair coat," says veterinarian Carol Osborne. "My seven years of research, backed by double-blind clinical trials, showed that pets respond very well to a balanced, wholesome, natural diet. Whether a pet responds best to a raw food or a cooked homemade diet depends on the specific pet."

Switching diets: Yea or nay?

Nutritionists are divided on the merits of periodically switching your dog's food. Those in favor recommend switching to prevent possible deficiencies or excesses that could occur when feeding one diet for many years.

"For healthy pets, some nutritionists recommend switching diets every few months, others recommend never switching," says veterinary nutritionist Lisa Freeman. "I'm somewhere in the middle: I think it's reasonable to switch diets every one to three years, although not for animals with health conditions for whom consistent diets are very important."

Becvarova further explains. "Frequent changes to various foods on a daily or weekly basis may be detrimental to

gastrointestinal health by altering gut microflora. Dogs naturally prefer novel foods or flavors to well-known foods, which may lead to overeating at times when novel food is offered. Consequently, the dog's reaction may be to correct that excessive food intake by refusing to eat for the next day or two. This behavior, in turn, may incorrectly be interpreted as being a finicky eater."

If you decide to change dog foods, minimize the risk of digestive upset by mixing the new food with the old in gradually increasing increments over a three- to seven-day period, Freeman advises.

Transition finicky eaters with strong preferences in 10 percent increments over 10 to 14 days, Becvarova suggests. "Remove uneaten food after 15 to 20 minutes and don't give treats or table foods between meals for the first few days of the transition period," she adds.

Meet the experts

Iveta Becvarova, DVM, is a board-certified veterinary nutritionist who treats patients at the Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine in Blacksburg, Va.

Duane Ekedahl is the president of the Pet Food Institute, which represents the manufacturers of 98 percent of all dog and cat food produced in the United States and supports advancements in the quality of pet food and in pet nutrition research.

Lisa Freeman, DVM, Ph.D., is a board-certified veterinary nutritionist at the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University in North Grafton, Mass.

Susan Lauten, Ph.D., is a clinical instructor of nutrition at the University of Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine in Knoxville.

Edward Moser, VMD, Ph.D., is a board-certified veterinary nutritionist at the University of Pennsylvania. He serves as consulting veterinary nutritionist to Wellness Natural Pet Food and on the USDA panel, National Organic Program's Pet Food Task Force, which is defining organic standards for pet food.

Carol Osborne, DVM, is a veterinarian in Chagrin Falls, Ohio, and the creator of PAAWS: Pet Anti-Aging Wellness System. She has a special interest in longevity research and is the author of Dr. Carol's Naturally Healthy Dogs.

Rebecca Remillard, DVM, Ph.D., is a board-certified veterinary nutritionist at the Angell Animal Medical Center in Boston.

David Syverson is a regulatory feed consultant and chairman of the American Association of Feed Control Officials Pet Food Committee. AAFCO develops laws, policies, and standards for regulating animal feeds.

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